

Traveling across a blank space on the map **CARR IS A MOUNTAIN OF MYSTERY**

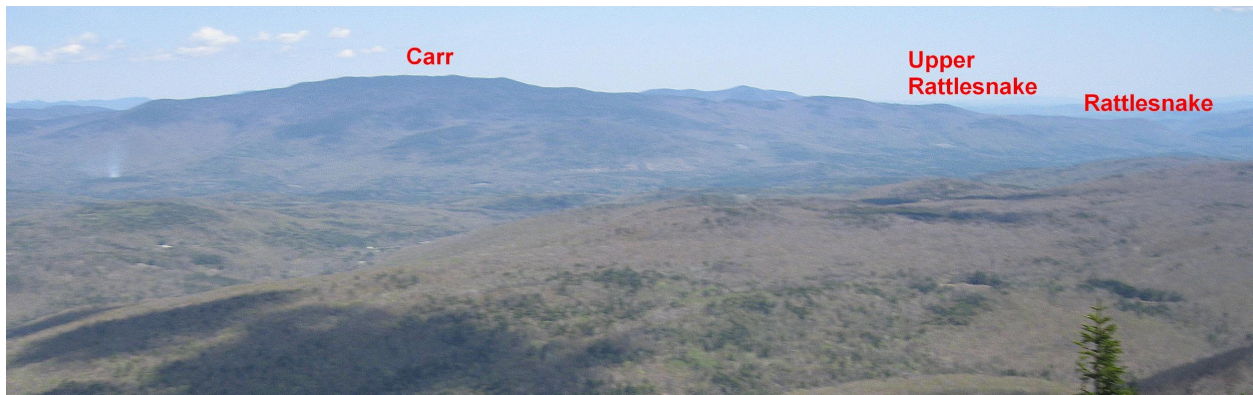
by Steve Smith

Carr Mountain, a wooded mass that sprawls for eight miles across the southwestern White Mountains, is off the radar screen for most hikers. Its 3,453-foot summit tops out well below iconic 4,000-footer status, and its trailheads are far from the popular hiking areas.

Locally, however, this peak has long held an aura of mystery and wildness. In the towns of Rumney, Wentworth and Warren it is a constant hulking presence. It was named for a settler who was lost for days on its flanks, staving off hunger by dining on frogs he nabbed on the shores of the Three Ponds.

In his somewhat fanciful *History of Warren*, published in 1870, William Little wrote that “a hundred different kinds of rock are found upon it,” including “small particles of pure virgin gold.” (Before you get the goldpan out, consider that he also wrote about wood fairies who “danced in the moonbeams” upon the mountain’s mossy streams.)

The 1940 edition of the *AMC White Mountain Guide* showed an entire network of trails crisscrossing Carr, including the Carr Ridge Trail, a 100-foot wide fire break cut after the 1938 hurricane. Within a decade most of these footways had been abandoned.



The Rattlesnake to Carr ridge, from Mount Cube

Today the only trails lead to Rattlesnake Mountain, the low rocky spur at the south end of the ridge, and to the summit of Carr itself, from both east and west. The summit clearing, site of a fire tower from 1939 to the mid-1960s, offers good views of the high peaks to the northeast, though you have to stand atop ledges or the tower steps for the best perspective.

The rest of the mountain's long, wooded crest is terra incognita to hikers. For years I'd been intrigued by the big blank space on the map – five miles as the crow flies, but more like seven miles on the ground - between the Rattlesnake and Carr trails. A study of it from nearby Stinson Mountain revealed ledgy spots that promised interesting views.

In 2004 I made off-trail forays along short sections of this south ridge, but only a full traverse would cure the itch. For such an ambitious bushwhacking excursion, formidable reinforcements would be needed.

These came in the person of J.R. Stockwell, a custom home builder from Gilmanton, NH. J.R. is an avid explorer of the mountains. In recent years he has crafted many amazing off-trail journeys, and in 2009 he completed his goal of making a bushwhack ascent of every White Mountain 4,000-footer, many by multiple off-trail routes. Most of these epics have been solo, often in winter. (He has since upped the ante by bushwhacking each 4000-footer in every season!) When I proposed the Carr traverse for the summer of 2005, J.R. immediately signed on.

