

WALKING THE NEW ENGLAND TRAIL IN THE PIONEER VALLEY

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You don't have to drive over an hour to the Appalachian Trail to find really pleasant and sometimes quite challenging hiking right here in the Valley on the old M&M Trail, now officially re-christened The New England Trail. Starting in Rising Corner in Southwick, and running north along the ridgeline up over Provin Mountain, the trail continues up and over Mt. Tom, across the river to Mt. Holyoke and the Seven Sisters and up over Mt. Norwottuck and Long Mountain and north to Granby, Amherst and Belchertown.

The Pioneer Valley portion is divided into 9 Sections, numbered from south to north, each generally 4 – 6 miles in length and presents a variety of experiences for a day-hike. There are no formal camp sites and very little potable water on the trails. Because the trail is built to follow the ridgelines, there is a lot of up-and-down and a lot of rocky sections underfoot. There is generally parking at either end of each Section, though a few are hard to locate.

I recommend <http://newenglandtrail.org/get> on the trail for the latest information on each Section, including any closing, flooding, or re-location warnings.

Hiking times are based on a moderately fast, consistent pace, without stopping, which I can easily maintain at age 75 carrying a 10 pound day pack – water, snacks, safety and first aid articles. If you are a solo hiker, doing an out-and-back of each Section, obviously your times for the return trip will be somewhat longer! And add time for lunch, snacks, or just to admire the views.

Disclaimer – These descriptions are not associated with, or approved by, the AMC or the NET.

Section 01. Southwick to Agawam

2.35 miles | 50 min to 1 hr

Mostly gentle grades, mostly on dirt ATV tracks, skirts Agawam Archery Club range. Obviously, you must not take any of the side-trails west into the range.

Directions – From Rt 187 South, turn right onto Barry Corner Rd and continue straight onto Rising Corner Rd, bear right at Rising Corner and continue across Suffield Town line to large sign at parking lot on right.

- The AMC has built an accessible gravel path from the trailhead down to the floating bridge across the swamp. Follow the gravel path north towards woods. Note wood pile of old boards on right, which are the remains of the former rickety cat-walk across the swamp. Descend to swamp and cross on new floating bridge. 5-7 min
- Long gentle grade up to top of ridge. Throughout this piece of the trail, heavy machinery has cleared random areas on both sides and bulldozed the trail itself at times. At 12-14 mins, note old 12-foot steel deer stand ~100 ft west of trail, and new huge elevated deer blind platform to the east.
- Cross gas pipeline at 16-18 min. Good view west – only view on this section.
- Descend into low, buggy, muddy area adjoining Agawam Archery Club. Cross creek on stones; small bridge has been washed away. Multiple mudholes in this section after any rain.
- Trail rises again after brook; red-blazed side trail east goes down steeply into valley with fields and tree farm.
- Leaving Archery range, rising gently. Note car-size glacial erratic on right at 45-50 min. (Coming from other direction, stone looks a little like a sperm whale)
- 250 feet later, on left 50 ft into woods, see small glacial erratic that looks like a bucket-seat chair.
- Reach back yard of home on Routh 57. Trail goes along lawn at west side of property onto driveway, and then left onto dirt road west to entry of Agawam Archery Club. 50-60 mins. From here, trail crosses Rt 57, follows road west 500 ft and re-enters woods at sign. Parking is just west of sign.
- [Optional] To extend hike, there are two loop options: the first starts just 50 feet north of the bridge, and goes west along the swamp edge to a hayfield. Mostly flat. After ~10 mins, trail abruptly turns right straight up the side of the ridge, over the top and eventually back to the NET after another 10 -12 mins. The second loop starts further north on the NET and is a wide trail east which leaves the NET at a point where the NET turns 90 degrees north. Instead of following the left turn indicated by the blazes, go straight ahead and follow the trail which descends to a tree farm after ~10 mins. Continue north along the edge of the woods to a fence at which point another trail climbs steeply back to the NET, intersecting at a point where a green “Entering Private property” sign is located on the NET. Total side loop ~ 25-30 mins.

Section 02. Southwick to Agawam-Westfield

3.69 miles | 1¾ -2 hrs

Trail starts north from Rt. 57, skirts abandoned Lane (now Peckham) quarry, climbs Provin Mt to the towers and descends past Provin Mt reservoir, across Rt 187 and down to the Westfield River.

