

# Climbing a Lakes Region landmark

## Red Hill offers a short hike with great views

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The ledges at the summit of Moultonborough's Red Hill open views south to Lake Winnepesaukee and the Belknap Mountains. The fire warden's cabin can be seen on the right. The Red Hill Trail provides a moderate 1.7 mile hike to the summit along an old jeep road. (Steve Smith/Mountain Ear Photo)

The view from Moulton-borough's Red Hill has been celebrated for centuries.

"A more charming and delightful view with the naked eye is not perhaps to be seen in America," wrote visitor Isaac Hill in 1840.

"Whoever misses the view from Red Hill, loses the most fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable view, from a moderate mountain height, that can be gained from any eminence that lies near the tourist's path," enthused the Rev. Thomas Starr King in his classic 1859 book, "The White Hills."

Pretty high praise for a summit that barely pokes above 2000 feet.

The secret to Red Hill's preeminent prospect lies in its strategic location between New Hampshire's two largest lakes --Winnepesaukee and Squam-- with the lofty Sandwich Range to the north and the humpy Ossipee Range to the east.

Named for the color of its oak forest in fall, this long, low ridge is easily identified by the firetower topping its rounded crest. The tower is staffed by the Moultonborough Fire Department from May through October; the rest of the year the cab at the top is locked.

One must climb the tower to get the full 360-degree view from Red Hill, but scaling the steep and narrow stairs in winter can be a difficult and even dangerous undertaking due to snow and ice buildup on the steps. Fortunately, good views to the south and north are also available from the ledges at the base of the tower.

The shorter and by far the more popular of the two hiking routes up the mountain is the Red Hill Trail on the south side. This trail follows an old jeep road at a steady, moderate grade for 1.7 miles to the top. The elevation gain is a respectable 1350 feet, but it's never very steep and is only slightly rough in a few spots. It's also a dry trail with a minimum of ice buildup in cold weather. Thus it's a good climb for the short days and uncertain footing of December, and it leaves plenty of time to attend to holiday duties. When more snow comes, it will make a fine snowshoe trek.



The firetower atop Red Hill was built in 1927 and is staffed from spring through fall by the Moultonborough Fire Department. In the winter the cab is locked and ascending the tower is not recommended when the stairs are encased in snow and ice. The summit of Red Hill provides good views south and north even without going up into the tower.

Last week, on the crystal clear day before Friday's snowstorm, I took a morning hike up the Red Hill Trail. From Route 25 in Center Harbor, I followed Bean Road north for 1.4 miles, turned right on Sibley Road for another 1.1 mile, then left on the Class VI Red Hill Road for 0.2 mile to the trailhead on the right.

Last year the Lakes Region Conservation Trust, which purchased the summit and much of the slopes of Red Hill in 2000, put in a new and expanded hiker's parking area. This lot is plowed through the winter (thanks to Sandy Brackett at Moultonborough PD/Fire Rescue for tracking that info down). A kiosk gives some background on Red Hill and its recent protection < one of several major conservation success stories authored in recent years by the LRCT ([www.lrct.org](http://www.lrct.org)).

Temperatures were in the teens as I set off for my morning jaunt, with a dusting of snow on the trail. The first 0.1 mile was up a wide road, one of two short sections where hikers, skiers and snowmobilers share access in winter. A right turn led up to a bridge over a small brook, and at 0.4 mile the route briefly rejoined the snowmobile trail, then turned left past a LRCT kiosk and an old cellar hole.

From here to the summit the trail follows the wide jeep road once used by the firewarden. Although eroded in places, the old road provides a generally easy route. I climbed out of a piney area and into the sun-warmed oak forest that dominates these slopes. In spring these woods are crawling with ticks. Here, certainly, hiking in cold weather has its advantages.

Near the top of the winding climb the trail led through a desolate area burned by an arsonist back in 1990. The bleached skeletons of dead trees rose starkly against the cloudless blue sky. The less-used Eagle Cliff Trail joined from the left, and soon the tower loomed ahead. It took just under an hour to reach the summit at a steady pace.

The day was exceptionally clear, with Mt. Washington reporting 130-mile visibility. From the ledges at the foot of the tower I gazed over Lake Winnepesaukee, still unfrozen and shimmering in the morning sun. Far to the southwest Mt. Monadnock was sharply etched on the horizon.

The highest point on Red Hill is a ledge just north of the tower, from which you can admire the dark, sprawling peaks of the Sandwich Range. Through a gap in the trees snowy Mt. Moosilauke can be spied to the northwest.

I brushed the snow off the topmost ledge to reveal the summit marker of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Under the direction of Dartmouth professor E.T. Quimby, a station was set up here in the 1870s as part of a statewide triangulation survey. This station, like many others, was marked by a triangle etched into the rock with an iron bolt in the middle. In 1958 a metal disc was cemented into the ledge, apparently on top of the old mark from the 1870s.

Since the tower steps were free of snow, I clambered to the upper platform for a wider view, including the elegant Squam Lake to the west. According to "A Field Guide to New Hampshire Firetowers," by Iris W. Baird and Chris Haartz, this tower was built by the state in 1927, using land and money donated by Center Harbor summer resident Ernest B. Dane. Its height was increased in the 1930s and again in 1972.

During my hour-plus stay at the summit my only company was a white-breasted nuthatch working over some scraggly trees at the edge of the clearing. The quiet was a contrast to the summer bustle atop Red Hill, when the fire lookout welcomes a steady stream of hikers on any nice day. Summer or winter, this short hike is a good one.