

Winter/Spring 2006

# Appalachia

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America's Longest-Running Journal of Mountaineering & Conservation

## Winter *in the Whites & Beyond*



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# On Snowy, Uphill Trails with a Four-Legged Hiking Legend

By Steven D. Smith





**D**URING THE PAST SEVERAL WINTERS, HIKERS IN THE HIGH PEAKS of New Hampshire's White Mountains have been startled by what looked like a small bear ambling down the trail. But that was no sleepwalking bruin; that was "Brutus," a 160-pound Newfoundland who has become a canine legend on the winter trails.

Accompanied by his owner, Kevin Rooney, 57, formerly of Williamstown, Vermont, and a merry band of fellow hikers, Brutus (or "Mr. B," as he is sometimes affectionately called) has climbed all forty-eight of New Hampshire's 4,000-foot peaks in winter. Not once, but twice.

In this game, under rules established by the AMC's 4,000-Footer Committee, the summits must be climbed during calendar winter, typically December 22 to March 20. This involves twenty-five- to thirty-day hikes, covering more than 200 miles of steep terrain, including the barren, wind-blasted crests of Mount Washington and its Presidential Range neighbors. Slightly more than 300 human hikers have achieved this milestone, compared to nearly 8,000 who have climbed the peaks in the warmer months, but Brutus is the first dog to earn the coveted winter patch.

The challenges of the high summits in winter—snow, cold, ice, wind, and wildly changeable weather—keep most sensible hikers, human or canine, curled up in front of the fireplace. But this is the time of year when Brutus, with his luxuriant coat of black fur, thrives on the trail.

"Mr. B loves the snow," said Rooney, a genial man who has taught numerous winter hiking workshops for the AMC. "It's a lot more comfortable for him than hiking in the heat of summer."

Brutus, who turned five this December, boasts a noble lineage. His breed is noted for its strong physique and sweet disposition. Both his parents were Canadian dog show champions, and his full registered name is "Brutus the Mighty King." He began hiking soon after Rooney and his wife acquired him, ascending Vermont's Camel's Hump in October 2001. A week later, Brutus and Rooney hiked the rugged 9-mile loop over Mounts Lincoln and Lafayette in Franconia Notch. Though Mr. B struggled a bit that day, Rooney said, "I could tell he was very strong, and cold, windy, snowy conditions with rime ice didn't faze him at all."

Within a year, Brutus had polished off his "all-season" list of New Hampshire 4,000-footers. According to an AMC tradition dating back to the 1960s,

*Opposite: Brutus with Scot Holt on the shoulder of Mt. Clay on the Jewell Trail.*

PHOTO BY KEVIN ROONEY





PHOTO BY KEVIN ROONEY

*Brutus joins Kevin Rooney, Jeff Kuehl, and Jim Durning on the roof of the Lakes Hut.*

canine climbers receive formal recognition for their accomplishments. So the following spring, Brutus and Rooney attended the annual awards dinner held in Stratham, New Hampshire, by the 4,000-Footer Committee. The 200 assembled peakbaggers clapped and whistled while Brutus paraded down the aisle for the patch and congratulatory pawshake.

Brutus began his winter climbs of the forty-eight peaks just after he finished his all-season climbs. On a trek to Wildcat Mountain in January 2003, a playful Brutus delighted his human companions by sliding down a ski trail on his side. During the winter of 2003–04, Brutus rambled through the rest of his winter list, as Rooney posted reports of their trips on the popular hikers' website, [www.viewsfromthetop.com](http://www.viewsfromthetop.com). A small cadre of devoted winter hikers accompanied the pair on most of their treks. Many others followed the gentle giant's exploits on the Web.

On January 18, 2004, Brutus tagged winter summit number forty-eight atop Mount Pierce in the Presidential Range. He was rewarded with a special treat of steak tips, carried to the summit by fellow peakbagger Cathy Goodwin. That spring, Mr. B made an encore appearance at the 4,000-footer awards event, where he received a whooping round of applause.



The following summer, Rooney mapped out a plan for climbing all of the peaks in a single calendar winter. This had first been done by Cathy Goodwin, Cindy DiSanto, and Steven Martin in the winter of 1994–5 and had since been replicated by only a handful of two-legged hikers.

During the winter of 2004–5, the adventures of “Kevin, Brutus & Friends” appeared on the web several times each week. Early in the season, a series of thaws and freezes encased the trails in ice, creating hazardous conditions. Rooney was prepared for nearly every eventuality, however. For the steep descent of the Blueberry Ledge Trail off Mount Whiteface, he brought along a harness and rope to lower Brutus over the trickiest ledges.