Directions: Follow Rt. 57 west out of Feeding Hills towards Southwick. Just the other side of the saddle, as the road descends, see small trail sign on right, with roadside parking. If you see the Agawam Revolver Club on the same side, you have just missed it.

- Enter at gate. And follow gravel road. Signs discourage trespassing in the quarry, but it is abandoned. (Side trails to the east lead up to and around top of quarry, but Peckham Industries has now posted that area against trespassing.) When the road turns sharply east into the quarry base, NET continues straight ahead.
- Trail rises steeply to north and east. (At top of ridge (15 mins) optional side trail back south leads to spectacular view from top of quarry, but that, too, is now posted “No trespassing” . Continue north to granite marker on trail at the juncture of Agawam, Southwick, and West Spfld. (35 min)
- Several fine westward views on left. (40 min)
- Reach Provin Mt. towers (42 mins) 5 signal towers and 1 fire tower.
- Downward grades approx. 25 mins. Several homes 100 feet below cliff edge to the west. Deer stand to east of trail in this section. Reach Provin Mt. Reservoir gate (60-65 mins.)
- Great views to north and west. No views possible to east, even if you ignore signs and try to climb up there. I tried. Look straight north way down at base of reservoir rock wall to see white blaze trail marker. Walk downhill across grassy field ~ 6-7 minutes north to blaze at edge of woods. This trail was mowed at times in the past but not this year. If you walk this section after a dewfall, you will get very wet.
- Trail goes up to the north and east to the end of a chain-link fence, and then immediately rises steeply on rock staircase, then north again. Do not be tempted to look for an eastern view by climbing to top of ridge. There is none.
- Very nice 18-step wooden stairway down steep pitch leads down to power line.
- Cross power line, descend to Rt. 187. (75-80 mins)
- Cross Rt 187 and follow blazes to 100-foot-high bluff overlooking Westfield River.
- Turn right and continue east along bluff and descend at steep “nose” using rope line. (85-90 mins)
- Continue east into Robinson State Park. Shortly after entering park, blazes lead downward to left.
- Follow trail across bog bridges and arrive at Westfield River. (1 ¾ -2 hrs)
- There is only one glacial erratic on this hike – about 100 ft east of trail, 4’x5’. Did you notice it?

The parking lot for this section is just 250 yards south on Rt. 187. A trail cuts through from the parking lot to the old NET just above the “nose”.

Section 03. West Springfield

3.4 miles | 1 1/2 hrs

This section originally ran along the ridge top bordering the Lane (now Peckham) quarry, but as Lane bit deeper and deeper into the side of the ridge, it became too dangerous and Lane forced its relocation. As such, it does not follow the optimum course, and required a lot of trail construction to re-create well over a mile of new trail. Almost all the trail is single-track, much of it cut into the side of the ridge, making it extra slippery when wet or leaf-covered. It parallels the quarry for much of its length, and the Bear Hole Reservoir for half its length. A portion is used for the Bear Hole 10K route. Not my favorite Section . . .

Directions – This section originally started right across Route 20 from the river crossing ford, and up into the Lane Quarry on a gravel road. The start has been relocated. From Rt 20 turn onto Old Westfield Road across from the CrossLight Gospel Church. After going under RR bridge, turn left onto Sikes Ave, proceed ½ mile to Sportsman’s Club Road on left. Park at entrance to Sportsman’s Club road.

