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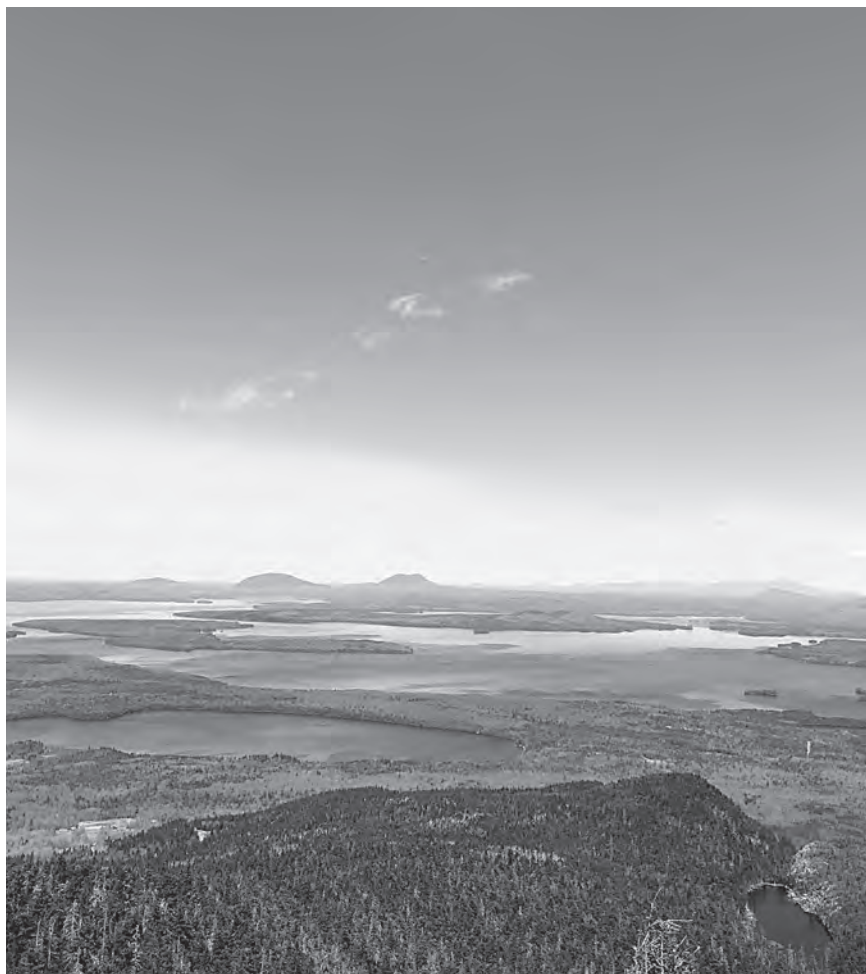
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Fall on Big Moose Mountain

A self-rescue on a day hike drives home old safety lessons

Matt Chabe



I FELL ON A MOUNTAIN. THAT'S WHAT I TELL PEOPLE. LATER, I REALIZED it would be more accurate to call it a "mountain climbing accident," but by then, I had explained the injury to so many people that changing it seemed like it might confuse the zeitgeist. So the line stuck—I fell on a mountain.

None of which is 100 percent accurate. I actually fell *up* a mountain, which I quickly discovered was more confusing than just bending the truth a little. I could see it on people's faces when I tested the truth, that cognitive battle between two equally correct core beliefs—that at least one direction on a mountain is down, and gravity pulls forcefully in that direction. Up? How do you fall *up*?

Today, a 5-inch-long scar arcs from my left eyebrow to a peak just above my temple, ending above my ear. Eleven stitches and seven staples closed the wound that made that scar. It's not subtle.

I've been hiking up mountains for many years and have done it in all seasons, at least enough to consider myself "experienced." But I'm only human, and it was only a matter of time before my own hubris would catch up to me. Over time, I'd developed a sense of invulnerability. It's easy to do when I willingly and happily venture into the wild. Most people don't do that on a good day. When I tell my friends that I hike, backpack, and poke around in the woods, I see it in their eyes; I hear it in their tone: *You're a real adventurous person*. Despite myself, the pride wells up, and it feels good. I'd developed a case of the "it-can't-happen-to-me" backwoods syndrome.

