

Mt. Washington Winter Ascent



Mount Washington in February.

“Graduation” from the [ECP Mountaineering School](#) is a winter attempt to climb the northeast’s highest peak; Mount Washington. From [Wikipedia](#):

Mount Washington is the highest peak in the Northeastern United States at 6,288 ft, famous for dangerously erratic weather. A weather observatory on the summit long held the record for the highest wind gust directly measured at the Earth’s surface, 231 mph, on the afternoon of April 12, 1934. The mountain is located in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains, Coos County, New Hampshire. While nearly the whole mountain is in the White Mountain National Forest, an area of 59 acres surrounding and including the summit is occupied by Mount Washington State Park.

Despite being less than 7,000 feet high, the mountain must be taken seriously. Even film crews practice here before heading to Mt. Everest to film their latest documentary. EMS offers guided trips up to the summit this time of year; however everyone was in the Mountaineering School to learn how to function under our own power.

People

Ice: Jamie, Kevin, Dave, Jason, Allison, Aaron, Erin, Nick

Traverse: Tina, Josh, Devin, Rick, Paul, Matt, Jeff, Brian, Derek, Felipe, Michael, and myself

Itinerary

Our group of 20 was split in two. One group of 8 was going to focus on ice climbing (Huntington Ravine and around) while the rest would attempt the southern half of the [Presidential Traverse](#). The rest of this trip report focuses only on the latter.

- 2/23 – Fly into Boston, MA and drive to North Conway, NH.

- 2/24 – Late morning start on the Webster Cliff Trail to a campsite near the Mizpah Hut.
- 2/25 – Continue on to Harvard Cabin, with a side trip to the summit if conditions allowed.
- 2/26 – Take one of the ice gullies to the summit and return to Harvard Cabin.
- 2/27 – Return to Boston, MA and fly home.

This was the plan. It changed. A lot.

Day 1

Picked up Paul and Kevin and drove to the airport, using the extended parking (\$8/day for a total of \$34). Tunnel traffic out of Pittsburgh put us behind by about a half hour, but fortunately security was a breeze as usual at Pittsburgh and we arrived just in time for boarding.

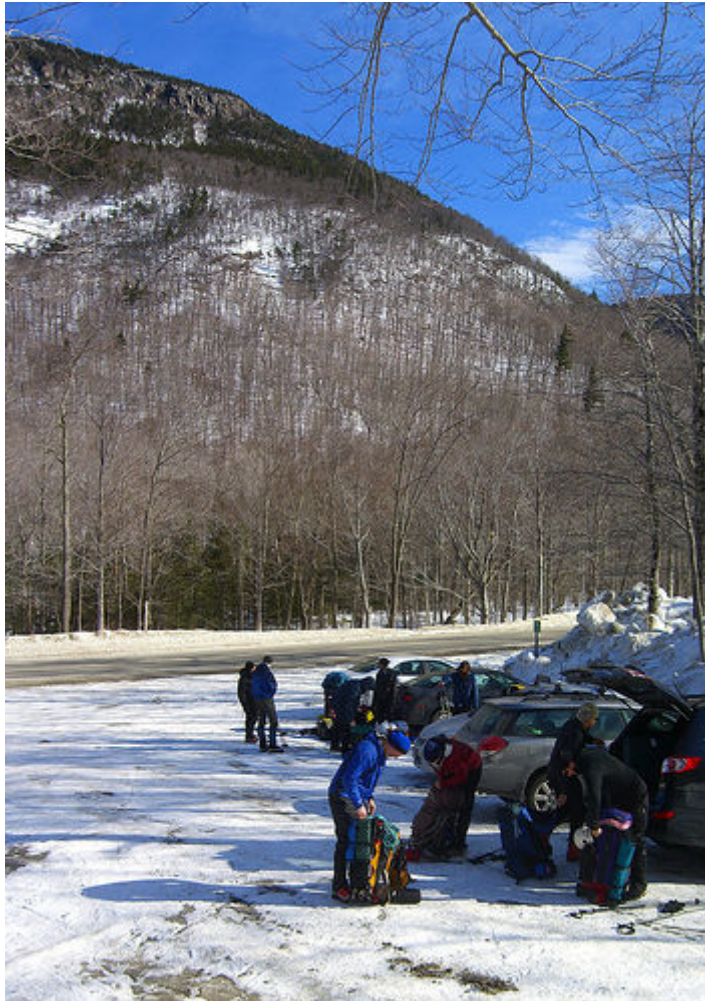
After landing in Boston we grabbed our bags and headed to the National rental car station offsite via shuttle. Jeff, Kevin, Paul and I split the \$180 rental. We chose an Impala since it had plenty of trunk room and figured it would be decent on gas. Our bags fit without a problem. After a 3 hour drive with only 1 stop for food, we arrived in North Conway at the Intervale Motel.