- Trail starts uphill next to Lane “No Trespassing” sign, to a flat area on the back entrance road to Peckham Quarry. Turn right on road. (5-6 mins)
- Follow gravel road and enter woods to right near log pile. Blazes visible. (10 mins)
- Cross Sportmens’ Club road, then start down steeply to bottom of ravine, using ropes recently added for safety.
- There follows a series of 10-12 ups and downs across ravines with several new bridges at the bottoms. Trail is cut into the side of each hill, and parallels marshland to the east.
- At ~30 min, begin to hear massive machinery. Notice “temptation ridge” encouraging you to climb for a view of the quarry. Don’t bite.
- At ~40 minutes, cross power line and soon the trail begins to skirt the quarry. Look over your left shoulder for a view of Provin Mountain and its towers in the distance. At ~45 mins, climb up short side trail to left for a great industrial view of the quarry. Descend trail to pole and enter woods on left. (The road that goes downhill from this junction descends in 5 minutes to the southerly end of Bear Hole Reservoir.)
- Next 25 min very pleasant forest walk, higher and drier, many gentle grades. At ~55 mins, see trail register. (Unmarked side trail east descends in 3-4 mins to the northern end of Bear Hole reservoir at the bridge and cataract.) Quarry noise diminishes, soon to be replaced by the drone of trucks on the Pike. Continue to the MassPike. (70-80 mins)
- Parallel Pike for several minutes through grassy field with occasional blazes to underpass, turn right, and cross under Pike. Admire the colorful gang tags and climb over wall to exit the tunnel. ~90 mins.
- Follow blazes across RR track to a gravel road, turn right and watch for NET signpost and red Evacuation Point sign where trail enters woods on left to start Section 04. Not far.

There is parking here, reachable from East Mountain Rd and Old Holyoke Road, dead-ending at Pike and the trailhead.

Section 04. MassPike in W. Springfield to Apremont Highway in Holyoke

3.7 miles | ~ 2 hrs

A mostly pleasant section that follows the spine of the north/south range of ridges. Mostly high and dry. Many glacial erratics from 10,000 years ago on either side on northern portion of trail. Section is full of criss-crossing ATV and jeep trails and is sometimes very confusing and hard to find blazes, but generally follows the highest points on the ridge. If you're not sure you're still on the trail, remember to look for the blazes behind you. It reassured me more than several times.

Directions – Going north on East Mountain road from Route 20, turn right on Old Holyoke Road immediately after going under turnpike. Continue straight ~ 1 mile until road ends at gate. Take gravel path behind gate several hundred feet to red Evacuation Point sign on left where trail enters woods.

- Trail climbs steeply to top of ridge. A great deal of welcome trail work has been done here recently, replacing the former “almost vertical scramble” with a still steep but reasonable set of switchbacks. The climb to the stone wall can be done in 10 minutes, but if you just got out of your car to hike, you are going to want to take it a bit easier, and call it at least 15 minutes. (There are no views from the side trail behind the stone wall.)
- Trail has been rerouted onto boring, occasionally muddy wood road going north for ~15 mins, eventually reaching top of ridge. (Trail formerly went west, right up westerly ridge, reaching a tower, an open view over Barnes Airport and two stone benches. Two nice guys named Mark and Chris have bought the land and threw us hikers off the nicest part of the ridge.)
- Trail skirts second tower to the west and a short Comcast tower to the right (not easily visible) before exiting onto a gravel road ~35 mins. Road climbs north to highest point, including abandoned tower, and another Comcast tower to the east. (~40-50 mins, depending on the temperature; the road is exposed!)
- Trail continues north along ridgeline for ~1 pleasant hour. Occasional glimpses of Barnes to west. Glacial erratics begin to appear on both sides.
- Dropping into a valley, trail doubles back southerly, then climbs onto a spur to the west, at the top of which is an open commanding view west over Hampton Ponds. 1 ½ hrs.
- Trail returns to original ridge and resumes northerly direction. Glimpses of Snake Pond at the west base of the ridge. More erratics. (If you are hiking in reverse – north/south -- when you come to the first erratic on the east side, go ~50 ft up the trail and see a perfect “wooden shoe” erratic, complete with foot-hole on the right-hand edge of the trail.) Begin to hear traffic on Rt 202.
- Descend to Rt. 202, cross at NET Trail Crossing sign, and continue through woods approx. 7 mins to the Apremont highway trailhead. ~2 hrs. There is room for 2 parked cars here.
- To reach Section 5, road-walk south on Apremont Highway ~ 3 minutes

There is a not-very-friendly No Parking sign at the trailhead for Section 05 here, but I have found if I park a ways up or down the highway, I am not bothered.

Section 05. Apremont Hwy to Rt. 141

4.7 - 5.7 miles (signs and website info vary) | ~ 2 – 2 ¼ hrs

My second-favorite section (after the Mount Tom portion of Section 06.) A beautiful section, lots of ups and downs to start and ending with some fairly flat sections toward Rt 141. Mostly high and dry. A number of glacial erratics. Many views, including unusual eastern view to Westover Field.

