

Tots on the Trail

Sweetening the deal for future stewards of the wild



From the average kid's point of view, hiking is an uphill slog, unless there happens to be a marshmallow tree within the first quarter-mile. The climbing gets better if there are a few gummy bear bushes along the path. It's a "can we do it again?" family outing if a few Oreo flowers bloom about 10 minutes before reaching the summit.

Marshmallow trees and Oreo flowers? You won't find them in the inventories of flora for the New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands or the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, but these rare plants sometimes appear beside the West Ridge Trail on Mount Cardigan. They're not obvious, so you need to look carefully at your surroundings—at least that's what I told my son to distract him from my bulging pockets.

The author's son Parker dips his toe in a puddle atop Mount Cardigan.



Clockwise from top left: A young hiker celebrates reaching the summit. Two young hikers approach the fire tower. The author on the West Ridge Trail.

Opposite: A fire watcher takes a break from his duties inside the tower.





One of New Hampshire's few working fire towers sits atop Mount Cardigan's bald pate, and there's an expansive 360-degree panorama that includes many of the 4,000-foot giants in the White Mountains to the northeast, as well as Mount Monadnock to the south, Camel's Hump in Vermont, and Pleasant Mountain in Maine.

A MOTIVATOR WITH KID APPEAL

Mount Cardigan (elevation 3,155 feet) is the pinnacle of the 5,655-acre Mount Cardigan State Park near Orange, New Hampshire. A short mile and a half from the parking lot to its bare summit, it's one of the best short distance, big reward hikes in the Dartmouth-Sunapee Region for adults. One of New Hampshire's few working fire towers sits atop Mount Cardigan's bald pate, and there's an expansive 360-degree panorama that includes many of the 4,000-foot giants in the White Mountains to the northeast, as well as Mount Monadnock to the south, Camel's Hump in Vermont, and Pleasant Mountain in Maine.

For many years, the route up the West Ridge Trail was my first hike of the summer. Then I had Parker. At first, he loved to go on hikes. He merrily chirped at the birds from his kid carrier until he fell asleep. I got a great workout from the extra weight on my back until he reached about 50 pounds.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT:

New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation, www.nhstateparks.org

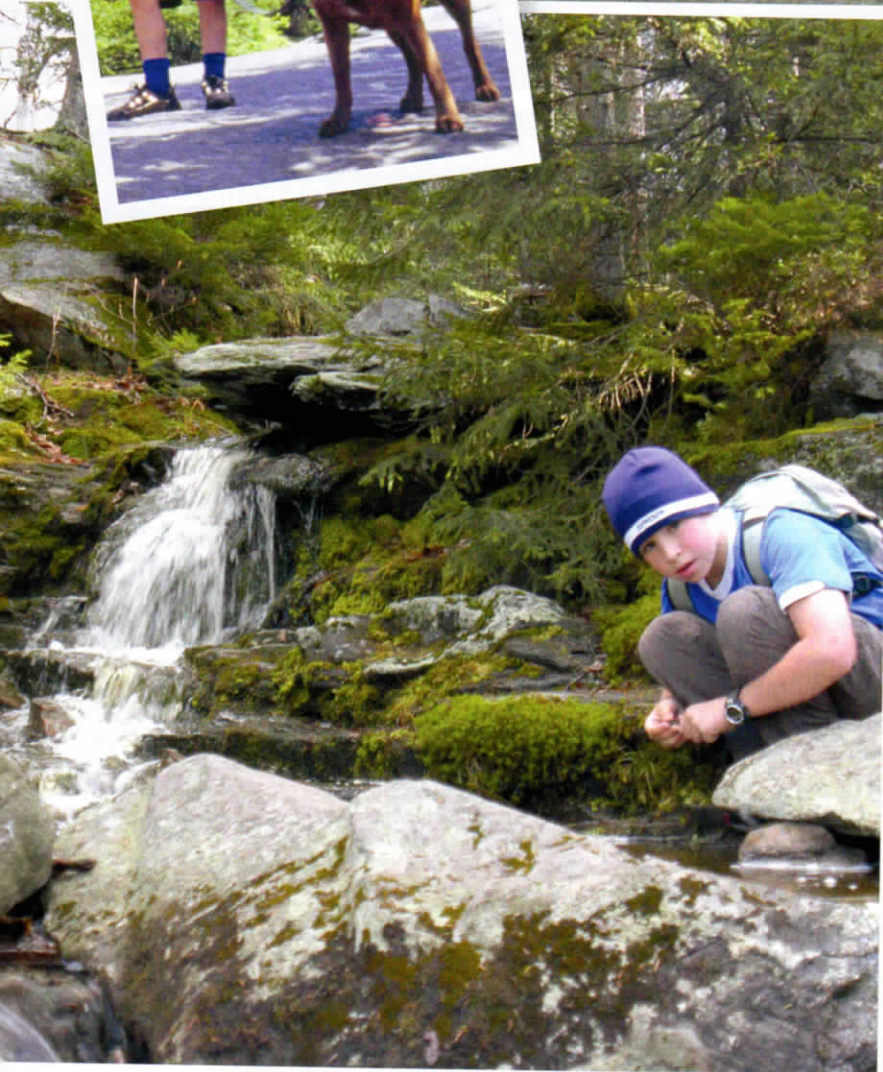
Appalachian Mountain Club, www.outdoors.org