Since it was about 00:30 when we arrived, it was relatively quiet though people were still stirring with excitement. I did very little unpacking as my backpack was almost ready to go already.

Day 2

As mentioned above, our group of 20 was splitting into two. 12 to do the Presidential Traverse and 8 to ice climb in the gullies and other areas around North Conway. The ice group left early at 05:00 to make an attempt on the summit due to better than expected conditions that day. From what I heard later, only Jamie and Kevin made it to the summit. The others had turned back at Lion's Head after climbing [Central Gully](#) due to conditions and exhaustion.

The plan for the traverse team was to be ready to start from the Webster Cliff Trailhead at 10:30. On the first day, we would hit Mt. Webster and Mt. Jackson then camp just below tree-line along the ridge. The next day we would hit Mt. Pierce, Mt. Eisenhower, Mt. Franklin and Mt. Monroe. If we were feeling up to it, we would also attempt to hit Mt. Washington that day. Summit or not, we would descend either Boott Spur or Lion's Head and camp at Harvard Cabin for the remaining nights. Finally on Saturday we would partake in some of the ice climbing that Huntington Ravine has to offer and summit (again?) afterwards. It's important to note that this was just a *plan*.



Last minute preparation before heading up to Webster Cliffs.

We shuttled cars around, leaving them spread out at different trailheads and bail points. Bail? Yeah right! We were ready to go at the start of the Webster Cliff Trail at 10:15 and made our way up to Webster Cliffs. The trail was packed nicely and was easy to follow due to an obvious trail and easy-to-see blazes. After about 1500 feet of climbing for about an hour, we get a radio call to stop and that there's a problem. As usual I'm quick to assume it was an injury, which fortunately was not the case. At this point the trail started to get a bit icy and the topic of crampons must have come up, because Tina realized she forgot her crampons in Rick's car which was all the way at Pinkham Notch. After deciding it was unsafe for her to proceed (not at the time, but further down the route), Derek asked for 3 volunteers to head back down to retrieve the crampons. Three valiant steeds (Jeff, Felipe and Michael) volunteered and made their way back to the car. They could spend an hour driving to and from Pinkham Notch to retrieve the crampons, then take the shorter and easier Crawford Path and join us at camp. Wunderbar.



The view north from Webster Cliffs.

Shortly after Webster Cliffs, the trail started to deteriorate. Deep windblown snow had covered the tracks we were following and made it difficult to follow the path. Not only were the blazes under snow at some points, but we also had to deal with “Spruce Traps.” The snow was approximately 6 feet deep, but not all of it was solidly packed. For the most part we didn’t have to post-hole much and were able to walk on a decent crust, but every once in awhile we’d hit a spot where the snow formed around a small spruce and we would plummet into waist deep snow. If you were lucky that’s all the further you went. At one point when we lost the trail, Josh started to follow what he thought may have been the trail. He took a couple of steps then *WUMPHF* he was in a hole with only the very top of his head sticking out (and he’s 6’3”). The rest of the day was spent falling in holes and trying to find blazes. We were not very successful.

Since darkness was quickly approaching and we were only halfway to Mizpah Hut, we decided to make camp right on the trail. Matt and I dug out a small trench for our tent and got it up pretty quickly. The stakes I brought (SMC Sno-Tent) didn’t work at all in the powdery snow, but we were able to make use of branches, a picket and an axe. The rest of the night was pretty routine. Cook dinner (Couscous & Tuna, and Mashed Taters & Salmon!), boil water, laugh at Matt, and go to bed. Brian looked at his thermometer and reported a warm 18°F. Later in the tent my watch reported 27°F. Tomorrow we’ll make much better progress after getting above tree line, right?

Day 3

It didn't seem like anyone wanted to get up. Even ol' man Brian slept in an hour past our original wake up time of 05:00. I know because I was up and waiting for someone *else* to make the first move. We may have only traveled 4 miles, but it was a very exhausting 4 miles.

Again the morning was pretty routine. Boil *more* water, have some oatmeal, drink some hot chocolate. The good weather from yesterday was still lingering. Everyone packed up and soon we were ready to move again. For a little while the progress seemed better than yesterday. We were having decent luck with finding blazes, and getting a little better at avoiding the spruce traps (if you see the top of a tiny spruce tree, don't step there!).

