



The 5-mile span of Franconia Ridge offers some of the most beautiful
Hiking in the White Mountains— and some of the most dangerous.

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Rescue on the Ridge

Why do hikers keep getting in trouble on Franconia?
And who should pay for getting them out?

By Amy VanHaren

Brian Gagnon was certain he was going to die. He wasn't scared, he just knew he wasn't going to make it. He was 24 years old and acutely aware of the severity of his current situation. The temperature had dropped to almost -20 degrees Fahrenheit. The windchill made it feel like 50 below. The winds on the ridge above him were registering over 100 miles per hour and he was more than 6 miles from the nearest road, lost in the White Mountains somewhere off the Franconia Ridge near the summit of Mount Lafayette. It was after 6 p.m. and already pitch-black. There was no way a helicopter would be cresting the ridge in such extreme wind to discover him. No time for rescuers to hike in that night.

Gagnon had already done everything he could think of to keep himself alive—bushwhacked off the raging summit into the trees, tried to start a fire (only to see the embers blow out and swirl around his head), followed the sound of water, remained covered in his full gear, and clambered into his sleeping bag on semi-flat ground (breaking his zipper in the process). He was exhausted and freezing. His fingers were blistered. His back ached. Leaning into the wind earlier had exposed a patch of skin on his lower back to the dangerous cold. Shivering, he held his sleeping bag closed and concentrated all his strength on staying warm. There was nothing left to do but wait.

THE HIKE IN

Ten hours earlier, at 8 a.m. on the morning of Jan. 20, 2007, Gagnon's day had started like those of millions of hikers before him—at the Lafayette Campground parking lot in the White Mountains' Franconia Notch. He and Ryan Duhaime, 23, and Marc Smith, 22—two friends from Plymouth State University—had decided to hike a variation of the Franconia Ridge Loop, one of the most popular day hikes in New Hampshire. They planned to hike up the Old Bridle Path to the summit of 5,260-foot Mount Lafayette, across the 3.8-mile Franconia Ridge Trail—over Mount Lincoln and Little Haystack—before continuing on to Mount Liberty and their campsite at Liberty Spring.

Their first day's trek would cover 8 miles of rough terrain, four summit peaks, and a 2,450-foot rise in elevation. It was an ambitious hike, and none of them had done the route in winter before, but each had some

hiking and winter camping experience. Gagnon had the most. When they set out, carrying sleeping bags, extra clothes and food, Thermarest sleeping pads, flashlights, an AMC map, GPS, and a stove and tent (the last two lugged by Gagnon's friends), his thoughts were only of the spectacular trail ahead.

DANGEROUS BEAUTY

The Franconia Ridge offers some of the most beautiful hiking in New Hampshire's White Mountains and also, because of its exposure to the weather, some of its most dangerous. It spans 5 miles from Mount Lafayette to Mount Flume and encompasses the tallest peaks in the Franconia Range. The 28th edition of AMC's *White Mountain Guide* appropriately dubs the highest part of the ridge—running from 5,260-foot Mount Lafayette (the Whites' sixth highest peak) to 4,780-foot Little Haystack Mountain—"a Gothic masterpiece." "It suggests the ruins of a gigantic medieval cathedral," the guidebook says. "The peaks along the high serrated ridge are like towers supported by soaring buttresses that rise from the floor of the notch." The views from the ridge showcase the Presidential Range and sweep over the expansive Pemigewasset Wilderness. The ridge is also surprisingly easy to access via I-93, no more than a day's drive from more than 70 million people. There is good reason so many hikers flock to the Franconia Ridge, sometimes as many as 700 a day.

There is also good reason why the Franconia Ridge is so dangerous. Traversing three mountain peaks at its highest point, it rises well above treeline, across 1.7 miles of exposed trail. From the summit of Mount Lafayette to the summit of Little Haystack the narrow ridge is rocky and wide open, as exposed to the elements as you can get. When storms and fronts tear through the Whites, the Franconia Ridge feels the full effect. Any hiker on the ridge will too. Big lightning storms. Hundred mile-per-hour winds. Blowing snow, freezing temperatures, and thick ice that covers everything from trail to cairns to scrub trees. Being caught in a storm on the ridge is as treacherous as being a sailor caught in a tempest at sea.



