

Welcome to Great Blue Hill,

the highest point in the 7000 acre Blue Hills Reservation and the highest coastal elevation along the Atlantic seaboard south of Maine. This large dome of granite measures 635 feet at the summit. Hikers will be rewarded with a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside.

Before you begin...

Your hike up and down Great Blue will take approximately 1 hour, covering 1 mile and an elevation gain of 430 feet. Be aware the trail is steep and rocky in some sections. Rangers recommend wearing sturdy footgear, bringing drinking water and purchasing a trail map at the Trailside Museum for a complete overview of the park and trail system. Seasonal restrooms and drinking fountains are located at the brown building by the north parking lot from May to October.

The trail begins at the bulletin board beside the Trailside Museum. Follow the red dots and stop at numbered markers corresponding to the text, as you journey up the hill and deeper into the forest.

1. HIT THE TRAIL!

You are about to ascend the most popular climb in the Boston area. The forces of nature have shaped this hill and this trail. Rain and snow fall on the hillside washing soil and debris down the slope. The stone blocks before you help to stabilize the slope, holding

the soil in place and minimizing erosion to the trail. Can you see any signs of runoff and erosion in this area? Maintaining trails on slopes is a challenge. Please help the DCR park rangers by staying on the marked trail and not creating shortcuts.

2. TAKEN FOR GRANITE

Feel the exposed rock underfoot and along the trail. You are now stepping on rocks which once oozed from ancient volcanoes millions of years ago. As this molten rock cooled underground, it became incredibly hard granite. Over time, wind, water and ice have worn away the upper layers of rock revealing the granite beneath. Granite is often used for monuments due to its ability to take a fine polish. Note how thousands of footsteps each year have helped to smooth and polish the stone along the trail.

3. A BURNING ISSUE

Observe the trees around you. Do you see many trees with whitish bark? A forest fire burned here in the 1980's. The gray birch trees around you are called pioneer species because they sprout quickly in burned areas and abandoned fields. Burnt stumps and dead trees are also signs of a past fire.



Can you find any of these signs? Uncontrolled fires can pose a threat to the forest and its wildlife. However, naturally occurring forest fires can help keep the forest healthy and productive by ridding the forest

floor of dead wood, returning nutrients to the soil and helping control insects and disease. Sadly, most forest fires in the northeast are caused by humans, from carelessly discarding matches and cigarettes. Remember, please be careful with fire in the forest.

CAUTION

The summit road is ahead. Please use caution as you cross the paved road. Be aware of park vehicles and bicycle traffic. (The paved road leads directly uphill to the Blue Hill Weather Observatory.) The red dot trail continues across the road.



4. WINGING IT

Look, a flash of color in the trees. Listen, there's a rustle among the leaves. Observe, a winged silhouette casting a shadow on the forest floor. The hills are alive with birdlife. The reservation support over 160 species of birds including the prairie warbler, eastern towhee, field sparrow and the black-capped chickadee. The hilltops provide excellent vantage points for viewing hawks and turkey vultures as they circle and pass overhead, riding the warm breezes which rise off the slope. Close your eyes and listen. How many birds can you hear?

5. PINING FOR MORE

Take a look at the trees around you. Here three pines mingle along the rocky slope. Can you find them? White pine, the Blue Hills most common evergreen, has soft and pliable needles in bundles of five. Now look for a tree with needles in bundles of two and thick reddish bark. The red pine is named for its chunky, reddish bark of puzzle-like plates. Pitch pine has a short, often contorted trunk and three needles to a bundle. Pitch pine often grows on windswept dry hilltops. These evergreens provide year round shelter for animals such as great-horned owls and red squirrels.



6. A TOWERING TRIBUTE



The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built the stone tower and pavilion you see ahead. The CCC was a federal program created in the 1930's by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to provide jobs during the Great Depression. Imagine collecting and hauling these large stones from throughout the reservation. That's what the CCC boys did from 1933 to 1937 in the Blue Hills. Roosevelt's "Tree Army" built two observation towers, one here and one at Chickatawbut Overlook. They also constructed miles of trails, planted thousands of trees, built ski runs on Great Blue Hill and many other park improvements.

7. ON A CLEAR DAY

Breathe deeply, relax and enjoy the view. The Eliot Observation Tower is named for Charles Eliot, a visionary landscape architect and a major force behind the establishment of the Blue Hills Reservation in 1893.

To the east, you see the Harbor Islands dotting the coastline. To the north, skyscrapers tower among the Boston skyline. To the west, Mount Wachusett can be seen 44 miles away in Princeton, Massachusetts.

The Blue Hills Reservation stretches 8 miles to Quincy in the east. The two large bodies of water to the east/southeast are also in the reservation. Houghton's Pond is the smaller pond and has a sandy swimming beach. Ponkapoag, the larger pond to the south, boasts a unique quaking bog and boardwalk.

Southwest, above the tree line is the Blue Hill Weather Observatory and Science Center, a National Historic Landmark built in 1885. For an interesting side trip, follow Eliot Circle around to the Weather Observatory and examine the weather equipment on display. Afterwards, retrace your steps to resume the red dot trail downhill.

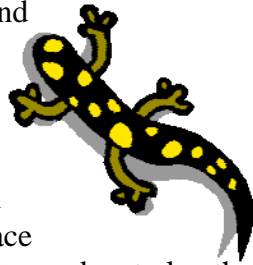


To continue directly downhill on the red dot trail, exit the tower through the picnic pavilion and go down the stairs to ground level. The red dot trail continues immediately across from the pavilion. At intersection 1082, follow the red dots as the trail takes a sharp left turn.

8. A REALLY BIG PUDDLE

Look to the side of the trail. Is there standing water or is it dry? Would you call this area a wetland? It is actually a vernal pool, a special type of wetland which dries up in the late summer.

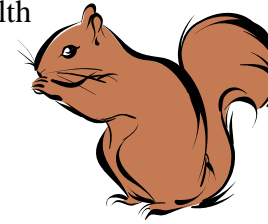
Due to its temporary nature, fish cannot survive in this wetland and so it is an ideal place for frogs, toads and salamanders to lay their eggs, protected from hungry, swimming predators. In March, listen for the high-pitched calls of the spring peeper, a small tree frog. By late summer, when the fragrant sweet pepperbush shrub blooms, this pool will probably be dry and the frogs, toads and young salamanders will have moved to their shaded woodland homes.



Ahead, you will once again cross the summit road. Please use caution.

9. A DAY AT THE BEECH

Feel the smooth gray bark of the American beech before you. Do you see names carved in this tree? This graffiti cuts the protective bark, making the tree vulnerable to disease. Undisturbed, these forest giants can live to a ripe age of 400 years old, while providing a wealth of food for squirrels, deer, wild turkeys and even humans.



Have you ever tasted beech nut gum?

The beech nut is a bur that contains 2-3 triangular, sweet tasting nuts.

Look for more beech trees as you stroll through this cool, sheltered ravine. Follow the red dot trail across a wooden bridge. The seasonal stream below feeds the pond at the Blue Hills Trailside Museum. Be sure to include a visit to the Trailside Museum to learn more about the amazing flora and fauna found in the Blue Hills. The red dot trail descends from here to the south parking lot.

TRAIL'S END

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to Great Blue Hill and the DCR Blue Hills Reservation. This trail is only a brief glimpse of the beauty of the Blue Hills. We encourage you to visit often and enjoy the fascinating seasonal changes of this rich and varied parkland. There is a world of wonders to discover!

dc
Massachusetts



GREAT BLUE HILL

Self-guided trail brochure