Half-way up the climb to Mt. Jackson, the snow started to fall. It was the small snow, not the big clumps. The stuff that makes you think it's not going to settle. Regardless of if it settled or not, it did end up drenching us throughout the day since it never stopped and would melt on contact with our warm shells. The climb to Mt. Jackson went really quickly and we were soon on the top finally experiencing an alpine climate. It doesn't even reach above the tree line but enough of it is scoured by the wind to give it the alpine feel. We didn't stay too long though, as we had a schedule to keep, so we made our way down the northern side.

After Jackson we ran into the same issues with spruce traps and route-finding that we had yesterday. Occasionally we would get on track and make good progress ("Blaze! ... Blaze! ... Blaze!"), but then we would get off-route and be stuck in a spot for almost a half hour at a time. At some points we would exit the trees and have to hope the GPS was accurate as the cairns must have been buried, if there were any. We would branch out until someone found what looked like a trail, or if we were lucky an actual blaze. Sometimes we were able to see old snowshoe prints that were helpful. Sometimes the most accurate traveler was a rabbit, who seemed to know the trails pretty well even on top of 6 feet of snow. At points we were ecstatic to find a cut branch, indicating trail maintenance.

We ended up traveling 5 miles this day, which is further than the first day however we had an earlier start. Around 16:00 we finally made it to Mizpah Hut (our target for Day 1), but were a *long* way from Mt. Washington and Harvard Cabin. With everyone drenched and quite unmotivated from the lack of progress, we decided to bail down Crawford Path to the Impala which was left at the bottom (good thing we left one there, huh?).

We took off down the Mizpah Hut Connector Trail which eventually connects to Crawford Path. Since it is a much more used path in the winter, it was in great condition. The recent snow still covered any prior foot prints with a soft powder, but at least the boot pack was solid. We *cruised* down this, getting to the bottom in approximately 1.5 hours. No holes, no post-holing, and quite a bit of glissading. It was quite sad that it took us 2 full days of hiking to get to Mizpah Hut and less than 2 hours to get down.

Back at the Crawford Notch Visitor Center, everyone dried off and relaxed while Derek and I fetched vehicles. We drove back to the Intervale Motel and asked for 2 more nights. Not quite the mountain camping experience but after what we went through, nobody complained. We

laid out all of our gear to dry then went to [Moat Mountain Brewpub](#) for dinner and drinks. Their beer tasted great, however I probably would've enjoyed any concoction of yeast, barley, hops and water at that point.

Later that night we discussed our new plans for Saturday. Everybody still had summit fever so we decided the best thing would be just to get to the summit the easiest way possible; Lion's Head. Not to mention with 10 inches of snowfall that day, the avalanche risk in the gullies would go up (and it did, from Low to Moderate). We would awake at a reasonable time and just book it for the summit. The forecast was calling for a decent day but really cold temperatures (upper zeros below with 90mph winds dropping to 60mph later in the day).

Day 4

I awoke at 06:00 and got packed and ready to go. It was awesome not having to carry a tent, sleeping pad, sleeping bag, etc. I had an 18 liter pack that probably weighed less than 20 lbs. That makes everything easier. Josh and I loaded into Rick's car and left for Pinkham Notch. Of course everyone had to stop at Dunkin' Donuts...

I calibrated my altimeter at the visitor center, and after ~5 minutes we were on our way to Harvard Cabin. Before we even left for New Hampshire, I almost opted for ice climbing over the traverse because I was worried how my knee would hold up. I never usually have problems with sickness or aches but I believe I developed tendonitis during the stair workouts in preparation for this trip. Well my fears were true, my knee was in a ton of pain at the end of Day 2 and pretty much all Day 3. I popped a few Advil those days but they didn't really do anything. They did make it tolerable though.

After climbing about 1000 feet, I voiced my concern to the trip leaders. It was hurting after only 1000 feet and we still had 3000 feet to go (and 4000 feet to come back down!). The conditions were just going to get worse and I didn't want to slow the group down. They (thankfully) urged me to at least get to Harvard Cabin and make a decision there. Well no less than 5 minutes before we reached the decision point, the Ibuprofen that I had taken must have kicked in. In a short period I went from a lot of pain to *nothing*. When asked if I was going to stay back I said hell no, so we turned up the Lion's Head trail and continued.



Myself, Devin and Brian near the start of the Lion's Head trail.