After a 40-hour search, Gagnon was found near the peak of Mount Lafayette, huddled in his sleeping bag. Photo courtesy of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

VANISHED

At the trailhead, the temperature hovered near 1 degree with a -30 windchill when Gagnon and his friends set off on their hike. Gagnon had seen the TV forecast predicting snow and wind, but not a detailed report, since his Internet connection had been down. He and his friends were comfortable on the Old Bridle Path in the shelter of the trees, but by the time the trio reached AMC's Greenleaf Hut (closed, they knew, for winter), they were in the midst of an alarming front. The wind was blowing a constant 80 mph with gusts close to 120. Loose snow whipped about and created whiteout conditions. Huddled against the side of the hut they attempted to talk, but each time someone yelled, the wind snatched any audible words away. Smith's uncovered face showed signs of frostbite, but he pressed his friends to continue with him to the summit.

The three men proceeded up the Greenleaf Trail to Mount Lafayette's peak, 1.1 mile away, crawling through frigid blasts of wind. The summit—and the trail—appeared only in spurts. The temperature was down to -10 degrees, and when they made it to the top, fully exposed on the ridge, they shared only a quick series of high fives and continued on. One hundred yards farther down the trail the group decided to turn around. Gagnon yelled to keep moving until they reached the hut. He turned and pressed into the wind ahead of the others. Smith and Duhaime stopped to adjust Smith's backpack. When they started up again, Gagnon was gone.

CONSEQUENCES

“The Franconia Ridge experiences what I call the ‘tourist syndrome,’” says Fish and Game Lieutenant Todd Bogardus, director of New Hampshire Search and Rescue. “People—and I mean people in general, from New Hampshire and everywhere else—think: ‘The mountain is right here so I’ll just go take a simple walk without planning.’ They underestimate their plan, and the mountain, and think they won’t get into trouble. That’s usually when they do.”

Gagnon had become one of a growing number of hikers to be lost in the volatile weather on the ridge. His location, while unknown at the time, was an ironic one. Less than a mile west of where he sat on the backside of the Pemi Wilderness was the spot near Mount Lafayette where Brenda Cox succumbed to hypothermia in 2004 after spending two days in extreme conditions without any overnight gear. (Amazingly, her husband Russell survived.) Gagnon was 1.7 miles northwest of Little Haystack, where Laurence Fredrickson and James Osborne would be discovered in 2008 after two days in dangerous weather, Fredrickson dead from exposure and Osborne in critical condition, his body temperature just 78 degrees. And he was only a few hundred yards from the place where Benjamin Davis was plucked from the mountain by helicopter just seven days after Fredrickson's demise.

Four hikers go missing somewhere on the Old Bridle Path/Franconia Ridge/Falling Waters Trail each year on average, according to Bogardus. Six required search and rescue in 2008. Though the numbers seem small, the consequences are huge. Most hikers lose their way in winter, when the conditions are most dangerous, sometimes resulting in hikers' tragic deaths and too often resulting in multi-day searches and dramatic rescues that incur high costs and put rescue personnel at great risk. “We see so many people in the Franconia [Range] that are unprepared for weather conditions and the challenge of the hike,” says Eric Pedersen, AMC huts manager and search-and-rescue coordinator. “Often, day-hikers have no idea what they’re getting into and lack the common sense to turn around.”

The reasons people need rescue from the ridge usually boil down to three basic ways of being unprepared.

The first is weather. Or rather, not checking the weather, understanding its severity, or being ready for it to change. “Weather doesn’t scare people like it used to,” says Chris Joosen, lead U.S. Forest Service snow ranger. “People like that word: extreme. They want to say they’ve been in it.”

The second is inadequate gear. Not having enough, having the wrong kind (leather boots in winter versus plastic boots, or creepers rather than 10-point crampons), or lacking the essentials for extreme weather and emergency situations. Both Fredrickson and Cox might have survived if had they brought the proper gear to protect them from the harsh elements: sleeping bags, tent, and plenty of extra clothing. “Take more than you need and you won’t need us,” Bogardus says.



The New Hampshire search-and-rescue community includes AMC, New Hampshire Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service, the Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, and the Pemigewasset Valley Search and Rescue.

