



BNRC's Hoosac Range Reserve



Self-guided Hike

This 6-mile round-trip hike winds along the ridgeline of the Hoosac Range Reserve to Spruce Hill in Savoy Mountain State Forest. Eleven interpretive stops will introduce you to unique natural and historic features.

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Welcome to the Hoosac Rangel!

This 944-acre reserve contains a diversity of ecosystems and forest communities. It is home to over 400 species of plants, nearly 30 mammals, and many more bird and insect species. The 6-mile round-trip hike will introduce you to some of the Hoosac's most interesting features.

The Hoosac Range Trail, itself constructed between 2010 and 2011, parallels part of an early Native American path from the Hudson River Valley to the Connecticut River Valley. This path has two divergent histories: one led to the construction of Route 2 and one led to the restoration and rebuilding of the Mahican-Mohawk Trail. Originally a narrow footpath used by Native Americans to traverse the Hoosac Range, it was later modified by European settlers to fit modern needs. The altering and widening of this path to accommodate horses and carts and then automobiles, eventually resulted in Route 2 (also known as the Mohawk Trail). Recently, in response to student interest in the history of the path, parts of the original trail left untouched by modern traffic have been restored for quieter recreation. This trail is the Mahican-Mohawk Trail.

The forest you see around you, characterized by rich, mesic soils that support a canopy of maples, oaks, birches, American beech, and black cherry, is a **Northern Hardwood Forest** (alternatively, "Transition Forest"). Like most forests of its type, it is relatively young, having been cleared in the 18th or 19th century to support the area's booming agriculture and industry.

1. Yoda Tree: About a quarter of a mile into the trail, look for an unusual protrusion from a tree on your right. If you turn around and look back at it, you'll see that this abnormal growth, called a gall, resembles the lovable Star Wars character Yoda. Galls have multiple causes including fungal, bacterial, or viral infections, insect infestations, and genetic mutations. The formation of a gall is the result of cell enlargement (hypertrophy) and/or abnormally rapid cell division (hyperplasia), similar to tumor growth in humans. Galls can occur in both woody and herbaceous (i.e. leaves) tissues and can be any shape or size.

2. Tree with Bear Sign: When the brush begins to clear and the trail veers right, look for a solitary, healthy beech tree on your right. A bear has climbed this tree: follow its signature claw marks as high as you can see. If you look closely at the scratches in the bark you can see that they are healing, suggesting it has been a few years since the bear was here. Bears climb beech trees in the autumn to eat their nuts, which are an important part of their pre-hibernation diet. When feeding, bears either shake the branches so that the nuts fall to the ground or sit in the canopy, pull branches towards them, and eat the nuts right off the branch. This leaves a pile of broken branches at the top of the tree – a bear nest!

3. Pileated Beech Tree: The trail curves left soon after—as it straightens out briefly, look for large, rectangular holes in the trunk of a tree to your right. These holes were created by a pileated woodpecker searching for carpenter ants. Look up and you'll see that this beech tree is long dead. Although pileated woodpeckers may cause small trees to break through their forceful foraging, it is more likely that this tree died from beech bark disease. This tree's bark should be smooth: a healthy beech trunk is said to resemble an elephant's leg. The rough, cracking texture that you observe instead is the work of an insect, the beech scale, and a fungus, which invade the trunk in succession.

At the trail intersection go left to Sunset Rock

4. Sunset Rock: From here you can see across the Hoosic Valley over the city of North Adams. As its name suggests, this outlook faces west and you can watch magnificent sunsets over Bald Mountain and the Dome. If you stop here in early spring you may see leafless shrubs covered in white flowers. Later in the summer these shrubs will have dull green elliptical leaves followed by dark purple fruit in the fall. This shrub is Bartram's shadbush (*Amelanchier bartramiana*), which is considered Threatened in Massachusetts. These shrubs like rocky soils on mountain summits and are threatened due to changes to their habitat.

