JR Stockwell is the King of the Mountains

If there was a championship of local hiking, New Hampshire native JR Stockwell would be a lock for first place—except he never tells anyone about his singular adventures in the White Mountains.

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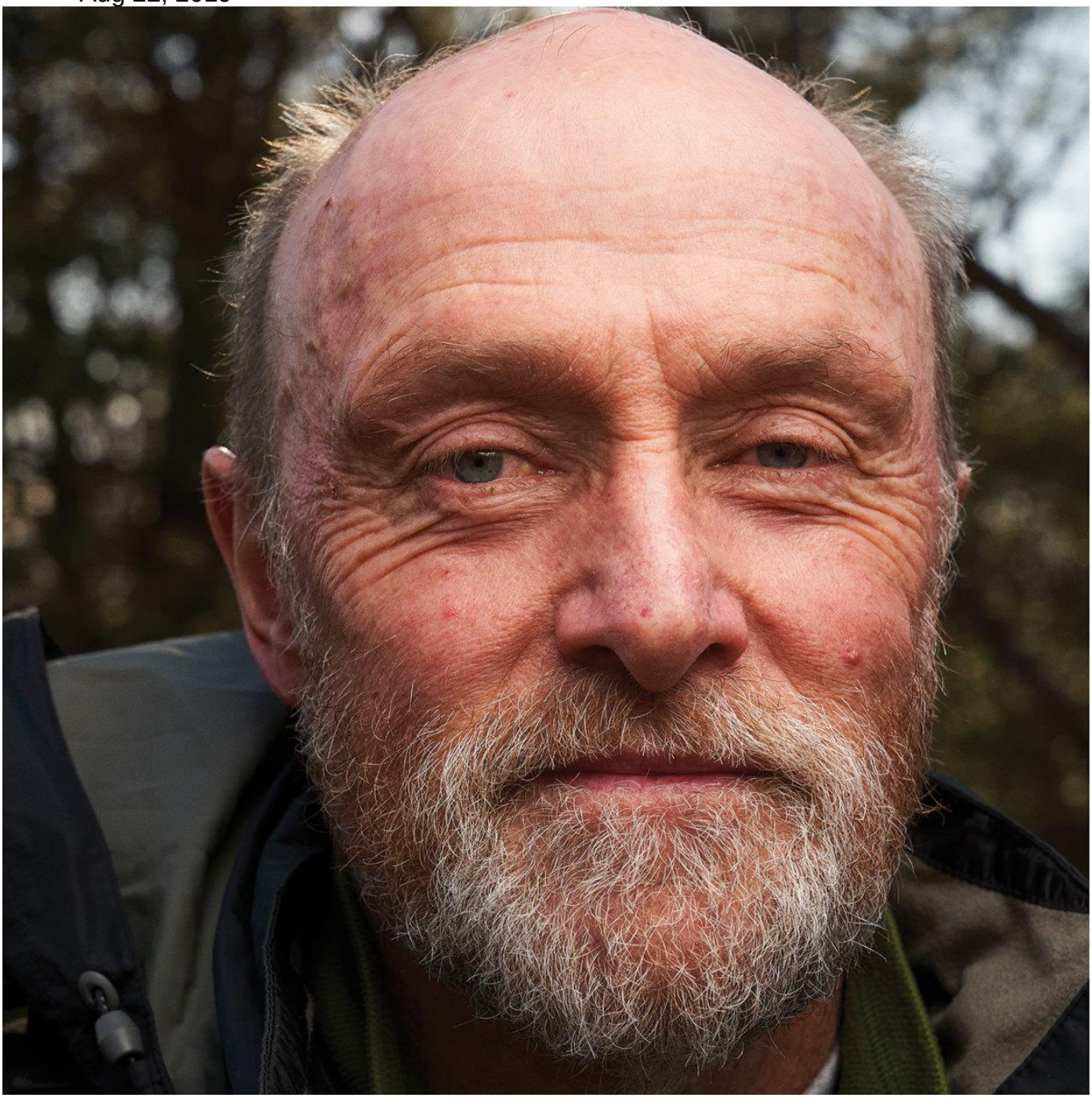

JR Stockwell

"He moves," one hiker has said, "like smoke through the trees."

"He's like a ghost," a peakbagger once told me. "You can't find a picture of him anywhere."

JR Stockwell is a real person, though. He is a 58-year-old carpenter who lives just a mile from me in tiny Gilmanton, New Hampshire, population 3,800. And for the past two decades he's explored the White Mountains so intensely that it's not hyperbole to say he knows the forested, 800,000-acre range like other people know their backyard.