“While he wasn’t crazy about it at first, by the end of the third pitch he had it figured out, and the fourth went rather smoothly,” wrote Rooney in his trip report. “He was rather full of himself the rest of the way down.”

The ascent of Mount Washington was easier than expected. The “worst weather in the world” was nowhere to be found on a sunny, balmy, and nearly windless Super Bowl Sunday.

Perhaps the most memorable hike of Brutus’s second winter round was a 23-mile traverse of Zealand Mountain and the Bond Range in late February. While crossing the open ridge between Mounts Bond and Bondcliff, the group battled 50-mph winds, with gusts into the 70s.

“I steadied Brutus by holding his collar and huddling behind boulders during the worst gusts,” recalled Rooney. “Fortunately, everyone made it safely, but we were all bruised a bit from getting knocked down multiple times by the winds. In retrospect, we would never have attempted the hike if we’d known how strong the winds were.” Rooney said that Brutus was visibly relieved when that difficult section was over and they were back in the safety of the trees.

“Brutus’s emotional reactions to tough situations are much like ours,” he said. “You can see the relief he experiences after it’s all over: he frisks around a bit immediately afterward.”

Over the course of many uphill and downhill miles, Brutus and his owner have developed a strong rapport on the trail that has helped them through dicey spots.

“Brutus and I have hiked so much together that he just gives me a certain type of quick look when he wants some help,” said Rooney. “In a tricky area above treeline, I’ll tap my hiking pole on rocks to point the way I think will be easiest for him. You can see the wheels churning when I do that. Sometimes he takes that route and sometimes he chooses his own. But



it's a lot of fun to know when you're communicating with someone at that level."

This writer had the good fortune to join Kevin, Brutus & Friends on two hikes as they neared the end of their all-forty-eight-in-one-winter quest. A mountain climb with this group is a leisurely outing. When Brutus halts for one of his occasional sprawls in the snow, the entire line of hikers takes a break.

"Brutus is the most energy-efficient hiker I know," said Al Dwyer, a veteran of many treks with Mr. B. "He never wastes any effort."

On a late February trip to Mount Osceola off the Kancamagus Highway, I watched in admiration as Brutus made short work of the steep, grueling pitch up towards the mountain's East Peak. A few days later, my wife Carol and I joined the "Brutus Brigade" for an ascent of Mount Tecumseh in the Waterville Valley. Before hitting the trail, we watched as a WMUR-TV reporter interviewed Rooney for a night time news piece. Brutus struck a majestic pose for the camera, clearly comfortable with his celebrity.

Our group of ten made a slow and jovial climb to the summit, number forty-six on Brutus's all-in-one-winter round. One hiker fed him some hard-boiled eggs, which he washed down with powder snow—his preferred hydration method in winter. Supersize dog biscuits were also on the menu. On the way back, we had a delightful time snowshoeing down the trail behind the bounding, snow-loving Newfie.

We were not able to accompany Brutus up Cannon Mountain on March 6, as he completed his forty-eighth and final summit for the winter of 2004-05. But about forty other hikers did go along, and there was a grand celebration on top, with a banner, a suitably decorated cake, filet mignon for the honoree, and the unveiling of the official "Brutus Brigade" t-shirt.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Brutus was seen out with his owner climbing several more peaks during the last weeks of winter, and many more on into the spring. At a gathering last May, friends and family joined to honor Rooney and Brutus before their planned move to California. The pair received a custom-made miniature rock cairn with Brutus's accomplishments emblazoned upon tiny trail signs. Brutus was also awarded the third-ever "Order of the Golden Biscuit," the ultimate tribute from the Four-Legged Explorers Association (FLEA). The previous two honorees were Barkley Mayer, a frequent contributor to *Appalachia* in the 1990s, (whose human companion, Doug Mayer, is co-author of the Mountain Voices series published regularly in this journal), and Tuckerman Ray (whose human companions are Brad Ray and Rebecca Oreskes, the Mountain Voices co-author.)





*Brutus relaxing on North Twin.* PHOTO BY KEVIN ROONEY

Though they will be sorely missed by their legions of friends and admirers in New England, Rooney and Brutus will certainly carry on in California. As one friend of Rooney's was heard to predict, it won't be long before there will be a western chapter of the "Brutus Brigade" tramping around the Sierra Nevada.

You just can't keep a good dog down.

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