



Trip Report – December, 2011 Backpacking in the Ramapo Mountains

Planning & Preparations

On December 9, 10 & 11, the Troop 49 Pathfinders completed a three day, two night backpacking trip. This goal of this trip was to introduce scouts and leaders to the skill of backpacking, while offering the opportunity to complete one of the three treks required for Backpacking Merit Badge. Planning for the trip started over the summer, when two older scouts, Will & Brendan, were completing the Backpacking Merit Badge. They laid out a local trek, which was presented to the PLC, and the ball started rolling, with Mr. Dente signing on as SIC for the trip. Mr. Dugas stepped up to be the second registered leader on the trip.

Mr. Dente & Mr. Dugas presented the trip at a troop meeting in early November. Parents were invited to attend, since for many scouts, it was their first self-contained trek into the wilderness. The trip plan and fundamentals of backpacking were covered. The focus included cold weather camping, since we were scheduled to be in Mothercroft Pavilion at Glen Gray, and using tents in Weis Ecology Center.

The original trek was going to include the first night at Glen Gray and the second night at Weis Ecology Center. After a planning meeting of some of the veteran leaders signed up for the trip (Mr. Fern, Mr. Burns, Mr. Dugas and Mr. Dente) it was determined that the mileage in reality was longer than it measured out on the map. We shifted gears to focus the trip more in the Ramapo Mountain range. The reservation for Weis was cancelled, and we picked up the Dan Beard and Baden Powel lean-to sites in Camp Yaw Paw. A key benefit of this change was to remove the need for carrying tents, which can weigh 6 pounds or more. As the date grew closer, Mr. Dugas and Mr. Fern spent some time hiking the trails to check the conditions. With Hurricane Irene and the early nor'easter that took down many trees, these leaders wanted to be sure that trails weren't completely washed out. Everything was a "go" as far as route goes.

Shake Downs

The next step was preparing each scout to carry their own gear and food on the trip, which we did by holding two "Shake Down" meetings. A shake down is when you meet prior to departure. At that time, you bring your backpack, fully loaded, as if you were about to depart. During the shake down, each scout is weighed to determine the maximum recommended pack weight. 20-25% of your body weight is used as a good rule of thumb. For some smaller scouts this presented a challenge and resulted in the removal of excess gear from their packs. Next, each scout emptied their backpack, and the gear was reviewed by the leaders for adequateness and weight considerations. Also, each scout wore their backpack, and it was checked over for fit. The key to comfortable backpacking is an effective hip belt. When you hike, the goal is to keep the weight of your bag on your hips, and not your shoulders. One of the problems for our younger scouts is that the hip belts are too large, and don't tighten up for a good fit. (No adult leaders had this problem!) Scouts in this situation had towels wrapped around the existing hip belt, to create more padding and allow the belt to tighten up.

The other item to cover at the shake down meetings was dividing up food. We decided that each scout would carry their own food. Mr. Dente picked up single serve packages of food from BJ's to cover Saturday breakfast, lunch, and Sunday breakfast. Mr. Dugas purchased freeze dried meals at the local camping stores for dinner. With help from Mrs. Mellone and Mrs. Hans, we divided up the meals and filled zip-lock bags with the food for each meal. Additionally, we created a "make your own GORP" station for scouts to make their own trail mix for snacking along the trail. Shared items, such as backpacking stoves, pots, toilet paper, trowels, and toothpaste were divided among the adults.

December 9th – Departure & Hike to Yaw Paw

The troop rallied at 6PM at the gate at Bear Swamp Road in Mahwah. We broke the troop up into three crews. Similar to patrols, crews are smaller, manageable units that function better in the backcountry than when you try to have one large group. In addition to the manageability, smaller groups also are better from a Leave No Trace perspective. Crew 1 was comprised of the older and more experienced backpackers. Crew 2 was the intermediate experienced backpackers, and Crew 3 was the newer and less experienced backpackers. Mr. Dugas and Mr. Burns brought 2-way radios which were distributed among the crews. Mr. Mellone was not hiking, but graciously volunteered to be a shuttle vehicle for anything we needed. Since it had recently rained, we took him up on the offer and filled his pickup truck with firewood before leaving.

Our goal for the first night was to hike the Bear Swamp Road 2 miles up in to camp. Since Bear Swamp Road is gated, there was low risk of traffic. One troop did arrive to camp while we were hiking. Mr. Dente had a red flashing light on his backpack since he was the sweeper. Sweeper is the last hiker, who makes sure that anyone who needs to stop to tie a shoelace, drink some water, or whatever, does not get left behind. Once we alerted the vehicles that there were hikers on the road, we radioed up to the other crews, and everyone was careful for a safe passing.

