

A Walk Atop America: Fifty State Summits and a Dream to Reach Them All

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The rainy summer of 1993 swelled the Mississippi to flood proportions. The rest of Iowa wallowed in mud. Worse! All the theme parks were closed! Dr Butler faced his ten-year-old son and a whole weekend of visitation across an atlas of Iowa spread across the bed. Father and son scanned it for something, anything, they could do together. There, in the middle of an expanse of plain white space, was a tiny legend: "Highest Point in Iowa." When Butler suggested "climbing" it, his son, surprisingly, said, "Cool!"

The highest point in Iowa happens to be at the end of a hospitable farmer's feeding trough amid an infinity of cornfields. The Butlers first encountered there the term "highpointers."

In five years of climbing great Andean peaks, Mexican volcanoes, and Rocky Mountain rocks, Butler had absorbed one little-known truth of mountaineering. Alluding to Milton, he warns: "Climbing also challenges those who wait at home." His book is, accordingly, dedicated to his wife and his mother.

Unlike mountaineering, highpointing can include those who otherwise would be stuck at home, waiting. With his wife Sheryl, Butler has strolled up North Carolina's Mt Mitchell, the highest point east of the Mississippi, and the 345-foot highpoint of Florida.

Butler's style is precise, friendly, conversational. The story of his first trip up Mt Rainier brings us into the world of mountaineering; his tale of finding the highest point in Iowa brings us into the fun of highpointing. Butler is also considerate enough to include useful apparatus: in front, a chart listing every state's highpoint, its height, and the chapter in which its story appears; and a United States map with each state's highpoint marked. The comprehensive index in the back aids navigation.

For entertainment, bedside companionship, or guiding aspiring highpointers, Butler's book is a gift worth having.