JR (technically he's Leonard Stockwell, Jr.) is the only living person to have bushwhacked up all 48 of New Hampshire's listed 4,000-footers in every season. He knows the names of nearly all the bird and plant species living in the Whites. He knows the whereabouts of all the crashed airplanes there, and once, when a fellow bushwhacker ran into him and reported that she'd just seen a moose carcass, JR already knew precisely where it lay rotting.

Steven Smith, the editor of the Appalachian Mountain Club's *White Mountain Guidebook*, regards JR as a little-known treasure. "There are many places he's been that no one has visited in a long time, if ever," Smith says. He calls JR "the true heir to Guy Waterman," referencing the White's ur all-season bushwhacker who, along with his wife, Laura, wrote books such as *Yankee Rock and Ice* that captured the Whites' wildness before he elected to end his life in the mountains he loved. On a bitter subzero winter day in 2000, Waterman hiked to the top of Mt. Lafayette, sat down, and died from the cold. "No one has ranged as widely in the Whites as Guy and JR," Smith says.

JR has produced no books, though. He doesn't blog about his hikes. He leaves no public account of his explorations at all. He is not on Facebook or Instagram. He does not own a computer. He does not have a cell phone. There are no photos of JR online, and on the website for the White Mountains' hardcore peakbaggers (48x12.com is a gathering spot for "grid" hikers who've knocked off all the listed 4,000-footers in every month of the year), there is but a single sentence about JR, written, a tad stingily, by someone else: "Junior completed the Grid on September 29, 2013 on Mount Carrigain."

Eager to know more? Sorry, JR Stockwell is the J.D. Salinger of the New England outdoors. He stands apart from today's media-saturated hiking world and the summit

photos clogging Instagram. Any one of us who's ever blogged about bagging a peak has contributed our own version of the hero shot. In the White Mountains, the phenomenon is particularly pronounced, as topping all of the region's 4,000-footers becomes an ever more popular New England rite of passage.

JR has lists to check, too, but he's guided by an antique ethic that values experience and adventure over achievement. "I want to explore the White Mountains," he says. "I want to see if there's a view from this or that peak. I want to look for the cellar holes and stone walls from old sheep farms and for the remains of old trails built in the thirties." He takes the time to find stunning sights no one has ever described in writing—for example, an unnamed, unbroken glade of white birch trees that sits just off the slope of Bondcliff, a peak that seems to draw half of nearby Boston each summer weekend. He's such an anomaly that whenever he's referred to online, the language is misty and grandiose. "JR just picks out a line on the map that interests him and goes for it," Smith has written. "Legend," another blogger wrote recently, summing up JR.

For me, the mythmaking surrounding JR is complicated. I've known the guy since 1980, when we were both teenage distance runners. Last year, I hired JR to do some carpentry at my house. I have written him checks; he's cashed them. In my experience, there is nothing ghostly about the man.

Still, I can't help but think of JR as existing beyond the tedious pale of 21st-century life, on a deeper and more meditative plane. He plans his routes by consulting his library of vintage White Mountain Guides stowed in a glass and wood case he built himself, and he has quietly absorbed the cool, restorative energy of New England's most remote places. He ventures out almost every weekend and he returns calm and unhurried. Recently I began to wonder: Is this little-known carpenter who's worked on my house *truly* a hiking sage? And if so, what could I learn from him—what could we all learn—about exploring the wild places close to home? I asked JR if I could join him on the trail to find out. A full year later, he agreed. Reluctantly.

Stockwell near his Gilmanton home in spring 2019. He grows a beard for winter hiking and shaves it off on March 21 every year.

"Hey JR, you remember how you used to listen to Ted Nugent all the time? You remember that album, 'Intensities in 10 Cities?'"

"What's that, bud?" It's February, and it's relatively balmy at 20°F. Carrying snowshoes, we're crunching uphill on a logging road near the Waterville Valley ski resort, over firm snow. The walking is noisy.

"Ted Nugent," I repeat.

"Well," JR says, chuckling, "as you grow older, you learn things, bud. Like maybe Ted Nugent's not the greatest guy in the world."

This is how conversations between us often go. We draw on decades of shared history and circle back on absurd moments. We pinpoint the vast differences between us (I was a Doors fan), and then in reflection, we arrive at new ways of seeing things, a path forward.

We keep crunching uphill. Our plan is to leave the trail soon, then cut upward, through the woods, across a col, and on toward the summit of an obscure peak. Sandwich Dome is the highest peak in the Whites that is not on the 4,000-footer list. As far as social media is concerned, the 3,992-foot Dome does not exist.

