

Hiking Mount Washington, Highest Peak in New Hampshire

These notes are written to help you compare the various routes that are commonly used to hike to the peaks. They are written on the assumption that you have a guidebook and a set of maps, so no directions are given to trailheads, and the trails are not described in any detail. I have omitted hikes that are substantially longer or more difficult than the standard ones, or that are simply less often used. The fact that a trail is not mentioned here does not imply that it is unsuitable.

Warning!

Mount Washington has the reputation of being "Home of the world's worst weather". Severe storms, including snow, can happen at any time of the year. The combination of severe winds, cold and wetness can exhaust the strongest hiker. Never continue upwards in deteriorating weather, as it gets worse at higher elevations.

Also note that it is a strenuous climb for those who are not in good shape. The distance by most routes is around four miles each way; that may not sound like much. But in those four miles you gain roughly 4,000 feet of elevation, which is a lot for those not used to strenuous exercise. To quote the *White Mountain Guide*:

To a person unused to mountain trails or in less than excellent physical condition, this unrelenting uphill grind can be grueling and intensely discouraging. If you are not an experienced hiker or a trained athlete, you will almost certainly enjoy the ascent of Mount Washington a great deal more if you build up to it with easier climbs in areas with less exposure to potentially severe weather.

Mount Washington Trails

Mount Washington is the highest peak in the White Mountains of New Hampshire (and indeed in the Northeast) and is therefore a very popular objective. As a result the most widely used trails can be quite crowded, and however you climb the summit will have crowds, many having come up by the road or the Cog Railway.

The most common way to ascend it is from Pinkham Notch by the **Tuckerman's Ravine** trail [rt: 8.4 miles, 4,300 feet, 6:20]. The first 2.4 miles, to the Hermit Lake shelters, is wide and relatively smooth going. But do not be fooled, you are going up, climbing about 1,800 feet in these 2.4 miles. The *White Mountain Guide* describes this section well, noting " ... its moderate but relentless climb ...". Soon the trail attacks the ravine headwall, here it becomes really steep! The last section, up the summit cone of Mt. Washington, is another steep ascent over large rocks, more "rock-hopping" than trail walking.

Less crowded routes are available from Pinkham. The **Lion's Head** trail is about the same length as the Tuckerman's Ravine trail, it is steeper and rougher. In exchange you get better views and less crowds (Until you reach the summit of Mt. Washington, which is always crowded). You may wish to avoid the steep rocks on the way down by returning via Tuckerman's Ravine.

On the other side of the ravine is the **Boott Spur** trail (note Boott, not Boot Spur!), which also has great views. It is longer than either of the above [rt: 10.8 miles, 4,300 feet, 7:35], but no more difficult than Tuckerman's Ravine. A loop using Boott Spur and Tuckerman's Ravine is a popular trip [lp: 9.6 miles, 4,300 feet, 6:55]. If you really wish to avoid the crowds as much as possible return by the Lions Head trail, though it is steeper and rougher than Tuckerman's.

Two trails approach Mt. Washington from the West, both starting from the same trailhead (on the Base Road that leads to the Cog Railway station). This trailhead is about 500 feet higher than Pinkham, so you save that much elevation gain. Either trail can be used for a round trip, though many use both to make a loop.

The **Ammonoosuc Ravine** trail (combined with the **Crawford Path**) is the shorter of the two [rt: 9.0 miles, 3,800 feet, 6:25], and affords shelter at the Lake of the Clouds hut. On the other hand there is a rather long section that is steep, rocky and usually wet.

The **Jewell** trail (combined with the **Gulfside**) is longer [rt: 10.2 miles, 4,000 feet, 7:05] but is the easiest way up Mount Washington (a relative term, there is no easy way to the top of Mt. Washington!). Combining the two makes a very popular loop [lp: 9.6 miles, 3,900 feet, 6:45]. You may want to read my report of a trip to **Mount Washington by the Ammonoosuc and Jewell Trails**.

Of the many other less commonly used trails up Mt. Washington I will only mention the **Great Gulf Trail**. That trail goes through the Great Gulf for 6.5 miles to Spaulding Lake (elevation 4,228 feet), then goes up the very steep headwall, rising 1,600 feet in about 0.8 mile! It then joins the Gulfside trail for an easy ascent up to the summit of Mount Washington (ow: 7.9 miles; 5,000 feet; 6:25). With only one car you may have to return the same way, many find going down the headwall unpleasant (rt: 15.8 miles; 5,000 feet; 10:25). With a second car (or the willingness to thumb a ride), it is possible to go down by the gentler Tuckerman's Ravine or Lion's Head trails (lp: 12.1 miles; 5,000 feet; 8:35). This is a strenuous trip, but the views while climbing the headwall are amongst the most spectacular in the White Mountains. See my trip report of **Hiking Mount Washington by the Great Gulf Trail** for a description of my 2002 trip.

To summarize, here are the distances, elevation gains and book times of the most used routes to Mount Washington:

Distances and Elevation Gains of Routes to Mount Washington

Route	Distance	Elevation Gain	Book Time
Round trip by Tuckerman's Ravine	8.4	4,300	6:20
Round trip by Lions Head	8.4	4,300	6:20
Round trip by Boott Spur	10.8	4,300	7:35
Loop, Boott Spur and Tuckerman's Ravine	9.6	4,300	6:55
Round trip by Ammonoosuc Ravine	9.0	3,800	6:25
Round trip by Jewell trail	10.2	3,800	7:00
Loop, Ammonoosuc Ravine and Jewell trail	9.6	3,800	6:40
Round trip by Great Gulf	15.8	5,000	10:25
Loop, Great Gulf and Tuckerman's Ravine	12.1	5,000	8:35

Choosing a Route

There are an enormous number of trails going up Mount Washington, and each of them has something to recommend it. I will just mention those that seem to me to be the most suitable for a first climb up Mount Washington.

The most commonly used route is Tuckerman's Ravine, which is rather crowded on summer weekends. There is, of course, an excellent reason why it is the most popular route, as it takes you into the floor of the great ravine. For variety, and to minimize crowds, I would suggest combining it with either Lion's Head or Boott Spur. Both have excellent views into the ravine from above; of these Lion's Head is the more scenic, and also the more crowded.

The routes from the west start off at a higher elevation, saving about 500 feet of elevation. The Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail is far more scenic than the Jewell trail, but also much steeper. Many hikers combine the two trails, going up the Ammonoosuc Ravine and down the Jewell trail. This loop gets Mount Monroe at almost no extra effort!

The Great Gulf Trail is substantially longer, steeper and has more elevation gain than any of the others. For those with the fitness to do it the views (when the weather cooperates!) make it well worth while.

Many people do Mount Washington using the huts, either because they enjoy the huts, or to minimize the elevation gain on any given day. Some do it as an **overnight**, going to Lakes Hut the first day, then summiting Mount Washington the second. It is usual to climb Mount Monroe after reaching the hut, and to descend by the Jewell Trail.