Directions: Section actually begins where trail crosses Rt. 202, but there is no parking close by, and it is easier to pick up where it crosses the Apremont Highway ½ mile further north. From Rt. 202 west, turn right onto Apremont Highway, and proceed ¼ mile. There is a not-very-friendly No Parking sign at the trailhead here, but I have found if I park a ways up or down the highway, I am not bothered.

- Trail climbs gently to top of ridge. At first unobstructed view west, see Barnes airport -- 12 mins. Look to NW to find high cliff on adjoining ridge to the west. (Trail will bring you right at that cliff-top in ~20 minutes.)
- At ~18 mins, trail turns sharply west and descends steeply through rocky slope to bottom of defile, crosses over old Trolley bed, and then up steeply onto adjoining ridge to west. Trail winds around south end of ridge, breaking out at cliff view overlooking Holyoke Soldier's Home and Westover Field. 30 mins
- Trail re-enters woods, climbs ~2 mins to ridge top and wide view west to Barnes. Glacial erratics begin to appear. Trail follows ridgetop to 90 degree open view west. ~45 mins.
- Trail returns to eastern ridge, turns left on wood road, proceeds to abandoned tower (55-60 mins). Interesting "balancing" erratic on left after tower.
- At ~1 hour, trail drops quickly into deep, dark, narrow valley filled with 75-100 fifty-year old fallen trees scattered like pick-up sticks. Trail winds south (!) through the fallen trunks for 5 minutes, then turns abruptly west to climb west ridge steeply, breaking out on a 180 degree view west. Look south to see towers on Provin Mountain in distance. (65-75 mins.)
- Trail follows sheer cliff edge ~ 10 mins, with two short "scrambles", open views west, then drops down to return to the eastern ridge, with obstructed view east. (1 hr.20 mins)
- Trail descends relentlessly to tent platforms, fire circle, an acre of ferns, and the Holyoke Revolver Club. (1.5 hrs.)
- Trail traverses low swampy area for 5 minutes, then rises, one part steeply, to view south to Provin Mt., and fire circle. (1 ¾ hrs.)
- Trail is now a pleasant, rising, ramble through oak forest, then descends gently to Old Easthampton Road and Stone Gate to Rt. 141. (2:10 – 2:20)

Section 06. Mount Tom -- Route 141 to Kestrel Park and Easthampton Street

~ 6 miles | 3-4 hrs

A spectacular section going up and over the entire Mt. Tom range, including Goat Peak, Dry Knoll and Mt. Nonotuck. Nearly an hour of trail skirts the west cliff face of the range, going up and down several peaks and in and out of woods. Traverses some sheer cliffs, goes by steep chimneys, occasional short clambering required.

Directions: From I-91 take Rt. 141 west towards Easthampton. Turn left onto Old Easthampton Road, and park in dirt lot by old stone pillars erected by the WPA in 1935.

- Cross Rt. 141 very carefully and enter thru gate to Whiting Street Reservoir. Follow wide gravel road 10 minutes, and turn left at tee. Glimpses of reservoir thru trees on right. After 5 mins, turn left at posts and climb back towards Rt 141. Trail now parallels Rt 141.
- At 30 mins, come to very large glacial erratic shaped like Rock of Gibraltar. 50 feet further north, note a side trail to east that descends back to reservoir.
- At ~45-50 minutes, come to side trail SW to Log Cabin parking lot on Rt 141.
- Trail climbs very steeply over loose shale and warm southern exposure to peak of Mt. Tom and its towers (at 60 – 75 mins depending on temps). Views S to Hartford, SW to Barnes, NW to Easthampton.
- Trail now proceeds along cliff face. After ~25 minutes, pass abandoned windmill. Just past this, is side trail E to abandoned Mt. Tom ski area.
- D O'C and Tote Road side trails intersect on right.
- At 1 3/4 – 2 hrs, trail begins descent into forest towards DCR picnic areas. See side trail and clearing to DCR work yard on left. Multiple trails to east slope of Mt. Tom start here.
- At 2 – 2 ½ hrs, reach Reservation Road. Trail follows Road east ~ 500 ft, then re-enters woods on left.
- ~15 minute climb to Goat Peak. Benches and a view W. Good place for lunch. To the East a short trail leads to old fire tower now used to observe hawk migrations Sept – Nov. 360 degree view from tower.
- Trail winds in serpentine coils through low mountain laurel downward to access road, then down further to saddle and junction with other trails down east face.
- At ~2.5 – 3 hrs, reach Dry Knoll, with lovely view North over oxbow and NoHo. Bench and trail register are here.
- After 5 minute descent, reach old Mt. Nonotuck access road. (You can optionally turn right and climb to old parking lot for the Eyrie House ruins. A trail at the North end of parking lot winds around the mountain top and through the old Eyrie House ruins, returning to the parking lot -- total ~15 mins.) Otherwise, turn left, downhill on access road and re-enter woods on right after ~150 feet.
- Trail now follows old Eyrie House carriage road which brought guests up to the hotel for years. Trail traverses the N face of Mt. Nonotuck with several switchbacks. At base of mountain, trail enters Kestrel Park and its accessible gravel trail. [3 ½- 3 ¾ hrs].
- Follow trail to small parking lot [3 ¼ - 4 hrs]
- (Trail originally went northeast paralleling the power line to Underwood Avenue, and from there down to Easthampton Road and under I-91 to Rt 5, crossing Rt 5 and the RR tracks and then down to the Ct. River. Today, the tracks have more higher-speed trains, and only fishermen use the trail.)

