

# AMC'S BEST DAY HIKES IN THE CATSKILLS & HUDSON VALLEY

Four-Season Guide to 60 of the Best Trails  
From New York City to Albany

Including Shawangunks • Taconics • Hudson Highlands

PETER W. KICK

## Bear Mountain



Appalachian Mountain Club Books  
Boston, Massachusetts

In Partnership with



Trails.com™

**TRIP 4**  
**BEAR MOUNTAIN**



**RATING:** Strenuous

**DISTANCE:** 4.0 miles

**ELEVATION GAIN:** 1,000 feet

**ESTIMATED TIME:** 3.5 hours

**MAPS:** USGS Peekskill; USGS Popolopen Lake; NY-NJTC Northern Harriman Bear Mountain Trails; Bear Mountain and Harriman State Parks, Palisades Interstate Park Commission

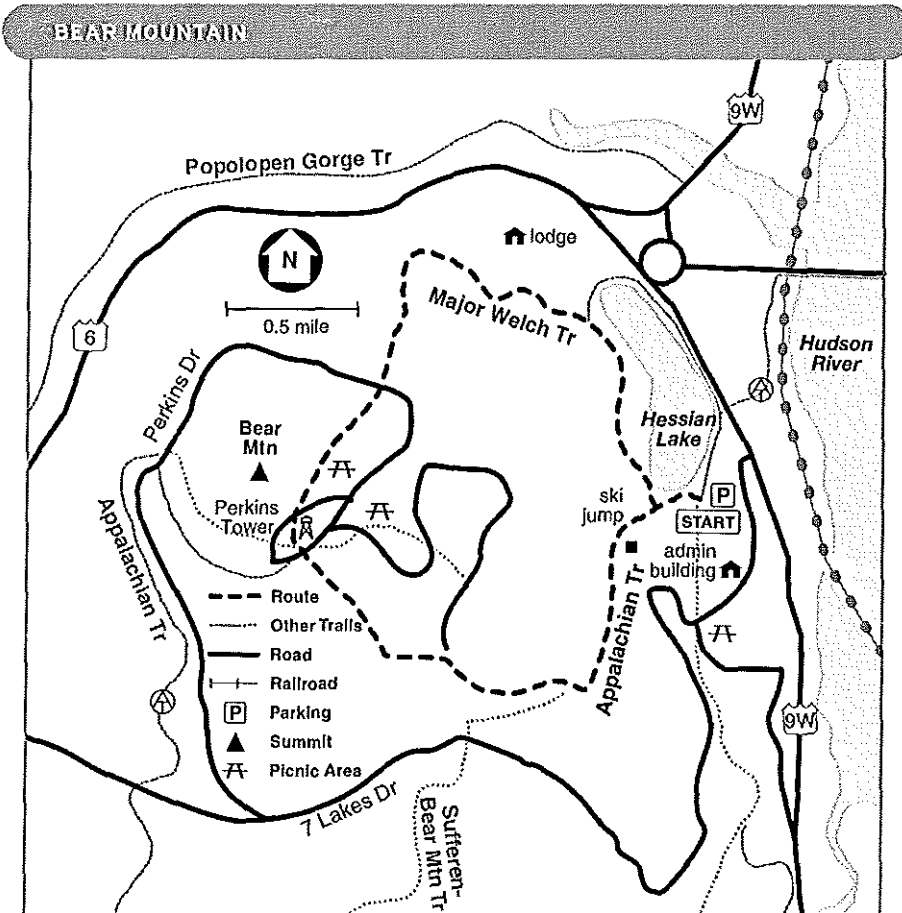
A pretty hike from the famous Bear Mountain Inn and state park along Hessian Lake, to Perkins Memorial Tower and its 360-degree views, descending on the Appalachian Trail.

**DIRECTIONS**

Begin at Bear Mountain State Park, 0.4 mile south of the Bear Mountain traffic circle on US 9W. The traffic circle is located at the northern end of the Palisades Interstate Parkway, at the western entrance to the Bear Mountain Bridge.

