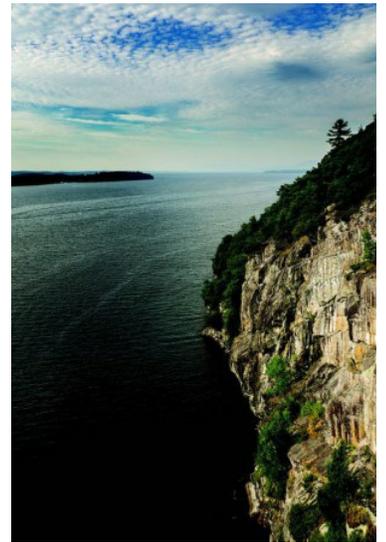


The History And Mystery Of Split Rock Mountain

Split Rock Mountain, the locale of an ancient boundary between nations, is the exotic and mysterious Far East of the Adirondacks. It's home to rattlesnakes, bobcats, eagles, and peregrine falcons and the scene of a marital murder, a mining tragedy, and Revolutionary War intrigue. You'll find here disappearing ponds, Lake Champlain's sheerest shoreline, panoramic vistas, and a wonderfully varied network of trails.

I've been lucky to visit these woods often on foot and on skis. The mountain straddles adjoining corners of Essex and Westport. My first jaunt here was in 1984, soon after the state's first big land purchase in the area, and my guide was Gary Randorf, the first executive director of the Adirondack Council. We explored a rolling dogleg trail, his favorite, now called Gary's Elbow. That spring day we observed the deeply soft lavender of hepatica (to me, the loveliest early wildflower), and we hiked to the lookout over Snake Den Harbor, a deep anchorage bounded by precipitous haunts of the eastern timber rattlesnake.



I've not seen live snakes on my treks there, but friends have. One of the least aggressive rattlers, it prefers to retreat rather than confront. It overwinters in deep dens, called hibernacula, with other species of snake and during the warm seasons ranges a mile or two from these sites. Once I found a squashed rattler along the shoulder of Lake Shore Road, just west of the mountain; even in death, its skin was a phenomenal collage of black and gold. This is their northernmost habitat.

Split Rock Mountain has more than eleven miles of marked trails. They are laid out in a rough figure-eight, with the main access near the center. Most of the trails follow old roads; one allows snowmobiles, which are infrequent. Recently, I revisited Split Rock twice, divvying the area in half on each trip. For starters I chose the northern part.

Rising gently east from the parking area, the Lewis Clearing Bay Trail is the main trunk of the system. It's gated in all but snowy weather. This keeps out the all-terrain vehicles, but allows snowmobilers to ride the trail to access ice fishing on Lake Champlain. The trail soon passes two intersections. "Gary's Elbow" is the first right, but this time I passed it.

At the second fork, I bore left onto the North Rim Trail, still climbing easily. The wide old logging road is growing in. Skidder ruts from the late 1980s or early 1990s remain plainly visible but are filling with leaves and seedlings. This part of the Split Rock range was slated for vacation-home development, but in 1993 it became Forest Preserve instead as the inaugural purchase of the state's Environmental Protection Fund. Governor Mario Cuomo came here for the dedication.

Over a mile in, the trail makes its first steep climb, over a small knob, bushy with hemlock and oak, and then descends just as sharply to a T- intersection. Here, you can go right and remain on the high road along the ridge or left and downhill for a lowland approach to the north end of the range. I took the low road, the northerly loop of the figure-eight.