But it exists for JR on a list. Because once he summits it, he will be just a few peaks away from bushwhacking up all of New Hampshire's 100 highest mountains—and that much closer to completing the 20th or so list in his life. In addition to his peakbagging exploits, JR has set foot in all 259 town-like parcels in New Hampshire—every township, grant, purchase, and location. Perhaps uniquely, JR finished all 15 of New England's late 20th-century marathons.

Even if JR was inclined to discuss his achievements at cocktail parties, they're so locally focused that they might be indecipherable outside New Hampshire. They might not even register here, for his lists are arcane. They're not easily reduced to an elevator pitch, and even JR himself doesn't regard his goals as dazzling. When I ask him to explain his "obsession" with bushwhacking New England's 100 highest, he redirects me. "I'm not obsessed," he says as we hike along an open, flat section, looking out at other forested peaks. "I really don't even think about achievement." Lists are just his way of bringing order to life's clamorous array of possibilities. "A list is a framework," he explains. "It's an excuse for getting out here—for looking at brooks that I've never heard of and searching for old logging camps."

Often, JR searches for such landmarks without navigational guides, finding his way off-trail simply by eyeballing familiar features—a certain grove of maples, say. He's not boycotting technology, though. He just hasn't heeded its call. "I've never really had any reason to use a computer," he says. "There's just nothing on there that interests me." He knows how to Google things on his wife's computer, but on the two occasions he's spoken to me of Googling something, he enunciated the word with a distant curiosity, so that the "o's" sounded like the hoot of an owl.

But if a certain technology seems useful to him, he won't shy away. Today, he's using a digital altimeter and eyeing it closely. When the instrument reads exactly 2,300 feet, we step off the logging road into the conifers. Then, after strapping on snowshoes, we push through a thicket of snow-covered boughs, each ready to dump its payload at the slightest nudge—and when you follow JR into the brush, there will be nudging. Every so often I feel a cold sting on my back as snow cascades off the trees and down my shirt.

It's a minor nuisance, but also a reminder that you don't have to go far from home to find hazards outdoors. JR tells me about "spruce traps," quicksand-like holes in the snow that form atop downed branches. I'm not falling in, though. I'm cruising along. The slope we're ambling up is gentle.

But then we reach the base of a frozen waterfall and start climbing, more or less straight up the cascade. We pull ourselves uphill by grabbing onto tree trunks. Only the claws on our snowshoes bind us to the fall line. JR moves briskly, with force, and following him, I'm a little on edge. This waterfall isn't on the AMC's map. It does not have a name. I doubt any rescuers could find this place if I broke my ankle, and part of me is petrified. JR may not be an official guide, but he's carefully packaged this outing, lending me snowshoes and handling all the navigation. Over the years, he's taken several novices into the Whites, one by one, and now it's my sense that JR was born to be a teacher. Each time I absorb a morsel of White Mountains wisdom, he nods placidly as a contented smirk sprouts under his beard.

The canyon we're in is shadowed by clouds and cliffs. It's semi-dark and it carries a certain cold intrigue. When we reach the top of the waterfall, there's a frozen beaver pond off to our left, maybe an acre in size. It's not on any map, either. It's not described in any trip reports that Steve Smith, the guidebook editor, knows about. For a few minutes, JR and I just stand on its shore, savoring how, in a crowded world, there are still a few secret places.

Eventually, JR takes off his gloves so he can pull a paper map out of his pack. It's one of those tissue-thin AMC topo maps, and he squints down at it, his beard spun with tiny icicles as he figures out our route over the col. Then we shoulder our packs and press on.

The White Mountains' Great Gulf Wilderness harbors plenty of secrets for those willing to look.

Of all the things JR does in the mountains, it's his bypass of GPS that tends to spur the most conversation. Undoubtedly, GPS makes the backcountry safer and more accessible, but it can also make the wild seem a little less wild. And JR isn't the only one to find value in analog maps.

Cognitive scientists seem to concur that paper maps are good for us in ways that GPS isn't. Nora Newcombe, a Temple University psychologist who studies spatial navigation, notes that when we use GPS we don't "build up a primitive cognitive map. As we navigate, we don't refer to distal landmarks—this church steeple, that mountain. We don't build up an intersecting network of routes we've taken, so that we can start exploring."

But is it really apt to regard paper maps as sacred relics of a simpler age? Robert Moor, the author of the book, *On Trails,* doesn't think so. "A modern map is a highly advanced tool," Moor told me recently. "It's the result of aerial satellite photos and the accumulated data of hundreds of years of surveying."

