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Night Visions

A 15-year-old walks 31.5 miles around the Pemi Loop, alone

Alexandra Herr



I UNCLIP THE STRAPS AND PLACE MY BACKPACK DOWN ON A ROCK WITH a triumphant sigh. Before resting and nourishing myself, I turn around to marvel at my progress. My gaze starts with a peak 17 miles away and travels along the mountainous ridge leading to the summit on which I now stand: Bondcliff, the last peak of the day.

Turning to my left, I look toward the green masses of treetops below. Eight miles remain of my solo hike of New Hampshire's Pemigewasset Loop, a 31.5-mile journey over rugged and dangerous terrain in the White Mountains, with more than 9,160 feet of elevation gain. Most hikers take three days to complete this loop, which climbs and descends nine of New Hampshire's highest mountains, but I am doing the whole thing today in less than 24 hours. This goal is rare; it is a feat avid hikers pursue. To prepare for this difficult endeavor, I have endured two years of brutal training. I have hiked many times at night and many times solo. Now, at the age of 15, I am finally attempting this feat. *I hope I make it.*

My gaze rises to the darkening horizon. Shades of indigo overshadow the sky, and the clouds bleakly darken. *I should go soon.*

Leaving can wait until after I take ten more minutes to finish a celebratory whoopie pie, though; I am on the final summit, after all. While replenishing lost energy with tasty calories, I am reminded of something concerning. An aggressive, food-seeking bear has been spotted many times on Bondcliff Trail and in the Lincoln Woods area. He reportedly snatches hikers' backpacks in search of tasty treats. I hope he wouldn't steal my backpack while I am wearing it, but the thought of the sightings worries me.

It's time to go. I pack my things and prepare for the long trip down. Every muscle in my body aches, but my mind pushes me forward. What keeps me going is the understanding that to finish the hike and arrive back at the car, I absolutely need to continue. *Just put one foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other.* I hope I will arrive at the trailhead before exhaustion overwhelms me.

I leave treeline and descend into the woods. The moaning wind fades and leaves me with the sound of my shoes crunching leaves and packing down dirt. My senses intensify; I hear every creak, rustle, and scurry. My worry about encountering that bear heightens my vigilance. The impending darkness makes me nervous, but everything goes well enough, until I notice a

Sunrise on the first hill of the 24-hour Pemi Loop challenge: the Mount Flume ridge.

ALEXANDRA HERR

suspicious shape ahead of me. I breathe in sharply. My heart rate accelerates. I try to calm my nerves as the realization sets in: It is finally happening. The moment I dreaded is here. Ahead of me on the trail, the head of a bear faces me head-on, as if challenging me to a staring contest.

Despite feeling alarmed, I come to my senses and remind myself that New Hampshire bears are generally skittish around people; the one ahead of me, even if it is the backpack snatcher, will likely move if I make my presence known. I begin to record a video with my phone; I have never encountered a bear while hiking. I have seen scat on the trail many times before, but the bears themselves have always managed to avoid me. I talk to the bear in a loud and commanding voice, hoping the animal will get nervous and quickly wander off. I do this for what seems like half an hour but is probably more like ten minutes. Nothing happens. The animal does not flinch; it just keeps staring at me.

Why hasn't it moved? I stop my efforts and squint my eyes to better discern the shape in front of me. *That is a bear, isn't it? It certainly looks like a bear.* I distinguish a dark shape that appears to be a bear's head with two round ears,



The summit of Alexandra Herr's final mountain: Bondcliff. Its beauty compels her to linger, but she knows when it's time to go. ALEXANDRA HERR

but the dim dusk light and the fair amount of distance between me and the bear shape muddles the solid form I am trying to identify.

I nervously creep forward until I am so close to the apparent bear that, if it is indeed a bruin, it can probably smell the food buried deep within my pack. I stop short, my mouth gaping open. The once-convincing outline of a head has separated from the ears. The ears do not even look like identifiable body parts anymore. The body itself is nowhere to be found. This whole time, I have thought a jumbled mess of logs and branches was my first exciting, though nerve-wracking, bear encounter. I cannot even begin to describe how stupid I feel now that I have confirmed to myself that the bear is, indeed, only shrubbery. Well, I must be tired. Despite feeling an urge to bang my head against the nearest tree, relief bubbles through my veins as I realize I have just avoided a potentially dangerous animal confrontation. Well, in a way. I also cannot help feeling proud of myself for calmly handling the situation. Now I know how I will act if I see an actual bear on the trail; for several minutes, I believed a real bear was staring me down, and I did not reveal fear or run away. Instead, I stood my ground calmly.

I continue with the hike, speeding up the pace to make up for lost time. Contrary to what one might assume, my bear paranoia increases. My already-magnified senses reach new heights, and I bang my poles together and authoritatively talk out loud to make sure the actual, active bear—which I know lives in this region with the bear-shaped shrubbery—does not bother me. I probably am taking my precautions further than necessary, but I still worry. I'd be embarrassed if other hikers came along and heard me making all this noise.