**TRAIL DESCRIPTION**

Since its creation in 1913, millions of people have visited Bear Mountain State Park to indulge in George Perkins' version of "rest and relaxation," but only a fraction of them ever climb its namesake, the scenic "little" mountain lying west of Hessian Lake. Though not especially formidable at a modest 1,305 feet, Bear Mountain "feels" much bigger because of the steep northerly ascent from near sea level to its summit via the Major Welch Trail. Because of the elevation changes, this hike feels longer than it is, and you should prepare accordingly.



There are several approaches to Bear Mountain, but the Major Welch Trail is the most scenic and interesting of them, sharing its popularity among hikers with the easier southerly approach using the Appalachian Trail (AT). (It is also possible to drive to the summit on Perkins Memorial Drive, so expect to see cars and people at the summit picnic area.) Major Welch was the general manager of Palisades Interstate Park from 1912 to 1940. He organized the completion of the first section of the AT, and designed the trail's distinctive logo. (The AT Conference believes that the Bear Mountain section of the AT is the most heavily used portion of the 2,150-mile trail. It is scheduled for improvement, and some sections may be relocated.)

It seems amazing that in spite of the extremely high day-use figures Bear Mountain State Park sustains, it has been kept so clean and orderly—a result of the park's careful planning, management, and supervision. You will appreciate

this as you stroll through the inn complex, where you'll park. Try to take this hike before the pool opens on the first day of summer, or after it closes, when parking is free and visitors are not present in great numbers.

Walk in front of the inn and bear left toward the south end of Hessian Lake. Orient yourself at the southern shore, behind the inn on the paved path. Watch for the red circle on a white background as you follow the shore in the company of friendly geese and squirrels. Head toward the boat rental concession to the west. As you pass a children's playground on your left, the AT joins the paved lake path. That's your return route. Leave the AT to your left and walk along the pretty western shore of Hessian Lake. In 15 minutes or so, look left at the location of a bench, where the Major Welch Trail departs to the left (northwest). If you're daydreaming, you might miss it.

The Major Welch Trail is slow in ascending. The first 0.5 mile is forgiving as the trail rises gently and sidehills along the northeasterly hardwood slopes, passing a water tower on the left and the park's Overlook Lodge, downhill and north. By the time you're wondering where the vertical rise begins, you've turned south and the trail climbs directly upslope over a rocky surface. These rocks have enabled the trail's direct approach, protecting it from the kind of erosion you'll see on the softer southern slopes. You'll appreciate your poles or hiking staff here! Most of the hike's vertical rise is packed into the next half-mile.

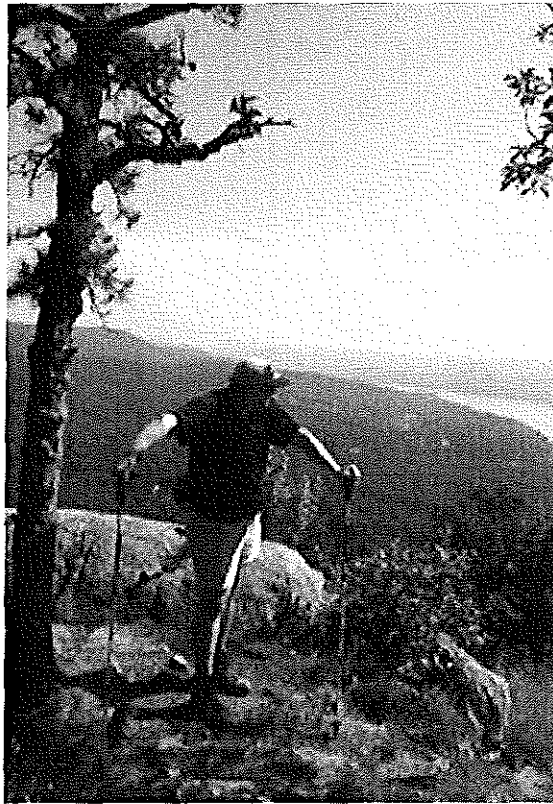
The trail climbs through a nearly pure oak/laurel woods, among thick mats of blueberry bushes. Underfoot is the bright limestone of the Greenville Series of Precambrian origins—amongst the oldest surface bedrock of its kind. As you gain elevation, you come upon a long, angled slab with a northern exposure. Things get more interesting now as views of the valley open up. Here you will get a close look at Popolopen Torne with its brown, exposed summit. Ahead, the scenery improves as you are treated to views to the north, west, and east, encompassing a good deal of the northern Highlands and the river. You can identify Sugarloaf, Taurus, Storm King, the Black Rock Forest, the lands of Fahnestock State Park, and down along the river, Garrison Landing. A few pitch pines appear.