A 2009 survey by the British insurance company Elephant found that a third of car accidents happen within one to five miles of the victims' homes, most of them from such routine activities as backing into vehicles in parking lots or exiting minor roads. Simple, routine stuff. Closer to the matter, hikeSafe, the joint effort between the White Mountain National Forest and the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, reports, "Falls while hiking in mountainous terrain typically account for more fatalities than any other direct cause." Other sources say the same thing: It's the routine that gets you. It's not the rare, scary things like hypothermia and bear attacks.

It's falling. Simple falling.

The view north from the summit of Big Moose Mountain in Greenfield, Maine, overlooking Moosehead Lake. The peaks of Baxter State Park are in the distance. MATT CHABE

BIG MOOSE MOUNTAIN IN GREENVILLE, MAINE, RISES 3,196 FEET AND is about an hour and a half's drive north of my house. Its name was Big Squaw Mountain until 2000, when a Maine law renamed it. Big Moose sits near the southwestern shore of Moosehead Lake, the state's largest body of water, and it was the site of the first fire tower in the country. (The tower was relocated to the nearby Moosehead Lake Visitors' Center in 2011.) On the northern slope sits Big Squaw, an abandoned ski area that was revived in 2012 and retains its host's former name. And it's a nice, moderate day hike.



Big Moose Mountain, once known as Big Squaw Mountain, overlooks Moosehead Lake from the water's southwestern shore. LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

The Big Moose trailhead is about a mile and a half down a potholed logging road. I pulled into the parking area with my dog, Gulliver, on a sunny April afternoon and parked near the only other car, a Honda Element. It was the first warm day of the season, and temperatures were forecast to jump from the previous day's 50 degrees Fahrenheit to just over 70.

I hopped out of the truck and let Gulliver run free while I arranged my pack. I took out some old running pants, my emergency kit, my MICRO-spikes, and my food to make room for my fleece, knowing that even in the warmer days of spring, the summit could get cold. In some areas, pockets of ice persist in hidden caves all summer long. I repacked my things, locked the truck, and started on the trail.

The trail to the summit is only about 2.2 miles. Muddy at the bottom, with a slow spring thaw trickling down through the rocks. I'd never hiked this trail before, but from what I gleaned from trail reports, it remained wooded with only a brief steep portion before reaching the summit. No problems.

THE SNOW MADE ITS APPEARANCE ABOUT A MILE FROM THE SUMMIT. IT came in long, inconsistent patches of what skiers call "mashed potatoes" that became more regular the farther I climbed. Eventually, the trail was nothing but soft snow about a foot deep. I had left my snowshoes at home. It was a warm spring day, and I was wearing shorts. The heavy forest canopy had kept the trail from thawing as quickly as others I had seen recently.

Gulliver ran ahead. The snow slowed my average time, and it was getting harder to keep up with him. Every so often I'd posthole into a shallow depression, the snow's thin, hardened crust scratching my bare shins. With every corner, I convinced myself I could see the treeline.

On one particularly steep pitch, I stepped forward and the ground disappeared. This was no shallow posthole. I had broken through the snow into a depression almost to the knee. I pitched forward with the full force of my weight, driving my head into a blown-down tree. My glasses flew off into the woods. I saw a flash of white.

I scrambled half-blind through the brush, feeling for my glasses. I was dimly aware that my head had been hurt—maybe it's just a bruise, I thought. But when I put my hand up to check it, blood gushed down my forearm. A hairy flap of skin hung from the left side of my head. A protruding branch had sliced me nearly to the skull. I pushed the flap back into position.

Oh, this is not good. This is not good.

The dog was pacing in circles, whimpering and panting. Something was clearly wrong.

“Gulliver. Come help me find my glasses.” I said it in a calm, even tone. No response.

“Hey. I need your help. *Dude.*” Note that I have never, at any point, trained the dog to find my glasses. I’m not sure what I expected for a response, but I still received none.