Weather and schedules finally came together on a glorious late August day with sun and puffy clouds. Our plan was to journey from south to north. We spotted a vehicle at the Stinson Lake Road trailhead, then drove down to Rumney and set off on the short, steep Rattlesnake trail at 7:00 am.

An hour later, after a diversion on the loop trail to the bare summit of Rattlesnake for a quick study of the terrain ahead, we plunged into the woods and headed north up the ridge.



J.R. Stockwell on Rattlesnake Mountain

Along the way we traveled, with as little impact as possible, through a wonderful variety of woodlands: ledgy, grassy oak woods, open spruce groves, fern-filled hardwood glades, and miles of prickly, mossy balsam fir forest, through which you do not so much walk as you bob and weave and duck (think the young Muhammad Ali), all the while being poked, slapped and sometimes stopped short by protruding branches.

The more open woods were on the first half of our journey, which led J.R. to remark that this was the “no payments for a year plan.”

We measured our progress with the US Geological Survey’s Rumney and Mount Kineo quad maps. Every couple of hours we were able to fold the map over for the next segment of the ridge.

Near the start of our traverse we wandered over a knob burned by an

arsonist's match in 1992, our way frequently blocked by bleached and bony fallen trees.



Burned area

Farther along the ridge we found scattered ledges with various views south towards Mt. Cardigan, west to Smarts Mountain and Vermont, and east to the Sandwich Range and Stinson Lake.



Ledge on Upper Rattlesnake Mountain



Col where old Stevens Brook Trail crossed the ridge



Eastern view from one of several outlook ledges along the ridge

On one of these, which overlooks a beaver-haunted basin below Willoughby Mountain, J.R. left a deer antler he had found a few minutes earlier. It was thus christened "Antler Ledge."



View across Basin Brook valley to Willoughby Mountain

Though we found no moose antlers, we did stumble upon a moose bed – a rectangular space of flattened vegetation – and many prodigious heaps of moose pellets, along with one berry-stained bear dropping. On a few ledgy spots there were vestiges of the 1940-era Carr Ridge Trail, including two old rock cairns. And in a ferny col we could trace the route of the former Stevens Brook Trail, which once ran across the ridge.



Grassy meadow along the ridge

Farther north we worked our way through a flat, scrubby area with many exposed whitish ledges. We wondered if these were evidence of a fire that burned over the Carr ridge in 1854, when, according to William Little, “a million trees burned like the wind...Its roaring could be heard six miles away, and one could see to read fine print at midnight.”

In 1887, Appalachian Mountain Club trappers Frank O. Carpenter and W.M. Beaman explored the crest of Carr, using climbing irons to ascend trees and catalog the summit views. Descending south along the ridge, they came to a “broad, flat open tract,” locally known as “Chalk Mountain.” J.R. and I thought this ledgy plateau might be that very place.



Ledge on south shoulder of Carr Mountain

High on the brawny south shoulder of the mountain we found the day's finest spot - an outcrop with a sweeping view south and west. Most satisfying was the look down much of the long ridge we had ascended.



View south down the ridge

A short distance farther we chanced upon another ledge with a view northeast all the way to Mt. Washington. Embedded in the rock were three iron pins – the middle one nearly upright, with a triangle chiseled around it, and the outer two bent over. J.R. noted that the pins were wedged with a type of flat head nail that was in use over a century ago. Later research indicated that this was a long-forgotten station of the U.S. Coastal Survey, probably from the 1870s.



Iron pin marking survey station of U.S. Coastal Survey

We left this ledge about 5:45 pm. “The shadows are gettin’ kind of long,” noted J.R. The last mile along the main summit ridge was rough. Here we battled through the thickest, clingiest woods of the day, climbing over a seemingly endless series of steep-sided humps that adorn the flat crest. Those payments J.R. had mentioned were now coming due, with interest. For the last tenth of a mile we picked up a primitive and fast-fading path cut a few years earlier by a group searching for a missing Lear jet that was eventually found on Smarts Mountain.



View north from ledge near the Signal Station

We finally reached the summit of Carr at 7:20 pm, and ten minutes later we headed down the east section of the Carr Mountain Trail. The last 2 ½ miles were negotiated by headlamp, a tedious descent enlivened by the hootings of several barred owls. By the time we reached our spotted vehicle at the trailhead, we had spent over fourteen hours plumbing the mysteries of Carr Mountain, and we had only scratched the surface.

