

Summit Trail



From Mt. Sunapee, looking south - Lovewell Mountain on left, Mt. Monadnock at right.

Hiking Mount Sunapee's Summit Trail **Story & Photos by Gary Stansfield**

For some, Mount Sunapee State Park conjures up images of alpine skiing. For many others, however, the park represents a smorgasbord of outdoor recreation opportunities - including hiking, hunting, nature study, backpacking, snowshoeing, and more. All are available at no cost in our public park. The Summit Hiking Trail on Mount Sunapee's west flank offers access to all of the aforementioned non-skiing activities, and is a personal favorite.

The trail can be accessed at the top of Old Province Road in Goshen, or from the Mount Sunapee Resort parking lot. (For more information on parking and trail access, please visit the Sunapee Ragged-Kearsarge Greenway Coalition's website at srkg.com.) Via either access point the distance to the summit is approximately 2.1 miles. Hiking at a very leisurely pace, with breaks for snacks and water, will get you to the summit in under two hours. That time can be cut in half if you prefer to hike at a brisk pace.

I prefer to avoid the hustle and bustle of the ski area, and start my hike from the Goshen trailhead. From the parking area, you amble down the grassy

remains of the historic Province Road for 100 yards to an opening in a stone wall. Straight ahead is the grassy (or snow-covered) Province Ski Trail. A sharp right turn here puts you onto the signed Summit Trail.

The hiking trail is marked with a variety of blazes: white, red, and yellow. A bit confusing, but fortunately the foot path is well trodden, and with a bit of care, staying on the trail is not a problem. The trail begins with a gentle grade and passes through a mixed forest dominated by white pine and red spruce. Take your time here, allow your legs and lungs to find a comfortable rhythm that will allow you to enjoy the tranquility of the trail. Smell the sharp tang of spruce, listen to the wind in the pine branches, and forget the cares of the "real world". No deadlines, no appointments, no emails or phone calls. For a few hours today, you are simply walking; an activity as old as humankind.

You soon arrive at a signed junction where the trail from the ski area parking lot joins from your left. Continue straight ahead. At times, the trail meanders close to the western edge of the state

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Follow the signs and trail markers to the top!

park. You will notice the blue blazes marking the boundary. The trail begins to rise now; soon you mount a natural staircase of granite slabs. Take a minute to admire the deep green of trailside moss and ferns.

After a bit of effort, just enough to remind you that you are climbing a mountain, the trail levels out in a nearly pure stand of red spruce. Young trees flank the trail, while their parents tower overhead. The park boundary can be seen on your right, marked by blue blazes and old strands of barbed wire deeply imbedded in trailside spruce.

The barbed wire indicates that this was once open pasture. Standing in the midday twilight of this dense spruce stand, you can easily realize that by the mid 1800s most of New Hampshire south of the White Mountains was de-forested for agricultural use, often to serve as sheep pasture. The vast majority of dense forestland that now covers the state has been cut over and has re-grown (in some cases, several times) since European settlement.

Leaving the spruce grove, the trail briefly drops to a small stream crossing, then slabs south. The forest here is very different, dominated by northern hardwoods including beech, white ash, yellow birch and sugar maple. Keep your ears open. The quiet of the forest is accented here by a variety of bird song sprinkled over the backdrop of chuckling small streams cascading down the slope. On a recent hike I heard the questioning “who-cooks-for you?” call of the barred owl, and the piercing “uck-uck-uck-uck” of the crow-sized pileated woodpecker, along this section of trail.

Soon the trail takes a sharp left turn uphill, and you begin to climb in earnest. Take a moment to catch your breath, and maybe examine some of the large beech trees on the edge of the trail. Some show claw marks of black bears on smooth gray bark. Beech nuts are a bear delicacy, and a bit of a climb is a small price to pay for a bellyful.

It is no accident that this side of the mountain is a mecca for wildlife. A large variety of animals use this wildland to feed, den, raise their young, and as a travel corridor. This forest lies at the northern end of the Pillsbury-Sunapee Highlands, a 30,000 acre area including both Mount Sunapee and Pillsbury State Park and their surrounding conservation lands. Research has shown that large, undeveloped forest blocks like this are essential to ensuring healthy, stable wildlife populations.

On my many hikes on this trail, I've seen moose, deer, wild turkey, partridge (ruffed grouse), snowshoe hare, porcupine and red fox. I've also found tracks, scat and sign of many other species including fisher, black bear, coyote and bobcat. You are not alone!

OK, back to work. As your climb continues, you will begin to notice a change in the surrounding forest. Numerous large-diameter red spruce and yellow birch begin to rise up on either side of the trail. Some of these magnificent trees approach 30 inches in diameter. Core samples taken by forest ecologists indicate that many of these trees exceed 170 years of age, and some are well over 200



Marks on a Beech tree made by bear claws.

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years old. Their twisted trunks and stag-headed appearance reveal the fact that they are very “experienced”. The oldest have withstood the harshest weather that New England can throw at them. They have been battered, but not destroyed, by historic weather events like the Hurricane of 1938 and the Ice Storm of 1998.