After a few minutes of scrambling in the underbrush, I found my glasses and put them back on. My fingers were trembling. Blood pooled in the lenses as I rifled with one hand through my pack for my emergency kit. Nothing. Where was it? I reached to the bottom, then simply emptied the pack onto the ground. A river of blood poured onto the snow and across the straps of my pack. A dull ache began to set in. I knew I needed to apply a pressure bandage to stop the bleeding before I tried to get off the mountain. I needed the antibiotic, gauze, and tape.

And then, the awful realization: There was no emergency kit. I had left it on the seat of my truck as I was packing my fleece. I had a clear vision of it sitting there, forgotten. The one thing I always bring, and it was sitting in a locked truck a mile and a half away.

That’s when the panic set in. I considered my options: my polyester T-shirt? Too sweaty, and I needed the layer. My fleece? Too thick. And then I found the thin running pants. Hurriedly, I tied them tightly around my head and checked my phone. No signal. So I began the descent.

I never saw the hikers who came in the Honda Element. I wondered, bemusedly, what they’d think when they came upon the bloody mess on their own descent. When I got back to my truck, my phone had regained its signal. “Call me,” I texted my wife. “Emergency.”

GREENVILLE, MAINE, IS A SMALL TOWN. THERE’S A SHORT MAIN STREET with a collection of local storefronts surrounded by a smattering of gas stations, grocery stores, and an Appalachian Mountain Club branch office. It’s quaint and remote in a very Maine way, and that’s why people vacation here. Not a lot of people live here.

The Charles A. Dean Memorial Hospital sits near the town center, about ten miles from the logging road where the Big Moose trailhead is located. Like the town itself, it’s small: a collection of mostly one-story brick and wooden buildings with an “emergency” sign pointing out back.



Thin running pants make a good makeshift pressure bandage in absence of a better option. MATT CHABE

By the time I pulled up to the rear of the hospital, the wound had more or less clotted. A thin trickle of blood continued to trace its way down my cheek. The running-pants tourniquet was still cinched around my head like a bloody turban. I could seek medical attention here, but the dog would have to stay in the car for an indefinite amount of time. My wife was in Boston. Together, we made the decision by phone that I'd drive to the hospital near my home. It was about an hour and a half away.

My head ached, but I was alert and I had food and water. I cinched the makeshift pressure bandage tighter, eased the truck out of the parking lot, and started toward the hospital in Bangor, Maine.

I COULD HAVE BEEN MORE PREPARED. I KNOW IT, AND YOU KNOW IT. I also know accidents like this happen out of the blue. I would have expected something like this to happen on a winter ascent of Katahdin, during a windstorm in the White Mountains, or on a solo backcountry excursion. But after all the orienteering, the survival books, the backpacking trips, and the general outdoors activities, this falling accident happened close to home on a sunny day hike. They say everything's a learning opportunity.

Suddenly, old lessons I had learned many years ago gained new relevance: Don't forget the emergency kit. Pack more food and equipment than you need. Leave a note on your windshield with your destination. Let people know where you're going to be with an expected return. It's all Hiking 101. What I really learned is that accidents can happen to the person I least expect—me.

A week and a half later, I felt antsy. My medical provider had removed the stitches and staples a few days earlier, and a scab covered the scar. I was fortunate to not have suffered a concussion. My eye was a deep purple where the blood had pooled in the socket. The eye would heal, and the purple would fade. But the scar—a rough, deep, mountain-shaped gash—would probably remain forever.

Though I was technically injured, my body felt strong. My mind turned to another hike. As I went through the list of possibilities, one peak nagged at the back of my head. It sung a song both menacing and familiar. It was like a poem missing its final line, a snippet of a song teasing me with a familiar melody but with words I couldn't recall.

I went back to Big Moose Mountain, overprepared. This time, I made the summit. And along the way, I took a picture of the blown-down tree that had gashed my head. Just for the memories.

MATT CHABE is a writer living in Maine and a senior editor at the *Bangor Daily News*. His work has appeared in *Backpacker*, *History Magazine*, *PopMatters*, *Sailing Magazine*, *Bangor Metro*, and more. He has backpacked New England's highest peaks, summited Katahdin in a snowstorm, road tripped cross-country on a shoestring budget, and last year ran his first marathon in December's wintry grip.