Much to our delight, the weather on Friday night was clear with some scattered clouds. We had nearly a full moon to guide us on our hike. We turned our flashlights off, and found that we had better vision without them on, since once our eyes adjusted to the moonlight, we could see all around rather than just in the range of our flashlights. The moon was so bright that it was casting shadows from each of the hikers as we climbed the hills in to camp.

After arriving to the site in Camp Yaw Paw, we were greeted by the camp master, and took care of the paperwork. Scouts got settled in the lean-tos, and we made trips to Mr. Mellone's truck in the parking lot to bring the firewood up to camp. The kindling in the area was wet, but with the help of a fire starter, we were able to get the campfire going. Mr. Burns worked with some scouts to complete their Fireman Chit which proved futile with the water soaked conditions. He also helped scouts to set up bear bags, and everyone brought their food bags and other smellables, such as toothpaste, to put in the bear bags.

We held a troop meeting, and Will, our Leave No Trace coordinator did a great job at reviewing the LNT Code of Ethics. Following that, we did a round of "Thorns and Roses", which is where each scout has the opportunity to talk about something good that happened that day (Rose), something they weren't happy about (Thorn) and also offer up their hope for tomorrow (Bud). Most roses were the unique experience of backpacking in the dark by moonlight. Scouts retired to their lean-tos for the night. The leaders stayed up a little longer and eventually put the fire out and headed off to sleep. Night was cold, but with no precipitation, and everyone was well prepared with good sleeping bags and enough layers to stay warm.

December 10 – Hike Yaw Paw to Glen Gray

The troop was up by around 7AM, and the cold air made it a little tougher to get out of your sleeping bag. The bear bags were dropped, and a number of stoves were fired up to boil water for hot chocolate and oatmeal. By 7:30, a few additional scouts arrived. Everyone ate and packed up, taking a little longer than we had hoped for. We took crew photos, and the first crew departed a little before 9AM.



From our site, we headed west to the Cannonball Trail, which runs through camp. We hiked north for a bit, through the middle of camp, passing the A Frame building and then around Cannonball Lake. As we approached the upper lake, we took the Blue Trail north. This trail goes around the back of the upper pond which feeds the Cannonball Lake. We continued on the blue trail until we came to the Yellow Trail, which heads up to Ilgenstein Rock. We quickly found that the heavy rains which had come through the area 4-5 days earlier had left some wet areas as well as creeks that had enough water to make each crossing a carefully planned event. The hike up the yellow trail was a bit slow at times, but the scouts and leaders stayed together in their groups.

We arrived to Ilgenstein Rock, and all the crews reunited there for a picture and to enjoy some trail mix.



After a short break there, the crews departed one by one. Just as Crew 3 was about to leave, two mountain bikers arrived. We had a brief conversation with the bikers, and noticed that one of them had a front wheel that was held on by a single pronged fork.

From Ilgenstein Rock, we headed east toward Bear Swamp Lake. As we made our way down the hill, we were challenged again by the streams. At one point, one of the scouts lost his footing, and was forced to step into a stream. He was OK, but we knew he had to change his socks. He said that he would be able to make it to our next stop, lunch, and we moved along.

At the bottom of the hill, we came to the trail that goes around Bear Swamp Lake. We headed north, and took the wooden bridge that crosses the stream which feeds the lake. On the East side of the lake, there is a dirt road, which doubles as the trail, and we took that to a turn off which leads east. At that intersection, the scouts had decided to stop for lunch. Everyone dropped their packs, settled down and

enjoyed a trail lunch of beef jerky, cracker sandwiches, and fruit snacks. As crews finished up, they embarked eastward down the red-silver trail.

The best way to describe the red-silver trail is as a connector. It connects the Ramapo Reservation to Bear Swamp Lake. From Bear Swamp Lake it goes mostly downhill, until you hit the bottom, and then it meets up with the Schuber trail which heads east towards the Ramapo Reservation or South, back towards Camp Yaw Paw. We took the trail south, and hiked along a nice area just east of Rocky Mountain. This trail is particularly nice, because it does not have so many rocks as some of the other trails. We hiked until we arrived at Bear Swamp Road and the Bridge that leads to Camp Yaw Paw. We crossed the bridge, stopping for a water break, and headed south then west, going up the hill and around back into Camp Yaw Paw.

Back in Camp Yaw Paw, we picked up the Cannonball Trail. The Cannonball is more like a Road that runs between Yaw Paw and Glen Gray. It was at this point, Mr. Dishian decided that he was in need of a refreshing bath and used a stream crossing to satisfy this need. It was a sight to be seen and made for a memorable moment for the members of Crew 2. He was later given the trail name of "Aqua Man". We stayed on the Cannonball for a while until we crossed the gas line (which we would find ourselves crossing many times during our trek). Just past the gas line, we headed east on the green "Old Guard" trail. The Old Guard trail is part of the Glen Gray Trails, so at this point, we were near our destination.