JR doesn't dispute the benefits of technology—hence the altimeter—but a career as a professional video game player is probably not in his future. When I first met him, he was already, at age 19, establishing himself as the quintessential ancient Yankee. He'd come to distance running via sled dog racing, where he excelled by taking his weight off the sled and hoofing it through the drifts. On account of a choppy, asymmetrical stride, he called himself "The Hobbler." Sometimes, for entertainment's sake, he bent low over a make-believe cane and spoke in a quavering voice. He seemed to embody a rugged ideal that I myself, three years younger, skinnier, and more frail and sensitive, would never attain.

I was a summer resident of Gilmanton back then, a visitor from the suburbs of Connecticut, and JR and I motored around town in my mom's yellow Volvo station wagon, which he nicknamed "the bread box." He pretended that he couldn't dare be seen in such a wimpy ride and hid under the dash each time we passed the post office.

He had local cred to protect. There have been Stockwells in Gilmanton since the late 1700s. JR's family is the namesake of Gilmanton's Stockwell Hill Road, and one of his

ancestors, a mason named John Clifford, worked in the Whites in the 1920s, shoring up an iconic, face-shaped natural rock formation, The Old Man of the Mountain, by chaining the Old Man's forehead to a cliff.

But none of JR's other ancestors ever set foot in the Whites. "They were simple, working-class people," JR says. "They lived within confined boundaries. None of them ever went anywhere."

As a solitary and inquisitive kid, JR was determined to find his way to a larger, more intricate world. After he saw a TV special on birds, he learned the cries of local species. Then, after he saw the blockbuster 1972 movie, *Jeremiah Johnson*, about a burly, gun-toting Rocky Mountain trapper, he decided that it would be a good idea to venture deep into the thick woods behind his house and see what happened. "A quarter mile in, I couldn't see anything," he remembers. "I couldn't hear anybody. I was afraid I would die."

The thrill of that first terrifying adventure never left him, and when JR was 20, he pointed his pickup truck west and rambled about, visiting Alaska and Oregon as he flipped burgers for gas money.

After a little more than a year of exploring, he came home because his mother was dying. In time, after his father passed, he moved back into his childhood home and became a solid Gilmantonian. He married the gym teacher at Gilmanton School, Karen Carlson, and established himself as an expert renovator of the town's myriad old houses. His independent streak never waned, though.

Breaking from the pattern set by his older siblings, JR never had kids. Instead, he traveled the world (he's visited Namibia, Madagascar, and Tibet) and also cultivated an exacting home life. Each weeknight, to maintain fitness, JR rides an exercise bike for precisely 48 minutes (to approximate a 6-mile run at 8 minutes per mile). He fills the bird feeders in his yard and organizes his workshop. Then, after dinner, he pores over his White Mountain books, which include Moses Foster Sweetser's inaugural 1876 guide. He figures out the mileage of his forthcoming hikes by measuring map distances with a wooden ruler. "Three-quarters of an inch there," he muttered once when I watched him, "seven-sixteenths there, thirteen-thirty-seconds there."

JR's steadiness at home is, like his lists, a framework that yields him the solid footing he needs to bore deeper as he explores. The scheme, always, is to find, within the familiar, new intrigues and marvels.

I have to admit that even now, in middle age, I look to JR for clues as to how to live. When he came to rebuild my kitchen, for instance, I paid close attention as he contended with a construction challenge. The floors in my 220-year-old home tilt steeply, and at uneven pitches. Carpentry in such a context is less mathematical than intuitive and, as I sat upstairs, listening to JR work as I wrote, I tuned into both the high whine of his bandsaw and the crazy long silences during which, I'm sure, JR was cogitating, strategizing. I knew that it was in the silences that I was getting my money's worth, and I asked myself if I could bring the same rhythm to my writing—the same deep digging punctuated by sharp bursts of precision.

One winter I thought of JR's taste for hiking in temperatures as low as minus 20°F, and I decided to turn off the furnace and plumbing and rely on a wood stove and an old-fashioned privy. When JR came by one evening, taking a short break from the oil-heated comfort of his den, he regarded my hermitage with doubt and concern. "Dude," he asked, "what are you *doing?*"

Another experiment is proving more successful. It involves my exercise regime. I do a little open water swimming and a ton of cycling here in New Hampshire's Lakes Region. If I don't rack up 200 miles on Strava every week, I begin to feel guilty. I'm aware that the statistics I obsess over (elevation gained, miles per hour, average wattage) do little to afford me cosmic peace, so I decided recently to compose and tackle a list of my own—obscure and personal, just like one of JR's.