Section 07. Mount Holyoke and the Seven Sisters

6.1 miles | 3.5 – 4.5 hrs

The single most challenging portion of the nine Sections, due to constant elevation changes along the route. The Seven Sisters have at least seven more littler sisters! Features of this section include the Skinner Mountain House with magnificent view from its wrap-around porch, a launch site for hang-gliders, Mount Hitchcock, Bare Mountain at the range's north end, and the Notch Visitors center on Route 116.

Directions: From Mount Holyoke College, take route 47 north to Old Mountain Road on right. (Old Mountain Road comes very suddenly after a blind right-hand corner, so be ready.) Follow road ~1/2 mile to marked trailhead on right. (Trail originally started at the Ct. River shore somewhere behind old Hockanum Cemetery, but it has long been lost.)

- Trail climbs steeply to power line with views W and S over entire Mt. Tom range. Stench from manure pit at Barstow's Farm, below, is enough to gag you. Trail proceeds N, dropping and re-climbing periodically to switch ridges. A bit of clambering here and there. At ~25 mins, superb view of Ct. River and NoHo.
- At 35-40 mins, watch for fork in trail – straight ahead and up, or East and flat. Either trail will do, but the left trail will bring you to the hang-glider launch clearing after a minute. Proceed N at other end of clearing, and rejoin NET after 2 mins.
- At 40-45 mins, trail descends slightly to join Halfway House trail.
- At 45-55 mins, reach Summit House. See S all the way to Hartford, W to the River and NoHo, E to Westover. At times, there is an open rest room and water; other times, locked up tight.
- Ya gotta spend 5-10 minutes up here admiring the incomparable views west and north as you continue to walk north through the picnic area. The trail resumes at the far north end of the picnic area. Time check ~ 1hour.
- After 5 minutes of descending, cross access road at Taylor Notch. You now are on the section informally known as the Seven Sisters. Climb another 5 -7 minutes to outcropping with view south.
- Continue 10 minutes more to excellent view from NoHo to the Ct. River, to Hadley, to UMass.
- At 1:20 reach sign for Black Rock trail east.
- At ~2:00, reach high point. On this section of the trail, the markings are nearly worn away as of 2019. Approaching summit, trail actually veers sharp left and downward to north, but you may ignore the turn and walk 1-2 minutes to summit and back. Obstructed view only. Can be very confusing here.
- At 2:15, after descending for 15 minutes, reach sign for Parker Trail to Chmura Road. Turn right.
- The next 7-10 minutes on a wood road are the only flat portion of the entire section. Enjoy the break.
- At 2:20-25 begin climb to summit of Mt. Hitchcock, around 500 feet of rise on three long pitches.
- At ~3:00 hrs, begin climb over several spurs and knobs, and alongside pipes and conduit that formerly served the Cold War underground bunker under Bare Mountain. Reach summit ~3:20 hours. Enjoy great views west, north and east, including the inner workings of the Lane Quarry below. The Quarry is what remains of Round Mountain, a 780-ft peak that was the twin of Bare Mountain in the 1940's until the entire mountain has been quarried away. The twin peaks formed a narrow notch that gave the name to the Notch Visitors' Center.
- Descend 20 mins to Route 116 and cross to parking lot at Visitors' Center. Total trip 3:30- 4:00 hrs.