Poor planning is the third reason people end up in trouble. “You need to know what you’re getting into and be prepared to handle the worst situations so you’re not surprised,” says Pedersen. “It’s essential to be prepared physically, to be fit enough to do the hike in a reasonable amount of time, and mentally, for route finding and decision making, handling the weather, and dealing with anything that may arise.”

THE COSTS OF RESCUE

Locating a lost hiker in the 200,000-acre search area surrounding the Franconia Ridge takes an enormous amount of resources. A major three-day search can require up to 50 individuals, hiking for more than eight hours each day in the most extreme weather conditions. It takes a concerted effort from the entire New Hampshire search and rescue (SAR) community, including Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service, the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation, and 10 talented, dedicated volunteer teams, including AMC, the Mountain Rescue Service (MRS), the Androscoggin Valley SAR, and the Pemigewasset Valley SAR team. It also takes a large amount of money.

A multi-day SAR that includes the National Guard (like those that often occur on the Franconia Ridge) can cost up to \$25,000, according to Bogardus. As incidents rise, so do rescue costs for equipment, staff, and flight crews. In 2008, the Fish and Game Department conducted 158 search and rescues and went over its \$200,000 SAR budget—funded through snowmobile and boat licenses—by \$45,000.

In July 2008 the New Hampshire legislature passed a law that lowered the threshold for charging hikers for their rescues from reckless (the first standard established in 1999) to negligent. To be found reckless, a hiker had to have been aware of the risk and consciously disregarded it—such as being told to turn back by snow rangers and continuing on anyway. A negligent hiker, however, is any “reasonable person who knew better,” says Bogardus; someone like Gagnon, who failed to thoroughly check the weather before embarking on a 9-mile winter hike, fits this definition.

The final decision comes down from the state’s attorney general in each case, and not all hikers receive bills; there is no charge in instances of death, for example. “Fredrickson,” Bogardus says, “already paid the ultimate price.” Hikers deemed negligent may be billed for the full cost, an average of \$1,000 for straightforward rescues and more than \$10,000 for complex SAR missions. Since the law passed, there have been 152 SAR incidents, and only 10 hikers have been billed. The fees that have been assessed amount to \$33,857, of which only \$8,000 has been recovered. Bogardus says the law won’t solve any of the department’s financial crises, but he hopes it will promote better judgment.

Controversy surrounds the policy of billing lost hikers. Some opponents of the law mistakenly consider it a “money grab,” says Chris Thayer, AMC White Mountain facilities director and president of the volunteer, nonprofit New Hampshire Outdoor Council, which promotes safe hiking practices and provides financial assistance (received through donations) to SAR groups throughout New Hampshire. “But the original—and the consistent, current intention—is to lead with hikeSafe education efforts while also having the statute tool in the toolbox to enforce when needed.”

OUT OF THE WOODS

On Monday morning, after 40 hours of extensive search over 45 miles, five drainages, and four peaks, Fish and Game Conservation Officer Brad Morse and MRS members Fred Wilkinson, Bayard Russell, and Jim Shimberg discovered Gagnon’s trail. With the help of a clear day, they located Gagnon’s footprints just off the summit of Lafayette and followed his “breadcrumbs”—hiking poles, Nalgene bottle, burned Thermarest pad—one mile to the southernmost drainage of Franconia Brook, an area where rain and snowmelt drain into the brook in warm weather. There they found Gagnon huddled in his life-saving -20 degree sleeping bag, in disbelief that the flash of red he had seen was really a rescuer’s jacket and not some figment of his imagination. Miraculously, Bogardus says he was in “relatively good shape,” suffering mild hypothermia, superficial frostbite to his hands and feet, and second-degree frostbite on his lower back. Relieved and grateful, he was lifted by cable into the helicopter.

“I think that the will to go on played a big part in my survival,” Gagnon says. “I just focused on making it hour by hour. I knew the stories about those who had made really rash decisions from hypothermia and I was determined to avoid that fate.” Gagnon was elated to return to loved ones and thankful for the rescue community’s efforts. He was later charged \$7,000 (on top of \$3,000 already donated by his family) for his rescue. He paid the state with a loan from his grandfather, but it was the experience that taught him the most valuable lesson. “I would definitely watch the weather if going above 3,000 feet or to the top of a mountain,” he says. “Now, if it wasn’t good, it would keep me into the lower elevations.”