The trail cuts across Perkins Memorial Drive and continues to climb, more easily now, flattening out after one more steep pitch. After crossing a gravel road in the picnic area, you will soon pass the true summit, where tower bolts can be seen in the rocks to the right of the trail. Continue straight through the picnic area, following markers past a rest room on your left (with a pair of vending machines outside), and ascending slightly to Perkins Tower. Take a few minutes to see the tower, with its tiled, art deco pictorial history of the

park, and each of the four walls detailed with panoramic locator maps of the 360-degree views. The tower was constructed to take advantage of these views, and was such a hit with the touring public that in September and October of 1935, it attracted 9,869 cars from 36 states and two Canadian provinces. Note, in particular, Anthony's Nose to the east and Dunderberg, Bald, and the Timp to the south. The tower commemorates George Perkins, of the banking firm J.P. Morgan, who envisioned a place where the people of New York City could find "rest and relaxation." Perkins was an activist instrumental in the long and important struggle to preserve the Palisades, leading to the effort to preserve and protect the entire Hudson Valley from exploitation and development.

The Major Welch Trail ends here. Just outside the front entrance of the tower and across the drive to the south, your route continues on the AT. In the rocks at the trailside, you'll find the AT between the bronze plaque honoring Joe Bartha, trails chairman from 1940 to 1955, and a vague, weathered carving indicating the AT's distance to Arden and to Vogel State Park in Georgia (1,260 miles; the southern terminus has since been relocated to Springer Mountain). Descend through open hardwoods.

Within 10 minutes or so, you will cross Perkins Memorial Drive, and descending, will again reach it at a point where a trail marker says *Tower, 30 mins.*, and the word *tower* is stenciled on a rock to the left, next to the road. Pay close attention, as the trail turns right and follows the road. (It is evident by herd paths that many hikers unwittingly continue downhill into the woods once crossing the road.) Follow the road for 10 minutes until reaching a loop. The AT leaves the loop on the right side over a stretch of broken pavement; marking is good. Within 100 feet it turns hard left (east) and descends. The AT switches and drops into the east, passing through a beautiful grove of white pine before continuing through



A hiker along the Major Welch Trail.

hardwoods. At the well-marked junction where the Suffern-Bear Mountain Trail (SBM) comes in, bear left with the SBM and AT. At the head of a gully the trail swings hard to the right, continuing its descent and flattening out at a point where the park complex becomes visible. Avoid the trail to the right, instead continuing on the AT and SBM for a short climb past the old ski jump and tower; piecing together the missing runway and the crowds of spectators, you can imagine what the scene must have looked like.

Now the trail follows the old service road to the ski jump as it switches back and drops to lake level again behind the inn. The SBM trail ends and the AT makes its lonely way along Hessian Lake, across the Hudson toward Maine's Mount Katahdin. You may ponder, for a moment, the vision of Mary Averell Harriman, wife of Edward Harriman, who gave 10,000 acres of land to the state under the condition that they discontinue plans for the construction of Sing Sing prison at the base of Bear Mountain. It was eventually built down-river, in Ossining, north of New York City, giving rise to the old expression, "Sent up the river."

From here, you know the way back.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

**SUMMARIES AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH HIKE** list hiking distance, vertical rise, time on the trail, and United States Geological Survey (USGS) topographic map (or maps) or the local state park or preserve map for the area the hike traverses. Unless otherwise noted, distances are for the round-trip or circuit. Distances are given from state markers where available and correct (incorrect signs are noted in some instances). Where measured mileage information has not been available, distances have been computed from electronically rendered USGS topographic maps and are correct to within 10 percent.

Vertical rise refers to the total change in cumulative elevation for the hike. Hiking time is given for the total time at a leisurely pace, but it is simply the minimum needed to walk the trail as described. The text often suggests that you allow more time for sightseeing.