Forest Fire Lookout Association, www.firelookout.org

New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands, www.nhdfi.org

GETTING THERE

West Ridge Trailhead on Mount Cardigan: From Route 118 north of Canaan, turn right onto Mt. Cardigan Road (also called Orange Road). Go past the Canaan Speedway, following the signs to Cardigan Mountain State Park & Forest.
GPS: N43 38.717, W71 56.249



It was among these subalpine plants that Parker found the rare and elusive Oreo flower.



When he outgrew the pack, he gleefully ran ahead on the trail, stomping in mud puddles, over-handling toads, and testing his balance on logs . . . for about 200 yards. That was okay at first. After all, he was only a preschooler. I figured by age five, he was ready for his first summit attempt.

Mount Cardigan seemed perfect. It was near our home in the Upper Valley. The trail was well-maintained, and I thought the fire tower might have some appeal given his propensity for Tonka fire trucks. But kindergarteners are rarely enthusiastic about the same things their mothers are. I needed a motivator with kid appeal.

The previous winter, I had volunteered as a cross-country ski coach with the Ford Sayre Ski Club in

Clockwise from left: Clearing the trees near the summit. Labrador tea, a subalpine shrub, blooms alongside the trail. Taking a break by a mossy cascade.

Inset: One of Parker's first hikes up Mount Cardigan.

Hanover. Parker and a half-dozen of his friends were in my group. To get the rambunctious tykes around Garipay Field, I filled my pockets with M&M'S, then doled them out here and there to keep the lads moving. Perhaps a similar bribe would work for hiking?

"Parker, look!" I called, just ahead of him, pointing to a fir tree beside the trail, "Check out this tree."

We were a half-mile into our hike up the West Ridge Trail, just past the junction with the South Ridge Trail. Mildly curious, Parker approached the conifer. Then he saw the white "fruit" on its branches. He grabbed a couple of low ones, then smiled up at me with delight, his cheeks bulging with marshmallows. Suddenly the hike was more interesting, at least for a while.

UPPING THE ANTE

We continued to ascend the mountain, eventually crossing two bridges over a large mudhole. The trail bent left, then climbed more steeply through a rocky area, passing a small, picturesque cascade that tumbled down a series of mossy ledges.

Parker couldn't resist the small waterfall. He bounded over to a modest clear pool, then entertained himself swirling the water and examining the rocks. The distraction gave me an opportunity to locate a gummy bear bush.

After 20 minutes, Parker was bored with the cascade and ready to move onward, but not upward. "Can we turn around here?" he pleaded.

"But you'll miss the fire tower," I replied, "That's the best part."

Parker grudgingly consented to keep climbing. The trail bent slightly away from the waterfall. At the crux of the slight arc in the path, a low shrub with unnaturally green, red, and yellow buds caught his eye.

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View of the fire tower across Mount Cardigan's expansive bald summit as the West Ridge Trail clears the trees.



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"Mommy, look!" Parker harvested gummy bears and shoved them in his mouth and his pockets as quickly as he could.

"Are you going to share?" I asked. Parker paused in his plucking to hand me a couple of the chewy candies.

"Thanks," I said, "You've sure found some unusual plants on this trail!"

A RARE VARIETY SEALS THE DEAL

About a mile into the hike, we crossed a stream on a substantial footbridge. Soon the trees began to thin. Low blueberry bushes dominated the undergrowth but bore no berries. As the trees shrank away completely, Labrador tea, sheep laurel, and cinquefoil bloomed around us. It was among these subalpine plants that Parker found the rare and elusive Oreo flower.

"I found another strange plant," declared Parker proudly, sticking an Oreo over his eye like a black monocle. He took a bite of his prize, then plucked one for me.

