

Life at the Top

*Weather, Wonder & High Cuisine
from the
Mount Washington Observatory*

Eric Pinder

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Introduction

An Iceberg in the Sky

WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT the windiest, most wintry weather in the world occurs not in the Himalayas or on the icy tundra of Antarctica, but right here in the hills and mountains of New England?

On Mount Washington, highest peak in the Presidential Range of New Hampshire, blizzards regularly pummel the summit, sometimes even in summer. Bone-numbing cold, frequent fog, and furious winds have earned this lofty peak a nickname: “Home of the World’s Worst Weather.”

This is a book about Mount Washington and its savage skies and the unusual lives of the handful of people who eat, sleep, work, and play in a land above the clouds.

Mount Washington is a 400-million-year-old spike of metamorphic rock thrusting high above the hills of New Hampshire. Expansive views of sparkling blue lakes and rolling hills entice thousands of sightseers to climb up the slopes to its 6,288-foot summit each summer. They visit when the temperature and wind are relatively mild: Gentle breezes caress the brows of weary hikers like a cool, damp cloth. But in winter, the wind turns formidable—sometimes deadly. Whenever I strap on my winter hiking boots and scramble up a high ridge on the mountain, I brace against the nearly constant wind. Gusts scissor through my jacket

and hurl chunks of ice the size of cinder blocks into the sky. My nose reddens, and I fight back a sneeze. A powerful gust knocks me sideways, like a punch delivered by a strong invisible hand.

At any time of year, the mountain may be swept by winds so strong they can hoist me into the sky like a kite. Rather than walk, I must fly down the trail; the flaps of my jacket flutter against my ribs like wings. I wobble to keep my balance and try to walk in a straight line. All across the summit cone, I see other hikers buffeted by wind. They walk in jerky, mechanical steps through the gusts, like marionettes with missing strings.

Despite these extreme conditions—or, more accurately, because of them—Mount Washington is home to a small crew of scientists who live and work on the windy summit, keeping track of the notorious weather.

The Mount Washington Observatory was established as a private nonprofit organization in 1932 to study weather and climate trends. The Observatory's wintry conditions attract scientists and researchers who are studying cold-weather climates. "We're really an arctic island in a temperate zone," explains staff meteorologist Mark Ross-Parent. "There's something about weather extremes that people love."

A healthy sense of humor helps the staff to take demanding conditions in stride. Mark boasts that he has "the highest paying job in New England." Unfortunately, that refers to his elevation, not his wages. "Working here really limits your upward mobility," another meteorologist quips.

Two crews work on the summit on alternate weeks, and their duties include scientific research, weather reporting, daily radio broadcasts—and, of course, shoveling snow: "Wow! Two days in a row of strange white stuff. I think it could be snow, but there's so darn much of it, I can't really be sure," writes one scientist in the Observatory logbook on a January day. A little later he adds: "The sledding should be fairly decent tomorrow. The crew (all two of us) spent the day shoveling, but it seems to be blowing right back in, so that all evidence of our hard work will be gone by tomorrow. Memo to the other shift: We really did shovel. Really! Trust us."

Life at the Top takes a look at life on the summit, where workdays are punctuated by visits from wild foxes and soaring ravens. In daylight, we

catch glimpses of flying saucer-shaped lenticular clouds in orbit around the peaks. Clear nights sometimes bring spectacular views of meteor showers or the aurora borealis. Swirling snow wraps around us like a blindfold in winter, forcing us to retreat indoors. And at dinnertime, the aroma of spicy spinach quiche wafts up from the kitchen.

Quiche? Would you believe that people who are crazy enough to sled down the six-thousand-foot-high mountain in the raw grip of January can also be gourmet cooks? Workers on Mount Washington endure the worst blows of winter weather, but they compensate by eating well—and often—so any book about the Observatory crew’s trials and triumphs naturally must include a selection of favorite recipes. You’ll find them beginning on page 117.

“If you don’t like the weather, wait a minute,” is an old Yankee aphorism. On Mount Washington, they say it with a twist: “If you don’t like the weather, go someplace else!” But have a bite to eat before you go.



LYNNE HOST

**LENTICULAR CLOUDS HOVER OVER MT. WASHINGTON
WHILE CUMULUS CLOUDS WHISK BY IN THE WIND.**



Part I

Summit Science



Chapter 1

The Story in the Stones— Mount Washington’s Geology

DURING SHIFT CHANGE AT THE Observatory, the roof of the Bombardier snow tractor is piled high with boxes of fresh food, supplies, books, new research equipment, and backpacks from the crew stuffed with a week’s worth of clothes. The first chore upon arriving at the summit is to unload all those heavy packs and boxes, brush off the snow, and carry them inside. You’ll often hear the familiar question, “What have you got in here, *rocks?*”

You’re a geologist if your answer to that question has ever been “Yes!” According to an old joke, if you’re a geologist, all the baggage handlers at the airport know you by name and refuse to help with your luggage.

Geology is the study of rocks. It’s a hard (pardon the pun) subject. Enthusiastic geology students like to say, “Geology rocks!” And there are plenty of rocks of interest to geologists here on Mount Washington.