Rather than relying simply on the map in the book, take the recommended maps too. These maps give the larger picture, and you will have more fun on a mountaintop if you can identify surrounding countryside. A cautionary note on USGS maps: While contours and elevations are by and large reliable, some of the manufactured features, including trails, are seriously out-of-date. All of the supplementary maps mentioned in the hike headings are more convenient and up-to-date than the USGS quads, and I recommend acquiring them. In particular, I recommend the *Appalachian Mountain Club Catskill Mountains*

map that was designed to accompany my book *Catskill Mountain Guide*, published by the AMC in 2002. That book is sold with a paper-printed map, but a Tyvek version of the map can also be purchased separately and could prove helpful for the Catskills-related trips in this book. It is also very useful to have the *DeLorme Atlas and Gazetteer for New York State* and *DeLorme Atlas and Gazetteer for Massachusetts* in your car, or the corresponding county map for your area of travel. Don't rely on finding small preserve maps and other hand-outs at kiosks. Often the supplies are exhausted. Try to find the map you need online, as many of them are these days.

If you do not know how to read a map, you should learn to do so before hiking all but about a dozen of the simplest trails in this guide. Spend time walking with someone who does know how to read a map, such as your friendly chapter hikers from the Appalachian Mountain Club. The same instructions are appropriate for the use of a compass. You may not need either on the easiest of this guide's trails, but walking the easier routes with map and compass will allow you to become comfortable with their use so you can extend your hikes beyond the ones described, or to more difficult hikes. Get the best compass you can afford. I've had the same Silva Ranger for 30 years, and highly recommend a similar type of orienteering compass with a flip-up sight that will also be useful in identifying far-away peaks or triangulating your position from a set of known peaks.

## **GPS**

You don't need a heavy, battery-hungry GPS on any of these hikes. In fact, those new to GPS may encounter a learning curve that could be an obstacle to way-finding instead of an aid. However, I sometimes carry a very small, lightweight GPS unit, a Garmin Geko 201, that is available for under \$100 and that you can learn to use in your backyard or neighborhood in a matter of hours. The obvious advantage to the GPS system is its use for emergencies. If you have a phone, you can tell your rescuer your exact location—accurate to about six feet—using your GPS. Ultimately, a GPS will give you a better understanding of position, altitude, direction, and distance—and will help you to better understand, map, compass, and geography.



# The Appalachian Mountain Club



Founded in 1876, the AMC is the nation's oldest outdoor recreation and conservation organization. The AMC promotes the protection, enjoyment, and wise use of the mountains, rivers, and trails of the Northeast outdoors.

## **People**

We are nearly 90,000 members in 12 chapters, 20,000 volunteers, and over 450 full time and seasonal staff. Our chapters reach from Maine to Washington, D.C.

## **Outdoor Adventure and Fun**

We offer more than 8,000 trips each year, from local chapter activities to major excursions worldwide, for every ability level and outdoor interest—from hiking and climbing to paddling, snowshoeing, and skiing.

## **Great Places to Stay**

We host more than 135,000 guest nights each year at our AMC Lodges, Huts, Camps, Shelters, and Campgrounds. Each AMC Destination is a model for environmental education and stewardship.

## **Opportunities for Learning**

We teach people the skills to be safe outdoors and to care for the natural world around us through programs for children, teens, and adults, as well as outdoor leadership training.

## **Caring for Trails**

We maintain more than 1,400 miles of trails throughout the Northeast, including nearly 350 miles of the Appalachian Trail in five states.

## **Protecting Wild Places**

We advocate for land and riverway conservation, monitor air quality, and work to protect alpine and forest ecosystems throughout the Northern Forest and Highlands regions.

## **Engaging the Public**

We seek to educate and inform our own members and an additional 1.5 million people annually through AMC Books, our website, our White Mountain visitor centers, and AMC Destinations.

## **Join Us!**

Members support our mission while enjoying great AMC programs, our award-winning AMC Outdoors magazine, and special discounts. Visit [www.outdoors.org](http://www.outdoors.org) or call 617-523-0636 for more information.

**THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB**

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