Despite the radio call and warning by Mr. Fern, crew three found themselves off the green trail shortly after getting on it. We looked at the map, and realized that we were on an unmarked, unimproved road that parallels the green trail. Knowing the camp and where we needed to get to, the unmarked road would bring us to the Dormanville site, which we could cut behind and come right in to Mothercroft Pavilion. We followed the road, and passed a couple of cabins that were occupied by other troops. As we approached Mothercroft, several scouts came out to greet us and cheer on the last steps of the days hike.

As everyone safely arrived to Mothercroft Pavilion, scouts focused on water and firewood. Scouts used the hand saws and hatchets they carried along the trail to gather wood. Additionally, Mr. Mellone arrived with his pickup truck carrying firewood and water as well. Mothercroft Pavilion is unique. It sits on a wooded hill overlooking Lake Vreeland in Camp Yaw Paw. The uphill side of the pavilion is a long wall with a fireplace in the middle. The remaining walls are more like a porch, with a short wall and uprights. There are openings on either side of the pavilion on the short walls. The lake side opening provides a nice view of the camp. Within the building, there are stairwells, one on each side of the fireplace. These stairwells go up to lofts situated in the rafters on either side. These lofts provide sleeping space. The open area on the main floor is filled with tables and benches.

While there was still daylight, scout Marc P took on the task of hanging the bear bags. Once again, Mr. Burns worked with some scouts to earn their Fireman Chit and get a warm fire started. This time there was success on both parts. Next, it was time to prepare dinner and get a fire going in the fireplace. A central cooking area was set up with 4-5 stoves. Pots of water were heated, and scouts retrieved their bags of freeze dried food that they had carried since Friday's departure. The sun set early and everyone enjoyed their dinner. Some scouts shared and swapped samples of their meals with each other, since it's not often there is such a variety of freeze dried foods being cooked.



While the scouts got themselves situated in the lofts by laying out sleeping bags and setting up “home” for the night, some of the adults were outside downing a dead tree that was precariously leaning against another. Some of the other adults were back in the pavilion, and evaluated the challenge of getting heat from the fire to as many sitting around the fireplace as possible. Initially, there were simply two planks of wood serving as benches, sitting atop cut logs. The tables from within the pavilion were re-arranged and stacked to form stadium-style seating. Moving the tables and benches around was like playing a sliding tile game, but soon the seating was set. Meanwhile, outside working on the dead tree, the leaders were finally able to complete the fall of the dead leaning tree, and cut off a Yule Log of massive proportions.



As the fireplace now was accommodating to many, both in seating and warmth, Mr. Dugas brought out graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate bars for s'mores. On the mantle of the fireplace, there had been a two pronged fork, which Matt W. quickly cleaned off and it became our high-volume marshmallow roaster. It fit 5 marshmallows on each side. Matt carefully roasted the marshmallows to toasted perfection. Scouts enjoyed the s'mores and when we were done, the troop all gathered for a round of Thorns and Roses. Many scouts couldn't even think of a thorn, since all were enjoying the evening.

We wrapped evening snack, and scouts gathered their smellables for the bear bag, which Marc hoisted for the evening. The scouts retired to the lofts, and a number of the adults cleared the tables from in front of the fireplace, and laid out their sleeping bags there for the night. Through the night, the fire burned and by morning the Yule Log had been completely burned.

December 11 – Hike Glen Gray to Pool Hollow Road

Sunday morning was a bit quicker paced than Saturday. Everyone was up by 7AM. Water was boiled for oatmeal and hot chocolate. Cleanup was quick, and the pavilion was swept out. Tables were returned to their original places and we were ready to hit the trail. The crews rolled out one at a time, and all were on the trail by 8:15.

The first part of the hike was westward. The crews passed through Gilwell campsite, which was where we had stayed last December. We headed further up until the Cannonball Trail diverged from the road, and up we went. This climb was steady but not overly complicated. When we reached the top, we continued South on the Cannonball Trail. At this point of the Cannonball, we were in Ringwood, just east of Skyline Drive. We could hear the cars on the road as we hiked to the border of Oakland, near the gas pipeline station. We passed a crew of cyclists, and continued to the place where the Cannonball crosses Skyline Drive. It took a few minutes for a break in the steady stream of cars, and all crossed safely. About 50 yards up the trail, the White Trail provides a detour from the Cannonball. This was in our itinerary, because the White Trail is the one that goes to the "Castle Ruins". After a scramble down a rocky decent with patches of ice, we moved quickly along the white trail and arrived at the castle ruins.

One of the scouts in our troop, Will N. was looking to complete the requirements for Geocaching Merit Badge. We had agreed for this scout to have set up caches around the castle ruins, so we took a break there, and met up with him and his dad, as they hosted a cache event. The scouts dropped packs, and explored the ruins while completing the caches.