Robin's Run, as it's called, drops gradually for a half-mile to an unmarked intersection. Here, old side roads abound, beckoning bushwhackers. The left-hand route goes out to an informal trailhead, also former logging yard, along Lake Shore Road. Bear right to stay on Robin's Run. Skinny and twisty at first, it follows blue markers on the level and widens into an avenue-like roadway, rising toward the ridge. Old culverts channel drainage and keep the footing mostly dry, but these are rusting away. Dedicated locals maintain these routes, their work obvious with recent

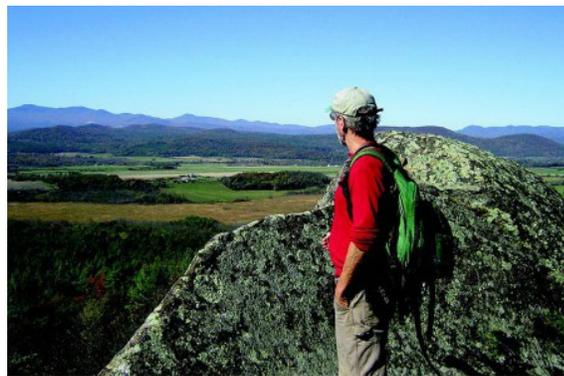
cuttings; it's they who named the trails.

The trail becomes twisty and passes another unmarked path out to the road, then steepens through dark hemlocks to the north end of the ridge. At the top is a three-way intersection, I went left, meandering over and around small bumps to emerge at the northernmost lookout over the lake, above Whallons Bay. I could see Essex and its farms and, across Lake Champlain, Vermont.

The Split Rock whence the mountain gets its name lies in massive chunks down below on the water, battered by waves. It was long called Cloven Rock, for ages the dividing mark between Algonquin territory to the north and Iroquois territory to the south. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht designated it the boundary between the British and French, long in conflict for control of the continent. Since 1838, the Split Rock lighthouse has lighted the way for lake travelers, at this easternmost point of the Adirondacks.

After a binocular search for familiar landmarks, I returned to the three-way intersection. Turning left, I followed the North Rim Trail. A few yards south, it passed a junction with a trail-in-the-making that leads to more lookouts. It was still a herd path, but I followed it to the first open rocky hummock to take pictures. From there, the route got spotty. Word from the trail builders is that soon it will be brushed out and marked as the South Rocks Overlook Trail.

Below and a bit to the north of the lookout lies Grog Harbor, an overnight haven for vessels sailing the length of Lake Champlain. In 1776, Essex patriots allegedly captured a British bateau, provisioned with rum, then a sailor's staple and nicknamed "grog." They grabbed the boat but dumped the booze overboard in the harbor.



Back up to the ridge, I turned left. The North Rim Trail winds back and forth across the spine of the mountain but sidesteps its high point. As it meanders, it drops into hollows on each side. In the low spots are vernal pools, so named from the Latin for "springtime." These tiny ponds lack a steady supply of water and often evaporate during the hot months. Fish cannot breed in them, but they're nurseries for invertebrates and amphibians. Caddis flies, dragonflies, wood frogs, toads, and blue-spotted salamanders are some of their residents. Wood ducks visit, and raccoons, mink, and wading birds feed. Vernal pools are exceptional and fleeting biological refuges.

Just before the trail steeply departs the ridge, a short path winds to two more lookouts. One faces south and east over the lake, offering a view of some tiny islands and the mouth of Otter Creek in Vermont. The other aims south and west, with a prospect of the sheer Palisades, around to the Jay Range. The Jay Range is the west end of the Split Rock Wildway. When completed, this succession of preserves and conservation easements will ensure that far-ranging creatures like bears enjoy unimpeded travel between this wild haven along the lake and the larger sanctuary of the higher mountains. This prevents isolation of their populations and expands their breeding pool.

Next came the "Screamer Hill," my skiing-inspired nickname for the steepest descent in the trail network. It's fringed with boulders and blackberry thorns as it drops well over a hundred feet. Without snow, my chances for a crash today were few.

The return to the trailhead was gently rolling and winding. It had been a leisurely and varied three-hour jaunt that stitched together all but one of the panoramic lookouts of the range. Next time, I'd take in the last perch and much more.

Return to Split Rock

In April, I went for the bottom of the figure-eight, again starting off east along the Lewis Clearing Bay Trail; this time, I bore right at the second fork and followed the solid woods road winding southeast past three more junctions, finally

heading steeply down to a small bay on the lake, reached in just under two miles.