I am now endeavoring to bike to, and then swim across, each and every lake and pond that sits within Gilmanton's 80 square miles. And Gilmanton is a very watery place. Already, in consulting a New Hampshire gazetteer and my own memory banks, I have identified 18 potentially swimmable bodies of water. Reconnaissance missions will surely reveal additional lakes and ponds. I need to get off the roads. I plan to thrash my way into the woods with binoculars, for I've learned, watching JR, that lots of cool stuff is not on the map.

In a mountain range so teeming with hikers that you sometimes need to wait in line to move summitward, JR knows where to find refuge, off trail, in 20-foot-wide pools of calm black water on a terraced green slope. He's shown me that there is so much nature close to home. You just have to look. That may be the biggest lesson JR has to impart: Always keep your eyes open.

When JR and I go out for our next bushwhack, up tiny Smarts Mountain on a warm spring morning, I ask him why he never advertises his feats.

He's tongue-tied for a moment, embarrassed. "I guess I'm humble," he says finally. "I don't like making a big deal of myself. And do you really think that what I do is interesting to people?"

Well, yeah, I say, to hikers it is. JR concedes that Steve Smith, the guidebook editor, is always asking to look at the skeletal diaries in which JR records his backwoods adventures. "But I'd feel weird showing them to Steve," he says. "I'm terrible at grammar. Spelling is a mental block for me. In school, if I got a C, I was ecstatic." He adds that reading is also a trial for him: "If I get through two novels a year, I'm lucky."

As JR says this, I'm picturing his mind as a vast warehouse. The facts flow in and come to rest, each one of them, on its own neat shelf. And his mind is so orderly that the facts never leave, and they never get lost. JR may be afflicted with something like dyslexia, but when you're JR, that's a minor impediment. You find a way to bull past it, to strategize around it. You become a scholar of the White Mountains anyway, despite limitations, and you keep dreaming up lists.

Not long after our Sandwich Dome hike, JR finishes the 100 highest list, and for a couple weeks he's a little at sea, without a list for the first time in decades. The lull does not last, though, for soon enough he decides that he will climb every peak noted on the AMC's six White Mountain maps—every single one, even the dinky 800-footers with convenience stores at their bases.

No one has ever counted all the peaks on the maps, let alone climbed them, but there's probably about 1,000 of them. JR has summited over half these peaks already (the big ones, mostly), meaning that he's got roughly 500 small ones to go. "The bumps," he's

calling this grail. It'll involve 125 or so day trips, with each trip including about four peaks, such as they are.

When I hike with him again, it's late May. The lady slippers are in bloom, and the ferns are starting to flourish. We drive northwest, up into the sparsely populated hinterlands near the Vermont border, and then hike a trail up Black Mountain, elevation 2,830 feet, for a lovely view from the granite ridge at the summit. There is actually another person up here—a haggard-looking guy who's come, he says, for the "hangover cure," having killed a 12-pack the evening before. We chat with him for a moment, and then we leave society entirely, dropping off the trail into the woods to bag Howe Hill, elevation 2,681 feet, and Little Bear Mountain, elevation 1,782.

These small rises are on JR's "bumps" list, and they're unimpressive. Little Black's flattish summit is thick with trees, so that after we stumble around for five minutes, standing on various mounds, to make sure we've reached the actual peak, the only view I get is of the black flies swarming around my head. I feel a little let down. Despite what I've learned of JR, I find it hard to believe that he's applying his formidable powers to these piddling hills. Is this how legends ease into retirement? As we descend, though, JR is attuned to the small delights all around us. "Bear scat," he says, pointing. "Moose scat. Now, there's a pitcher plant," he says, elated by the discovery. "It's carnivorous. That's only the second time I've seen one."

Gradually, I make peace with the smallness of this outing, for it's pervaded, I realize, by a certain music. I'm out here with a guy patient enough to locate minor trailside wonders—a guy who knows that the world is big and worth exploring, but that each of us lives in one place and that we can live deepest if we find things to love in that place.

We round a bend, eventually. Then we come out onto an open expanse of granite bathed by the warm afternoon sun, and JR says, "Look. That same mourning dove was sitting there when we came by the first time. Do you see it?"

I search for a moment amid the wildflowers and the waxy blueberry bushes, deep green beneath the blue sky. And then, I say, "Oh, yeah, there's that bird. I see it."

JR looks back at me. I glimpse that delighted smirk on his face again, and then we hoist ourselves up over a little crag of granite and keep moving along through the mountains.

Bill Donahue *has swum across six bodies of water in Gilmanton, New Hampshire. He is also working on New Hampshire's 4,000-footer list, slowly.*

By
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