Section 08. Notch Visitors Center to Harris Mountain Road in Granby

5 miles | 3 hrs

Another lovely section that rises over Mt. Norwottuck, down through the Horse Caves, skirts Rattlesnake Knob and continues over Long Mountain.

Directions: Park at Notch Visitors Center on Rt. 116 just south of Atkins Farms Country Market.

- Walk up driveway or steps, and to the right of the Visitors Center come to trail head.
- Trail descends steeply to land belonging to Peckham (formerly Lane) Quarry. (New switchbacks replace the former very sheer, slippery, grade.) Follow blazes under power line, back into woods, down to gravel road.
- At ~10 minutes, trail turns sharp right and climbs relentlessly for 10-12 mins to first knob.
- Trail continues up and down over 2 more knobs, reaching summit of Mt. Norwottuck at ~ 45-50 mins. Obstructed views of UMass, Mt. Monadnock, Hampshire College, Long Mt.
- Descend ~1 minute to overlook with open view east over Rattlesnake Knob and Long Mt.
- 5-7 mins down east face, through crags and boulders to Horse Cave upper opening. Enter straight into the narrow cleft and down. Good luck finding a way around to avoid this; there isn't one.
- Clamber down the boulders into the cave. Note large, sheltering extreme ledge overhangs.
- Next 15 mins are a pleasant ramble. Robert Frost Trail joins NET after 5 mins.
- At ~1.25 hrs, arrive at Rattlesnake Knob. Two viewpoints; one East over Long Mt; the other North over UMass all the way to Mt. Sugarloaf in Sunderland.
- Retrace steps back to NET, turn east and descend steeply 5-6 minutes to wood road. Turn right
- Road meanders back and forth 10 mins until the trail leaves road to climb first spur.
- Begin to see occasional glacial erratics. As you top the first spur, glimpse Rattlesnake Knob to the West.
- Trail register at 1:50 hrs. Top of south spur at 1:55
- Descend to deep saddle, where a large glacial erratic marks a side trail East.
- Reach open view at 2:10 hrs, overlooking Rattlesnake Knob and Mt. Norwottuck .
- At 2:15 hrs, reach top of Long Mountain. See iron post and small wood sign 910 ft.
- At 2:25 hrs, reach northern-most point on top, and begin steep descent to northeast.
- At 2:30 hrs, there is a wood ladder down steep pitch.
- At 2:40 hrs, trail rises over northern-most spur and descends again.
- At 2:50 hrs, trail descends steeply. Look through trees in winter at facing ridge to see house looming up on the ridge.
- At ~3 hrs, reach parking lot at Harris Mountain Road.

Section 09. Harris Mountain Road in Granby to Federal Street in Belchertown

2.7 miles | 1 ½ hrs

Pleasant section, lots of ups and downs, mostly on singletrack and soft forest floor. Crosses Bay Road at one-third point.

Directions: From Atkins Farms on Rt. 116, take Bay Road east to Harris Mt. Road on right. Park at signs.

- Enter on wood road. At 2 mins, trail exits right and climbs to ridge top in 10 mins.
- At 11 mins, cross power line and reenter woods.
- At 15 mins, reach ridge top and begin descent, skirting 2 homes, reaching trail register at ~25 mins.
- Trail drops so steeply for ~35 ft. that knotted ropes are provided to secure descent to Bay Road.
- Turn right and follow Bay Rd in front of Snowe's Storage, cross Bay Rd, and re-enter woods at sign for Kestrel Land Trust, climbing back to new ridge.
- At 40 mins, reach end of ridge, where trail crosses wood road and descends into deep, dark stand of 80+ foot pines and hemlocks.
- This next section boasts some serious ups-and-downs. At ~55 mins, cross brook on stones.
- At ~ 1:15, cross Orchard Road and continue down to Federal Street. Sign on Federal Street indicates that Section 10 is a 4 mile road walk north to Mt. Lincoln in Pelham.