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## The Northeast's Gol'tsy: A Vast, Subtle Expanse of Mountains

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*The Great Eastern Alpine Zone*

# The Northeast's Gol'tsy

*A vast, subtle expanse of mountains*

**Charlie Cogbill**



THE ARTICLE BY MICHAEL T. JONES AND LISABETH WILLEY, STARTING on page 12, finally brings to our attention the many sites—some unknown to almost everyone—in a coherent, geographic system of mountains throughout northeastern North America. Jones and Willey give a sweeping review of literally the high points in this great expanse. They comprehensively cover the variety of geography, geology, and access and show clearly where the Eastern alpine zone exists. They glimpse the variety of scenic beauty, cultural history, climate, topography, geomorphology, flora, and fauna of the eastern North American alpine.

Although neither the tallest nor the wildest of mountain ranges, the Appalachians hold a mystique of sublime beauty. They harbor some of the most diverse, and not incidentally some of the most utilitarian, forests of North America. Greatly adding to their diversity is the fact that some of these mountains rise just above the elevations that sustain forests. The topography of these areas above treeline, shaped by mountain glaciers, maintain a cold, windy, ice-blasted, foggy, snowy, and wet climate; short growing season; shallow, nutrient-poor, rocky soils; and relatively species-poor, recently colonized, postglacial flora. The largest of these alpine areas support ponds, wetlands, mires, alpine rills (small streams), flat meadows, late-lying snowbanks, headwalls, felsenmeers (seas of rocks), cliffs, and scree (loose rock) slopes. All of these greatly increase their topographic and ecological diversity. Even so, the alpine vegetation here amounts to only a restricted subset of the tundra communities in the far north, beyond the Arctic treeline. Although often called *alpine tundra*, the geographic and ecological nature of these mountains is quite different. The northern *tundra* (after the Sami/Russian word meaning “treeless plain”) is the term for the expansive northern biome. Isolated treeless mountaintops, however, are distinctive in many ways from the variously swampy or arid northern plains. A more apt geographic term for these peaks in eastern North America is *gol'tsy*, literally Russian for “naked,” figuratively either a bald pate or a summit emerging above the trees.

As one travels north, the average elevation of treeline decreases from 4,900 feet (1,500 meters) at 44 degrees north in northern New Hampshire to merge with the Arctic tundra at 1,800 feet (550 meters) at roughly 55 degrees north on the Labrador-Ungava Peninsula. The alpine summits form a virtual archipelago

*Gros Morne in Newfoundland. In the far north, alpine summits form a virtual archipelago of gol'tsy, islands of treeless mountaintops of the northern Appalachians.*

MICHAEL T. JONES

of gol'tsy, islands of treeless mountaintops of the northern Appalachians and the similar topography extending north of the Saint Lawrence River in Québec and Labrador. Southward, these peaks are restricted to a handful of massifs, and northward in Québec, Labrador, and Newfoundland, the total area beyond treeline is extensive on numerous mountains. In addition, hundreds of peaks or high plateaus do not exceed the average elevation of treeline but, because of exposure, topography, substrate, microclimate, or historic disturbance, support smaller, simpler patches of gol'tsy.

Thus, northeastern North America supports a unique extension of barren mountains with an arctic affinity far into the south. This is not the dramatic presence of the Alps or Rockies, but mostly obscure and modest landscape in a sea of forest. With moderate elevations, these small, isolated islands are limited, and each one tends to be an individual with different geology, glacial history, climate, topography, and vegetation history. The closest analogs seem to be the Ural Mountains separating Europe from Asia in Russia or the Sikhote-Alin Mountains of the Russian Far East.

Necessarily missing from Jones and Willey's survey are the myriad of particulars on the geography, natural history, personal anecdotes, and unimaginable vistas. These details are available to anyone willing to read about, to visit, to explore, to hike across, to mount an expedition to, to scientifically study, or to document new summits of, northeastern gol'tsy. This guide lets us begin to understand and appreciate what is unique to both the well-tramped summits in northern New England and the virtually unknown summits of the Labrador-Ungava Peninsula, literally the last frontier in eastern North America.

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CHARLIE COGBILL is a historical ecologist who has conducted detailed inventories of trees and plants going back to colonial times in New England and New York.

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