

Into Thick Air

Scaling Florida's highest peak, a journalist touches the void—without Sherpas.

by Jim Noles ■ illustrated by James Bennett

“THE HIGHEST POINT IN Florida?” my wife, Elizabeth, asked skeptically. “Why would you want to go there?” For a moment, I channeled the spirit of British mountaineer George Mallory.

“Because it's there,” I replied, quoting Mallory's apocryphal comment about climbing Mount Everest.

“No, really,” she countered, not missing a beat. “Why?”

“It's on the way to the beach,” I added hopefully.

“In that case, when can we go?” she asked, having suddenly discovered an unexpected interest in bagging the Sunshine State's highest peak. Having never been to Lakewood Park—home of Britton Hill, the peak in question—I didn't answer. I didn't want to subject my family to the perils of an ascent of its unseen slopes without the benefits of a proper reconnaissance.

And so, a few weeks later, I crossed the Florida frontier into the hamlet of Paxton. At the time, I was traveling alone. Several calls to the Nepalese embassy in Washington had failed to produce a team of Sherpas (or even a return call, for that matter) but, undaunted, I pressed on.

In Paxton, I stopped first at the local Tom Thumb gas station, where I struck up a conversation with the two ladies behind the cash-register counter. “I understand the highest point in Florida is around here somewhere,” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” they assured me. “Lakewood. Keep heading south. You'll see the sign for it.”

“Think I'll be able to climb it?” I asked, patting my stomach. “I used to be in pretty decent shape back in the day, but . . .” I trailed off with a slight smile.

They laughed. “Honey, you might just be able to handle it,” the cashier assured me.



Bill McRae, one of Paxton's councilmen, was my next stop. In 2003, the retired United States Air Force veteran had helped ensure a much-needed refurbishment of its park. Over a cup of coffee, McRae shared Lakewood's lore with me.

Lakewood's modern settlement traced its roots to 1900, when William Henry Britton purchased the Lake Lumber Company and moved it to what would become Lakewood. Later, the venture became known as Britton Lumber Company. For a time, the mill town of Lakewood flourished. Lakewood's rift-sawn yellow

longleaf pine boards eventually found use in such national landmarks as the U.S. Naval Academy's Bancroft Hall and the ballroom of New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel. A series of fires at the mill in the 1920s marked the beginning of the end of Lakewood's heyday. The Great Depression finished what the blazes started, and by 1956 Lakewood scarcely warranted a post office.

At the time, the local postmistress was Hazel Slaughter Britton, who seized upon a U.S. Geological Survey determination that declared Lakewood to be the highest point in Florida. Identifying a likely piece of high ground, she christened it “Britton Hill.” Now Florida had its highest mountain—Britton Hill, capable of boasting 345 feet in altitude—in the form of a modest roadside park.

As far as state high points are concerned, Hazel Britton's was unique—the lowest of the high, so to speak. Delaware ranks forty-ninth, thanks to Ebright Azimuth, at 448 feet. On the other end of the spectrum, Britton Hill spots some 20,000 feet to Alaska's Mount McKinley—the highest point in the United States.

Inspired by McRae's story (and assured by him that, other than

confirmed.

“Is this the beach?” asked James, the five-year-old.

“Is this the swimming pool?” John queried. He adjusted his swim goggles hopefully.

“Is this going to take long?” Elizabeth questioned.

In response, I nodded at the small park. “I don't think so. But if I'm not back in three days, I want you to know that I always loved you . . .”

Her only response was a patient snort and the disinterested rustle of the pages of Entertainment Weekly.

Undaunted, I stepped out of our Highlander, adjusted my sunglasses, steeled my resolve, girded my loins, and began my ascent.

Fifteen seconds later, I reached the fabled summit.

It was a large granite marker, placed in the woody shade off to the side of the park's latrine building. Its engraved words confirmed my feat—I was standing on Florida's roof.

From my vantage point, I looked east across the country road. A long green pasture, complete with cattle and white egrets,

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the town's new water tower, there was little else of journalistic interest in Paxton), I pressed on for Britton Hill.

A few minutes later, I arrived at a roadside park alongside County Road 285. “Lakewood Park,” the green letters of a white sign declared. “Florida's Highest Point. 345 Feet.” Another sign, however, warned me that the park closed at dusk. Chastened, I recalled Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, detailing the disastrous 1996 climbing season on Mount Everest.

OK—I admit—there were a few differences between Krakauer and me (other than several best-sellers). For one, I was 28,683 feet shy of Everest's summit. For another, I was basking in a humid eighty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, rather than Everest's below-zero temperatures. Nevertheless, I decided against pressing my luck. After all, unlike Krakauer, I was sans Sherpas. My assault on the summit would have to wait for another day.

That day came two weeks later, with my family in tow and en route to the beaches of the Gulf Coast. With John, my two-and-a-half-year-old son, donning his swim goggles the moment we pulled out of our suburban Birmingham driveway, I should have known that there would be little patience for a detour.

Four hours later, as I pulled into Lakewood Park, my fears were

stretched eastward and provided a bucolic—if not alpine—vista. Nevertheless, somewhere in the distance, muffled slightly by the buzz of unseen cicadas, I'm sure I heard Leonardo DiCaprio shouting, “I'm the king of the world!”

Actually, as Elizabeth informed me later, what I heard was James shouting, “Are you peeing in the woods?” (For the record, I was not.)

As I returned to the parking lot, a BMW with Georgia plates pulled up. A couple climbed out and walked toward the marker I had just left. “Look,” I commented as I slipped back into the Highlander. “That guy's girlfriend actually got out of the car.”

“They must have just started dating,” Elizabeth scoffed. “She's obviously indulging him.”

“Well, next stop Ebright Azimuth,” I declared defiantly, referring to Delaware's highest point.

“Mommy, Daddy doesn't know where the swimming pool is,” John said forlornly from the backseat.

“Or the beach,” James added.

On second thought, Ebright Azimuth would have to wait.

Next stop, sea level.