North of the bay is Ore Bed Point, where iron was mined from the 1870s to the 1890s, before such mining shifted to Minnesota. The buildings and docks are long gone, but the tailing piles remain. Two hundred steep acres around this defunct operation became the first state land on Split Rock Mountain, transferred by tax sale in 1893.

Walking ten minutes back uphill, I came to a left fork for the Snake Den Harbor Overlook. The short path brought me to a ridgetop with wide views east and south over the water. Also visible were the Palisades, sheer cliffs that rise two hundred feet above the lake. The cliffs attract peregrine falcons and rock climbers. Bald eagles also may be seen here. Some of the lake's three hundred shipwrecks lay in the water below me, and a large "End of Trail" sign kept me from taking the steep plunge!

More backtracking brought me to another fork to the left: the Barn Rock Bay Trail, another old roadway climbing gently through a small notch and then gliding straight south a mile and a half down to its namesake bay. Barn Rock and Snake Den are the two most sheltered anchorages along Split Rock Mountain; overnight boaters frequent these in summer. On this day, trillium and wild oats nodded in the spring breeze.

As the trail approached the water, it steepened, passing forks right and left. The one on the right set out over a small and sturdy granite bridge—it would be my return route along the base of the figure-eight. The left climbed to Barn Rock Overlook, above the lake, with a huge view east and south over the waves. It was a windy spring day and brisk on the exposed ridge, so I turned tail to circle down to the bay and clambered onto a rocky point at water's edge. Ducks and other waterfowl zoomed all about just above the swells. Barn Rock dwarfs even huge barns.

The bay's hillsides are a place of tragic history. For a decade, starting in 1880, the Champlain Granite Company quarried the rock and shipped it out over the water. A tramway, with hefty abutments still obvious along the trail, ran up and down between the quarries and the lake. Disaster struck when a tramcar shot out of control and killed four men. Operations ceased. My uphill route homeward, the trail branching off the Barn Rock Bay Trail, was the mine's access road and is called the Calamity Trail.



The path bends between huge cut-rock piles, abandoned in 1891. These probably make excellent snake dens; avoid them in warm weather. The wide roadway skirts a wetland and passes old wooden gates. On my hike, I came across coyote scat, gray and rosy with the fur of prey, on the trail. (I once saw a deer carcass near here that a bobcat had cached under leaves to eat later). Porcupine-snipped hemlock branches littered the ground. Rusted machinery lingered beside the way.

A half-mile shy of Lake Shore Road, I had a choice: walk straight out to the road and along it for another half-mile or take the Crossover Trail to the right. Delaying my asphalt encounter, I turned right, skirting a hillside and hiking through a dip and back up to my old friend Gary's Elbow, the trail out. Hepatica were blooming, as they had over thirty years back. The twisty course wound gently downhill and brought me to the main trailhead.

Another calamity occurred near here. In 1882, Henry Debosnys killed his wife, Betsy Wells, and dumped her body in these woods after an inheritance dispute. Debosnys was quickly found out, tried, and hanged in Elizabethtown—the last execution in Essex County. His skull and, some say, his spirit, reside at the museum in "E-town."

It took a century to protect Split Rock Mountain, a site of industry, tragedy, and international history. Throughout, it's been a nursery and haven for wildlife and a sentinel between Lake Champlain and the High Peaks. The bobcats, eagles, rattlers, salamanders, and ghosts should be there for hundreds of years. Walk softly, and you'll see them.

Directions: From Exit 31 on the Northway (I-87), drive east for 4.0 miles on NY 9N into Westport. Turn left onto NY 22 and go 0.4 miles. Turn right onto Lake Shore Road and go 4.7 miles to a trailhead parking area on the right.

Photos from above: The Champlain Palisades, by Karen Stolz; The author on Split Rock Mountain, by Elizabeth Lee; Split Rock on Lake Champlain once served as a territorial boundary, by Elizabeth Lee; Split Rock Mountain, Nancy Bernstein.

This story originally appeared in the Adirondack Explorer, a nonprofit newsmagazine devoted to the protection and enjoyment of the Adirondack Park. Get a full print or digital subscription [here](#).