"That's a sweet flower," I said, twisting one of the dark wafers off the cookie and popping it into my mouth. I gave the other wafer with



the white frosting on it back to Parker.

Parker's pace picked up noticeably as we followed the rock cairns toward the fire tower that crowned the summit. It took a full 10 minutes to reach it after we left the trees. Although technically not above tree line, the top of Mount Cardigan is an expansive bare dome as a result of a forest fire in 1855. The fire watcher was not there when we reached the tower, but we climbed the steps to just below the locked cabin, mostly to entertain my son.

The tower is not very tall, just 15 feet, and offers only a marginally better view than from the granite to which it's anchored. On that clear day, we could see Franconia Ridge to the east beyond Newfound Lake with Mount Washington in the distance. Mount Sunapee and Mount Kearsarge lay to the south, with Mount Ascutney across the Connecticut River to the west. But the only view that interested Parker was the one of a huge puddle to the side of the tower. He kicked off his shoes and socks, then waded in.



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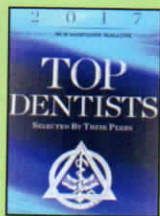
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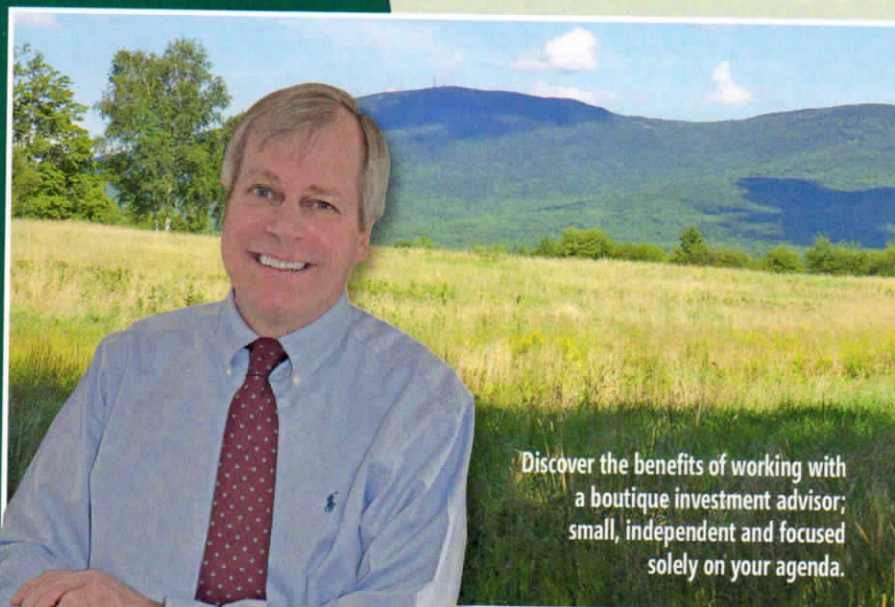
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SWEET SUCCESS

Since that first successful climb to the top of Mount Cardigan, Parker and I have hiked that mountain together many times. When candy no longer had the same allure, I enticed him to the top with Pokemon cards, then miniature Star Wars action figures. Eventually, the promise of a summit picnic sufficed.

The summer after he turned 10, we invited another mom, Carolyn, and her son, Harrison, age 5, to accompany us. That was when I knew my son had become a true hiker.

In an interesting case of déjà vu, Harrison followed Parker enthusiastically up the West Ridge trail to the junction with the South Ridge Trail, and then ran out of gas. He whined to return to the car, tugging at Carolyn's jacket.

"Hey, Harrison, check out this tree!" shouted Parker to his sidekick. Harrison paused mid snuffle. He looked at Parker and then at the tree, which had fluffy white balls sprouting from its branches. When Parker stuffed one of the balls in his mouth, Harrison's eyes widened. "You should see what else is growing on this mountain!" said Parker, glancing at me. "Come on, Harrison, follow me!"

While you may think less of me as a mother for spoiling my child with candy, I don't feel guilty. My son is now 20 years old and a leader in the Outing Club at Saint Lawrence University. If a pocketful of marshmallows, gummy bears, and Oreos is all it takes to teach a kid to embrace the outdoors, it's worth the sugar fix. After all, it's kids like Parker who will be the stewards of these wild places in the future. 🌿



ONLINE EXTRA

For information about fire towers in New Hampshire and Vermont and to see more photos of Mount Cardigan, go to www.uppervalleyimage.com.