Climbing St. Regis Mt., ‘Queen of the Northern Peaks’

St. Regis Canoe Area’s defining peak features a fire tower and 1,000 feet of elevation gain.

By Tim Rowland
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St. Regis might rightly wear the mantle of Queen of the Northern Peaks, defined as those mountains north of Route 3. No offense to the mountains of Loon Lake, Debar and Arab. It is the Ampersand of the north, a stony summit with the southern peaks in the distance and the ample waters of the St. Regis Canoe Area below.

It’s hard and ultimately pointless to assign “best view” status to any particular mountaintop. But it is also fun. While I am a personal partisan of Mt. Adams, no apologies need be made for anyone arguing for St. Regis.

A worthy challenge

Being in the backyard of Paul Smith’s College, St. Regis has its local constituency. However, I’ve talked to a surprising number of people who say they have had it on their list for some years, but have never gotten around to it.

On a recent summer day, the trail register indicated that St. Regis is more territory for vacationers than local residents. On this day we shared the top with, if sign-ins are to be believed, residents of four different states and three nations.

The trailhead is not hard to get to, but unlike Ampersand, it is off the main drag. This may explain its out of sight, out of mind status. Matter of fact, I'd bet more people are "reminded" that they need to climb St. Regis when they see the tower while paddling in the canoe area.

The tower, of course, brings with it another constituency, those who are hell-bent on completing the Adirondack fire tower challenge. If you believe in challenges, St. Regis will certainly be in your sights.

How long?



Looking west from the summit of St. Regis Mountain. Photo by Tim Rowland

So pick your most expedient route to Paul Smith's and a tick north of the Route 30/86 intersection. Then, turn west onto Keese Mill road and follow it nearly three miles to a parking area on the left.

When my brother Bruce and I arrived on a brilliant Friday morning, there were still a few spaces left. However, as with all ADK trailheads, there is always that one guy who manages to park strategically so his Subaru Forester somehow takes up six parking spaces all by itself.

Also, if you are the sort of free-spirited person who does not like to be hemmed in by arbitrary numbers, then St. Regis Mountain is for you. Depending on whose website you believe, it's a round trip of anywhere between 6.4 miles and 6.8 miles with an elevation gain of anywhere between 1,200 feet and 1,650 feet. So, you can take your pick. My own metrics came in at 6.5 miles and 1,461 feet.

The start

The hike starts with a brief walk down a dirt road of 0.15 miles before the trail begins on the right where there is a trail register. The trail climbs briefly before leveling out. From here, you will gradually gain elevation for the first mile before giving it all back over the course of the next half mile before gaining it back again. It's easy going through a forest that is pleasant if not memorable.

At two miles, you cross a brook and the real climbing begins, with little if anything in the way of breaks. The trail gains 1,000 feet over the course of a mile. My purely subjective, average-hiker scale judges 700 feet a mile to be the line between moderate and steep, so this is not a trifling.

Still, the trail seems open somehow. You never get that claustrophobic ‘this climb will never end hike of doom’ feeling common to the greater peaks.

Try it yourself!



The St. Regis Canoe Area from the summit of the mountain that goes by the same name. Photo by Tim Rowland

The first inclination that you have conquered St. Regis will be a side trail splitting off to the right. In only a few steps, it will afford a fine view to the north. You can get this from the tower, but here it's set off by a pretty framing of spruce and balsam.

From this vantage point, the spectacular summit is just a quick scramble away. It presents itself as a broad panorama of lake and peak, unfolding in a carpet of green and blue. The high peaks can be a little tricky to identify if you're not used to this northwestern angle. What's pointy from one compass point can look round from another.

On this day, we shared the mountaintop with maybe a dozen people from far and wide who were suitably awed and palpably reluctant to leave. Even with a considerable amount of time at the top, the hike fits comfortably into four hours. It affords some time to check out some of the interesting old dams and watercourses.

St. Jean-François Régis was a 17th-century French Jesuit priest known for his missionary work among the poor in rural France. He had a hankering to do the same here among the Iroquois, apparently. However, he never made it to his namesake mountain — don't make the same mistake.