After completing the caches and having some trail mix and water, the scouts saddled up for the home stretch. We followed the white trail down to Ramapo Lake, where we picked up the Cannonball again. The Cannonball goes around the west side of the lake, on a road that is easily accessible from Skyline Drive. We passed a few pairs of hikers along this area. At the south end of the lake, the gravel road transitions to a trail, and the Cannonball peels off to the southwest and starts up a hill. As you climb the hill, the trail cuts to the south, and there's another trail which terminates there, and heads west. This would have been the trail to take westward toward the DuPont Ruins and into Wanaque. Visiting the DuPont Ruins was part of the original route but the earlier rains had made crossing the swollen Wanaque River to our intended endpoint of the trek impossible. Fortunately, we planned for this contingency and had an alternate route and endpoint already planned. We acknowledged the trail, knowing that we'll be back to hike that one another day.

The Cannonball trail continues south here, and it was an area that gathered a lot of water, so the ground was soft, and water ran along the trail in some spots. By now, the crews were pretty much starting to intertwine, as the group from Crew 3 had kept good pace with Crews 1 & 2. Before long, we arrived at the bridge that crosses Interstate 287. The crews all waited for each other for a photo on the bridge.



Scouts waved to the many cars that were passing underneath the bridge. Many cars honked their horn and waved at us, too. Everyone knew that this was the last leg of the trip, for sure. As we crossed the bridge, we picked up the yellow trail heading east, and curved around and back again due east. We could see the homes and buildings along West Oakland Ave and we crossed the railroad tracks on to Pool Hollow Road. Scouts and Leaders made calls to wives and moms to come and pick them up from the long hike.

After sixteen miles of backpacking, two nights sleeping in freezing temperatures, and all of the challenges that we took on this weekend, it was a tremendous amount of accomplishment on many levels. For the individual scout, it was the accomplishment of moving himself with everything he needed to live for three days. For the crews, it was an accomplishment of teamwork, endurance and camaraderie. For the troop, it was the accomplishment preparing each and every scout for a successful trek.

Respectfully submitted,

Rob Dente, Guy Dugas, Dan Fern

Troop 49 Winter Backpacking Adventure

Friday, December 9th (2.0 miles)

Departure from the gate on Bear Swamp Road

1. Hike approx. 2.0 miles up Bear Swamp Road to Camp Yaw Paw where we will be camping for the night

Saturday, December 10th (7.34 miles)

1. From Camp Yaw Paw head N on Red Trl to Blue Trl INT (approx 0.4m)
2. Make LT on Blue and head N to Yellow Trl INT (approx 0.37m)
3. Make RT on Yellow and head NE to Blue Trl INT at Bear Swamp Lake (approx 1.73 m)
4. Make LT on Blue and head N and continue around lake to Red/Silver Trl INT (approx 0.6 m)
5. Make LT on Red/Silver and head S to Orange Trl INT (approx 0.63 m)
6. Make RT on Orange Trl and head SW to Yellow Trl INT (approx 1.37 m)
7. Make RT on Yellow and head NE to Red Trl INT (approx. 0.5 m)
8. Make LT on Red(C) and head S to Green (Old Guard Trail) approx 0.54 m
9. Continue S on Green Trl to Camp Glen Gray (approx. 1.2 m)

Sunday, December 11th (6.1 miles)

1. Depart Glen Gray heading N on Orange Trl to the INT of Red Trl (Near Gilwell)
2. Take LT (Heading W) on Red Trl to INT of Yellow Trl (approx. 0.56 m) Note: LT trail blaze missing
3. Take LT (Heading S) on Yellow/Red(C) Trl to Y/R fork (approx. 1.0 m)
4. Continue on Red Trl approx. 0.12 m to start of White Trl (on other side of Skyland Dr)
5. Head SW on White Trl to Castle Ruins (approx. 0.6 m). Continue 0.25 m to Mansion Ruin
6. Depart Mansion Ruins on White Trl heading S to INT of Red (C) Trl, (approx. 0.45 m)
7. Turn RT and Continue S on Red/Blue Trl to Route 287 Walk Bridge (Cool View) (approx. 1.6 m)
Note: Trail is along lake; don't take access road that bears right. Take Cannonball trail at opposite end of lake. At approx. 1.2 m Cannonball bears LT at new Red trail. We will be coming back to this intersection. (there is a fallen tree at this intersection)
8. Cross 287 walk bridge, Turn left at White Trail.
9. Head E on White Trl until it ends on Pool Hollow Road.

Abbreviations:

RT-Right , LT-Left, N-North, S-South, E-East, W-West, Trl-Trail, Approx.-Approximately , m-Miles