For obvious reasons, Mount Washington is called the “Rockpile” by the hardy souls who live and work on its windy summit. Jagged boulders jut through the clouds, and stones tumble down the trails, kicked loose by hikers’ boots. Steep ravines and rocky ridges cut across the skyline

thousands of feet above timberline. But where did this jumble of stones come from? To read the clues in the rocks themselves, we must climb to the summit, close our eyes, and strain to imagine the events of the distant past. Only in our minds can we witness the tumultuous evolution of Mount Washington.

The Evolution of Rocks

Surprisingly, in our search for the origins of the highest peak in New England, we must first look far beneath the sea.

The stones that sit today on the summit of Mount Washington were born during the Paleozoic Era, some 400 million years ago, when layers of sand and mud were deposited in shallow seas and compressed into sedimentary rock in a swampy region near Earth's equator. Over the course of many millions of years, these shallow waters disappeared as our continent drifted north into colder climates.

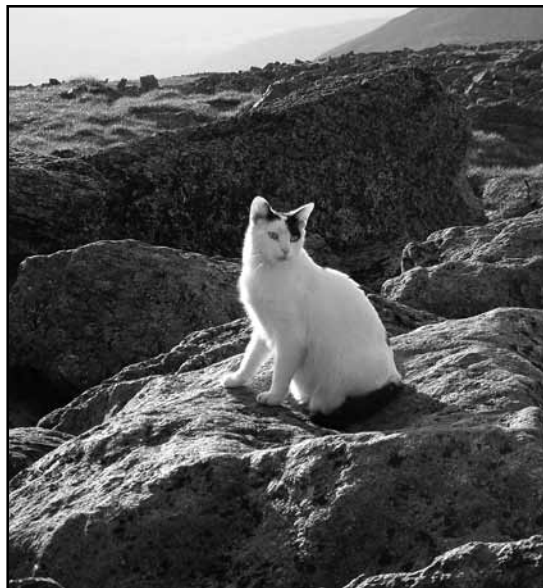
Three hundred million years ago, the continents of Europe and Africa rubbed against the coast of North America, squeezing out the ocean in between. As a result of this collision, miles of sedimentary rock were crumpled deep inside Earth's mantle. Sandstones and shales that had long ago formed in New England's ancient seas were slowly metamorphosed by intense heat and pressure. Metamorphic rocks known as schist,

How Big Is a Million?

Geologists measure time in vast epochs of millions and billions of years. Lesser spans of time such as a month or a year—or even a century—are simply too small to use.

For example, the Paleozoic Era, in which the rocks of Mount Washington first formed, lasted 325 million years. That equals a whopping 3,900,000,000 months or 118,706,250,000 days.

If we tried to count to a million (1,000,000) without pausing to eat or sleep, the task would take nearly two weeks. Counting to a billion (1,000,000,000) would require thirty-one years.



ON THE ROCKS WITH NIN.

gneiss, and quartzite were the result. Today, these rocks sit atop Mount Washington.

Why do the rocks sparkle? On rare days when the sun actually peeks through the clouds, boulders on Mount Washington's summit glitter and gleam. Each stone is studded with tiny mirrorlike plates of mica, a soft, easily scratched mineral that forms in paper-thin sheets. Mica is created when sedimentary rocks such as sandstone or shale are metamorphosed deep below Earth's surface. The mineral is one clue that helps geologists unlock the mysteries of Mount Washington's past.

By looking at the texture and mineral content of rocks, geologists can determine the temperature and pressure at which these rocks formed. In the case of Mount Washington, sedimentary rocks made of clay, sand, and mud were at one time squeezed and heated several miles underground. The pressure at these depths was six kilobars, six thousand times stronger than the pressure at Earth's surface. That's enough to instantly flatten a pickup truck into a tiny sliver of steel. The temperature in this geological pressure cooker was 1,100°F, a far cry from the annual average of 26.5°F that the rocks of the summit experience today.

Start by cooking 1 cup brown rice in 2 ½ cups of water to which you have added 2 tbsp of black pepper, one of the crushed garlic cloves, and about 1 tbsp of butter.

While the rice is simmering, heat 2 or 3 tbsp of olive oil in a large skillet and sauté the rest of the garlic. (You'll know it's ready when it smells wonderful.) Add sliced onions and green peppers and continue to sauté.

While the onions and peppers are still crisp, add the spices (the amount of crushed red pepper is left to the cook's discretion). Sauté for 2 or 3 minutes, then add tomatoes and beans. Cook until bubbly, then reduce heat. Cook an additional 15 to 20 minutes. Add water if necessary.

Finally, add hot rice and serve. Have plenty of tortilla chips, cold water, and sour cream available—and perhaps a fire extinguisher, too.

For an absolutely fiendish variation of this meal, known as *Nuclear Rice & Beans*, add ½ cup hot red pepper while sautéing the spices. Cook in a well-ventilated area.

Sawdust from the Log

November 1, 1995

“Crew gives a booming rendition of *White Christmas* in honor of today's modest snowfall (2.7 inches). All we need now is a fireplace and some roasting chestnuts. Nuclear beans 'n rice for dinner again tonight. No casualties this time.”