The practiced forest observer will notice additional, more subtle signs that this forest is something special. The absence of cut stumps indicates that this area has not been logged in a very long time, if ever. There are no stone walls or remnants of barbed wire here on this remote mountainside. The slope is steep, and the thin soils are interspersed with rocky outcrops. Scattered dead snags stand silently, and the hulks of large fallen trees slowly molder into the forest floor. The marks of human disturbance are not seen in this ancient forest.

Indeed, ecologists from the New Hampshire Natural Heritage Bureau have officially designated this as an “exemplary natural community”. Unlike 99% of New Hampshire’s forests, it is likely that this forest has never been logged. It is a living laboratory; valuable to scientists for research, for educational purposes, and for simple enjoyment by the public. It embodies what state parks are all about: the preservation of areas of rare natural beauty for all to enjoy.

Pause for a moment here, catch your breath, and appreciate these ancient trees - trees that surely heard the howl of timber wolves and witnessed the passing of deerskin-clad Native Americans.

After a bit of climbing, you’ll notice that the forest begins to transition again. The hardwoods begin to become scarce; spruce and balsam fir dominate. The harsh climate here near the top of the mountain makes it difficult for trees. The spruce and fir can deal with the heavy loads of ice and snow, and the fierce winds that frequently whistle through this high elevation forest.

As you near the summit, stop and enjoy a key-hole view through the thick evergreens. Gunnison Lake, the “Goshen Ocean” is visible to the west.

After a few more minutes of moderately strenuous hiking, you ascend a short grassy slope and find yourself at the summit. Climb the stairs of the



Hiking Trail passes through dense spruce grove.

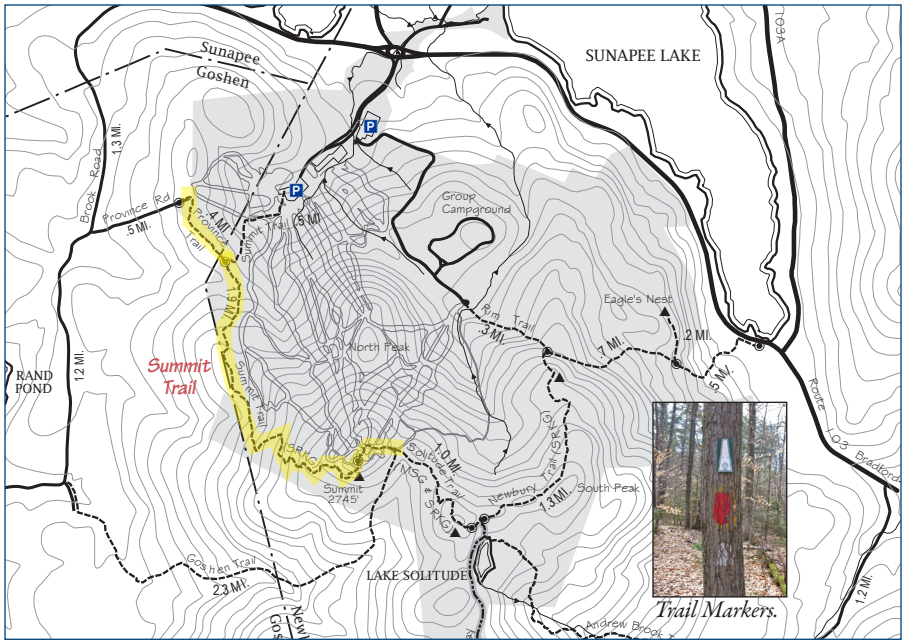
summit lodge to the top deck on the west side. On a warm summer day, the natural air conditioning of the west wind will be a welcome relief. Fine views west to Vermont and north across Lake Sunapee are rewards for your effort. Enjoy the view and a snack before you retrace your steps to the trailhead.

Part of the value of the Summit Trail is that it also serves as a gateway to more hiking adventure. If time and energy permit you can push on to Lake Solitude. Or, if you are really ambitious, and have planned ahead, continue south from Lake Solitude on the Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway Trail, a 50 mile trail through some of southwestern New Hampshire’s finest conservation lands. Carry your world on your back, and really get back in touch with the natural world.



More trail info at: www.srkg.com & www.msqt.org

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Trail map showing present ski trails and surrounding hiking trails

Author's Note - Sadly, this seemingly idyllic hiking trail I just described may not exist in a few short years. The Summit Hiking Trail lies directly in the path of the proposed western expansion of the ski area. As currently planned, the hiking trail will be bisected at least half a dozen times by new ski slopes, and a new lift line will be gouged out of the heart of the ancient forest community. The closed forest canopy will now feature ski runs, towers for a ski lift, and pipelines and guns for snowmaking. The trail will still be there, possibly re-routed, but the peaceful woodland hike that exists today will be changed forever.

If this is acceptable to you, simply sit back and do nothing. If however, like me, you feel that your state park should offer diverse opportunities for low cost, healthy recreation to all people regardless of their economic status: then please raise your voice in protest. Contact the decision makers in Concord. Write a letter. Make a phone call. Spread the word. Join others in saying "NO EXPANSION". And do it soon.

See you on the trail! Gary Stansfield

**Nobody can do everything
but everyone can do something.**



Friends of Mount Sunapee

Please visit our website to see how you can help protect Mt. Sunapee State Park from over development.

www.friendsofmountsunapee.org