At the next trail intersection go left to follow the ridge line.

5. Rock Face Communities: As you come around the sharp bend and descend below the rock face you will notice that the cliff on your right is adorned with a variety of plants. These plants are able to grow and thrive on limited soil and water. The majority of the species found here are mosses, lichens, and ferns, but sometimes a few flowering plants and small trees will grow out of cracks in the rock face.

6, 7. Glacial Erratics: Soon after the first rock face, notice an exceptionally round boulder in front of you, standing out from the other rocks found on the ridge. This "erratic" was carried here by a ½-mile thick sheet of ice some 10,000 years ago! Erratics can range in size from pebbles to large boulders. You will see several other glacial erratics along the Hoosac Range Trail – look for two more on a spur trail past the footbridge (**point 7**).

More geologic history of the Hoosac Range Most of the rocks that you see on the trail are Hoosac schist, a metamorphic rock created around 470 million years ago when the Hoosac and Taconic Ranges were formed. Hoosac schist, along with slate and phyllite, makes up most of the mountains in this area. These metamorphic rocks resist erosion, unlike the marble that fills the valleys. Over time, rivers have carved a valley through the less-resistant limestone and marble bedrock between the Hoosac and the Taconics.

8. Krummholtz: In about a mile, notice that the trees around

you appear stunted and twisted. From the German "krumm" meaning bent, or twisted and "holz" meaning wood, the term *krummholtz* is used to describe trees like these. Their strange growth is the result of extreme weather associated with ridges and mountain tops. In this area you may also see large-leaved goldenrod (*Solidago macrophylla*), which is Threatened in Massachusetts. Like other goldenrods, it blooms in late summer. It prefers sandy or gravelly soils, rocky ledges, outcrops, and open areas in woods and thickets at high elevations such as this. In Massachusetts, large-leaved goldenrod is found only in northern Berkshire County.

9. The Hoosac Tunnel: When you emerge from the canopy to cross under a power line, you are standing 1,700 ft above the Hoosac Tunnel, a 4.75-mile-long railroad tunnel that runs *under* the mountains of the Hoosac Range. The longest tunnel in the country at the time of its completion (1876), it took 25 years to build and is still in commercial use. The Hoosac Tunnel allowed trade to pass between the Connecticut and Deerfield Rivers without having to climb the Hoosac Range. Two million tons of rock were excavated from the Hoosac Range to create the tunnel, and 195 people lost their lives during its construction. The Tunnel's heavy death toll led to legends that it is haunted!

10. Acidic Rock Outcrop Communities: Rock outcrop communities dot the final quarter mile between the last vista and Spruce Hill. These communities develop after a disturbance such as fire or clear cutting, followed by soil erosion; they persist due to the poor soil and extremely dry conditions, which do not support large trees or other forest plants. The outcrops are characterized by exposed bedrock with sparse vegetation of low shrubs, grasses, mosses, and lichens. The majority of shrubs in this area are low bush blueberry, which offers food to wildlife. The berries are ripe around the Fourth of July.

11. Spruce Hill: Welcome to Spruce Hill! From this lookout you can sit and enjoy an almost panoramic view of Berkshire County at an elevation of 2,566 feet. On clear days you can see the Veterans War Memorial Tower atop Mount Greylock to the southwest. Greylock is the highest point in Massachusetts: 3,491 feet above sea level. From the summit of Greylock you may see farther than 60 miles in almost any direction. The town of Adams lies between Spruce Hill and Mt. Greylock; see if you can spot the Route 8 quarry (Specialty Minerals) and the solar farm at the former town dump. Follow Route 8 north through the valley to North Adams. Look west and you'll find Williamstown tucked in between Clarksburg State Forest and the Taconic Range.

Spruce Hill is accessible from the north by BNRC's Hoosac Range Trail and from the south through Savoy Mountain State Forest via the Busby Trail. Come in the fall, and you might spot a hawk migrating south for the winter!