Not too much further the trail started getting steep, so we stopped to put our crampons on. Then we hit probably the most difficult part of the whole ascent, the Hillary Step. Difficult is a relative term though, and after waiting in line for a little bit we all cruised right up through. It was a small snow gully that was a pretty easy climb with crampons and a glacier axe. At the top of the Hillary Step the trees started getting smaller and smaller until they vanished along with our nice views. It was really starting to feel like an alpine climb now. With no trees, we really started to experience the notorious Mt. Washington wind. Up through Lion's Head and the Alpine Garden, the terrain was very windswept and left nothing but pockets of snow, ice and rock. Brian took a couple of wind measurements and they were a measly 30-40mph.



Derek at the start of Alpine Garden.



Paul, Matt, and Brian snacking in deteriorating conditions. In the background is [Wildcat Mountain Ski Resort](#).

After Alpine Garden we hit a 30° snow slope in a whiteout that was easy passing. Fortunately, since my goggles were all fogged and frozen, I only had to follow the footsteps of the person in front of me. Soon after we were back in the windswept snow/ice/rock terrain, except this time it was steep since it was the final summit push. Towards the top we came onto this very flat and open surface covered in a sheet of ice. It was one of the parking lots for the visitor center (closed in winter). I knew this meant we were close. A few minutes later I saw the summit sign at around 14:00.

At this point it was pretty difficult to walk with the strength of the wind. Strong winds with even stronger gusts. I wasn't thinking too much about how cold it was yet. We took a few photos and videos then made our way to a wind shelter which gave us a much needed break from the wind. We were here for much longer than planned, due to a couple of issues with crampons. My hands were cold and numb and I was trying hard to keep them warm. The rest of my body felt pretty good, including my knee.



Derek, Rick, Josh and Paul with Matt below.

The descent was pretty quick since we didn't have to stop for breaks quite as much. Within no time we were down to the top of the Hillary Step. I knew it would be harder to go down than it was to come up, but didn't anticipate the line. We were there for a long time while a couple from Montreal was getting sketched out on it. They looked pretty unprepared. The girl had crampons but the guy did not. They both had glacier axes at least. They pretty much froze until a guide behind us stepped in and setup a rope to help them descend. We made it through here without incident, just taking our time and reversing our steps from the way up. We heard later that the couple had planned on camping at Lion's Head, and even made it up that far, until many people told them it was not a good idea with the gear they had (and sub zero temps and 50mph+ winds).

We stopped at Harvard Cabin just to see what it was all about. It wasn't really worth stopping at; except it helps you build a mental image of the area for later trips. We again cruised down the rest of the trail back to the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center.



Devin in front of the avalanche board.

We got back and took showers and went out to Elvio's Pizza for dinner. It was delicious, but then again anything is after a day of climbing. There was quite a bit of drinking and partying going on in the motel after dinner. It was our last night there, after all.

Day 5

Woke up, drove to airport, flew, dropped off Kevin and Paul, and returned home.

Trip Notes

- The most important lesson I learned on this trip is to utilize the rangers or locals. Perhaps we could have avoided the Webster Cliff Trail if we had known that it is very difficult to travel on in the winter due to the lacking bootpack.
- Tina's crampon rescuers (Jeff, Michael and Felipe) ended up making out pretty well. They didn't quite follow the Crawford Path but were able to make it to Mt. Eisenhower on a different trail by the end of Day 2. This put them in a great position for Day 3 and they were able to summit. Day 4 they spent ice climbing at Frankenstein Cliffs.
- I checked the conditions on the Mt. Washington Observatory website later and saw that we hit -5°F on the summit with 60mph winds gusting to 75mph ($\sim -42^{\circ}\text{F}$ wind chill). This was higher than the readings Brian took, however those were taken at a lower altitude.
- We did pretty well at saving on travel costs.
 - Roundtrip Flight: \$120 / person (on JetBlue)

- Car Rental: \$45 / person
- Car Fuel: \$12 / person
- Airport Parking: \$11 / person
- Highway Tolls: ~\$5 / person
- **Total:** \$193 / person ← Cheap!

Gear Notes

- First two days we had everything for a few days on the mountain, and expected worse conditions. Had I known the conditions would've been as nice as they were:
 - Tent was overkill for conditions
 - Didn't need fleece pants
 - North Face pants held up well despite very wet conditions on Day 3. However, I still think a base layer plus shell pants combination is fine.
 - Rope and ice pro that we carried wasn't necessary, nor were helmets. But this is only because we didn't end up ice climbing.
- Shovel did come in handy and wasn't too bad to carry. Can be used to put the stove on!
- Ibuprofen is essential, carry more.
- REI Flash 18 served very well as a summit pack.
- Boots were very warm. Most others were complaining about cold feet. I never had a problem. They have a lot more space around the toes than my hiking boots, and I think this is why they are so warm.