

# Slide Science

STORY BY MATT MCDONALD, PHOTOS BY FRANCIS ZUBER

HIKER SAID TO THE MOUNTAIN:

“HEY, WHERE’D YOU  
GET THAT SCAR”



**T**hick thunderheads choked Giant Mountain on June 29, 1963, but the loudest rumble didn't come from the sky. When afternoon showers became evening tumult, dumping more than six inches of rain on Giant's 4,626-foot summit, mud, trees and boulders tumbled 325 feet over Roaring Brook Falls.

Picture it next time you snap photos from Route 73 of the falls, now flanked by sheer rock, and the peak's west face, bruised and scarred.

Slides, these swaths of exposed mountainside, mark the Adirondack landscape. Tour the High Peaks region, from the Whiteface gondola to any view of the Great Range, and you can't



miss them. Equally as characteristic, though, are the conditions that form the slides—notoriously thin soil on top of smooth anorthosite, an igneous rock also found on the Moon, clinging to steep slopes.

It's a simple formula. When heavy rain saturates the soil, the resulting mush moves downhill on the waterslide below. Trees and rocks in the slide path take a ride.

Fortunately for hikers, precipitation, though common, rarely reaches the magnitude needed to wash away hillsides. Records indicate that rain fell at a rate near three inches per hour on that Saturday in '63. In 2011, Tropical Storm Irene poured more than seven inches of rain onto the High Peaks, swamping the Keene area and clearing more slides.

Curt Stager, professor of natural sciences at Paul Smith's College, says these and a few other recent rain events aside, most slides probably date to the end of the last ice age around 12,000 years ago. "When the land was coming out from under the ice sheets, there would have been more slides happening," he says.

And because the valley below Giant was a lake at the time, the ice age also left conditions for another kind of slide. When snowmelt and heavy rain permeated clay-rich soil on a low elevation slope of

Little Porter Mountain, 82 acres of soil and rock began sliding slowly—a few inches to a foot per day—and damaged several homes in Adrian's Acres outside Keene Valley. A land shift rather than a washout.

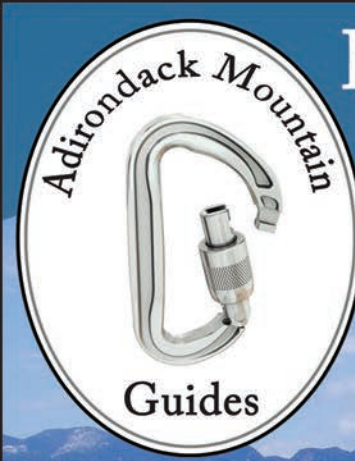
Stager says that because clay is slippery when wet, clay-rich soil becomes unstable when water saturates it. "You can find clay in the soil at lower elevations with lake or ocean deposits," he says. "You find it a lot around Montreal and Lake Champlain."

But being wary of the ingredients and possible locations for slides wouldn't make predicting where they will occur an exact science—or anything close. Stager says that's especially true for the high-elevation variety. "We'd have to know the peaks under their skin in a way we don't know," he says. "We can expect more slides during the next big rainfall."

If there's a silver lining to slides, beyond some mystical quality they add to New York's most wild place, it's the outdoor recreation they can attract.

Roaring Brook Falls has become a classic climb. Bennies Brook Slide serves as a ramp up Lower Wolfjaw that some people find more interesting than the trail. A narrow Irene-born slide on Mount Colden called The Couloir beckons backcountry skiers. The North Face of Gothics Mountain offers a playground for multisport mountaineers. Several guiding services offer courses and trips built around adventuring on slides.

**SO WHETHER THEY FILL YOU WITH AMBITION OR DREAD, SLIDES TELL THE STORY OF THE MOUNTAINS WE LOVE—AND THEY'LL EVOKE BOLDER FLOODS TO DO IT.** 🌩️



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