The night descends like a blanket, and shadows sweep over the surroundings. I shouldn't wait too long before putting on my headlamp, but I imagine the bear stealing my pack while I take out the light. Ever since the bear-shaped log incident, I have been spooked. Soon darkness starts to hinder my ability to navigate. I force myself to stop. I hurriedly take off my pack, retrieve my headlamp, turn it on, and wrap it around my head. Refastening my pack, I look down and all around me, double-checking that I have all my belongings. Then I get moving.

The pitch darkness surrounds me. I focus my eyes on the trail right in front of me and purposely do not look into the blackness to the side of the path. If an animal waits off to the side in the trees, I do not want or need to know; it would undoubtedly hear me coming and run off if I left it alone, anyway.

After what seems like forever, I arrive at the intersection with Lincoln Woods Trail. I am happy to be finished with the descent from Bondcliff. A few more miles and I will be back at the trailhead, where Mom's car is waiting.

This final portion of the hike is no less unsettling than was the earlier portion on Bondcliff; everything beyond the reach of my headlamp is now pitch black, and branches, logs, and leaves form creepy shapes where the night meets my artificial light. Throughout, though, I remember something soothing: If everything is going according to plan, then my sister and my mother should be hiking toward me right now. They will check in to nourish and encourage me while I complete the last few miles of my journey.

I continue talking out loud to myself. I jump from subject to subject, but my mind drifts away in a sort of meditation. It seems like my mind, unlike my brain, is disconnected from my body, and I cannot stop my legs from moving. They never stop. They are carried away. My body is a machine that takes orders from my brain, and my brain commands me to push forward.

My rumination shatters; a chaotic beam of light dances ahead. Relief pours into my veins, filling me with hopeful and jittery excitement. *Mom and Sage are here. I'll see people!* As quickly as these feelings fill my senses, however, they drain from my system. *Something is wrong.*

Instead of two steady headlamp lights, one light bounces around and moves as if possessed with an otherworldly energy. Dazed from physical taxation and mental fatigue, I am confused. Why is a light moving so quickly in seemingly random directions?

The only way to find out is to hike toward the source. I valiantly stride in the direction of this phenomenon. The closer I get, the more confused I become. Now I make out two huge and strange shapes in the darkness, and the light is in between the masses. *What is going on?*

I finally come close enough to the shapes to understand what I am seeing. My eyes glaze over two horses tied to a tree. There is a young blonde woman in between them, using her headlamp to adjust one of the horses' saddle straps. I am certainly curious about what this woman is doing with two horses far out on Lincoln Woods Trail after dark. I ask her and, after a pause, she states the obvious: "I am fixing his straps." Her response does not satisfy my curiosity, but I do not feel like having a conversation here and now, of all places and times.

As I continue hiking, I look back multiple times and watch her headlamp fade behind me until it is no longer visible. I almost wonder if it's possible I hallucinated the whole thing.



Midday, Alex Herr smiles for her mother, Trish, and sister, Sage, who briefly met up with her on South Twin Mountain.

TRISH HERR

myself would be refreshing, and it would serve as the final push I need to complete the rest of the hike.

As I am thinking this, I see a stable light. It duplicates. Either I am seeing double or there are two people ahead of me.

I don't jump for joy just yet; it is possible these people are not my mother and sister. I hike closer to where they stand, and I squint my eyes to assess their faces. As the distance between us lessens, I distinguish two tall female figures, each with relatively short hair.

"Mom?" I call out hesitantly. I hear elated replies and I smile with relief. We are finally reunited. Mom hands me a bottle of Sprite to drink on the final mile out. She and Sage ask how I am doing, and I tell her the truth: I am exhausted but ready to crank out the final mile of the day.

Sage and Mom wait for me to hike ahead a couple tenths of a mile before continuing themselves—so that I can finish the feat solo.

That final mile is brutal. I am so close. I expect my headlamp to shine on the trailhead sign, but it never does.

Just when I accept the fact that I am probably not very close to the end of the trail, I look up and see an illuminated wooden post ahead. *Could that be what I have been waiting for?* Smiling widely, I move my aching legs faster and faster until I nearly crash into the sign with excitement.

I've finished the entire Pemi Loop in one day. I have realized the ambition I first considered when I was just 13. Enthusiastic, I cross a bridge, walk into the parking lot, and spot our car. The lot is almost empty, and stillness settles over the area.



Resting on the pavement at the Lincoln Woods trailhead. TRISH HERR

I lie down on the pavement and contemplate the many experiences I had on the hike. I cannot believe it is over, but resting gives me great joy. I smile, proud of myself for undertaking this goal and accomplishing so much, both physically and mentally. I close my eyes and wait for my mother and sister, letting the chilly breeze play with the ends of my hair and brush against my face.

ALEXANDRA HERR is 16 years old and lives with her family in New Hampshire. She is an avid White Mountains hiker who completed the 48 4,000-footers when she was 6. She is now about three-quarters of the way through the grid—or summitting each of the White Mountain 4,000-footers in every month of the year. Her other main interest is karate, and she hopes to study environmental science in college. Visit her at alexinthewhitemountains.com.