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TOWER TREK.

A hike to Okemo's historic fire tower gives a view worth glimpsing.

By Lisa Densmore

Does your family cringe at the suggestion of a hike? Okemo Mountain might be just the peak that turns them into life-long trekkers, especially after they reach the summit. Imagine a 360-degree view that extends north and south along the spine of the Green Mountains, west to the Adirondacks and east to Mount Washington and the Whites; and you get to climb an historic fire tower to see it. Okemo Mountain is a peak worth bagging!

While not one of the 4,000-footers highly coveted by peak baggers, Okemo Mountain, also called Ludlow Mountain on some hiking maps, is still an impressive peak by Vermont standards with an elevation of 3,343 feet. That said, the climb to its summit is not overly difficult. Many people simply walk up one of the ski trails, although the true summit of the mountain is slightly higher than the top of the ski area. A better choice is the Healdville Trail.

The Healdville Trail is easy to follow and well-maintained, making it one of the more family-friendly hikes in Vermont. In fact it was built by teenagers! Formed in 1985, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) hires young people ages 16-24 to work on conservation-oriented projects, such as building and maintaining hiking trails on state land. The Healdville Trail was one of the VYCC's early projects.

The Healdville Trail is in the 7,500-acre Okemo State Forest. It is named for the former train depot which used to be located alongside the Green Mountain Railroad tracks in Mount Holly where the trailhead is today. The path is neither steep nor wet, and the distance, 5.8 miles round-trip, is manageable for unconditioned legs.

Lest you get the wrong impression, the Healdville Trail is still a hike, climbing an ambitious 1,943 feet. From the trailhead, the path climbs along the left side of Branch Brook, which tumbles over a number of small waterfalls forming a series of tiny pools, each a perfect spot to rest.

The ascent is steady for about 1.5 miles through a classic northern hardwood forest. Then the trail bears right and traverses the mountain to the south for another 0.4 mile to a sign for the Healdville Trail. Sunlight filters through the woods highlighting wildflowers here and there among the trees. Squirrels chide above you, and a random newt might scurry under a fallen leaf in front of your foot. Here, an observant child will grin at the discovery of a small snail on a log or a large shelf mushroom on a tree.

As the trail begins its last climb to the summit, the flora changes noticeably to evergreens and paper birch, a sign of the higher elevation and potentially harsher weather. It is always a good idea to bring plenty of snacks, water and layers of clothing (including a rain jacket) on this hike as the weather can change at a moment's notice, and there is likely a stiff breeze at the top.

You know you are close when the path passes the stone chimney and foundation of an old cabin. This is where the firewatcher who manned the tower used to live.

The 75-foot tower is just around the bend, mounted on a giant slab of rock. It was built during the early twentieth century as part of a widespread observation network that covered northern New England. Most of the fire towers in the network were torn down by the 1960s

when small aircraft became more available and more practical as a means of fire watching. The tower atop Okemo Mountain is one of the few that remain today. Long retired from active duty, it remains a cabin in the sky.

Lisa Densmore is the author of Best Hikes with Dogs: New Hampshire and Vermont (The Mountaineers Books, September 2005).

GETTING THERE

From the Okemo Mountain Resort, head north on Route 103 for 4 miles. Turn left on Station Road. After crossing the railroad tracks, look for the parking lot and the trailhead on the left.

10 TIPS FOR HIKING WITH KIDS

Nothing puts a damper on a hike quicker than an unhappy child. Here are a few tricks to ensure that your kids have a great day on the trail:

- 1.) Wait for a clear day to ensure a comfortable hike and a great view at the top.
- 2.) To ward off fatigue and to stay dry, dress your kids as you would yourself, especially their footwear. Have them wear real hiking socks and sturdy hiking shoes, preferably waterproof ones given their propensity for mud puddles.
- 3.) Limit their backpack weight to 10 percent of their body weight or less, and expect to carry both your pack and theirs after the first mile or so.
- 4.) Take your time on the trail. Let your kids explore. The process of getting to the top is as important to the adventure as reaching the goal.
- 5.) Engage your kids in conversation, mind games or story-telling to take their minds off the physical output.
- 6.) Take frequent rest stops - about every 20 minutes to half-hour - and give them water and a yummy snack to keep them energized.
- 7.) Play trail games, like stepping only on roots and rocks, to keep them moving uphill without dwelling on the climb.
- 8.) Have one adult go ahead to "plant" cookies, gum drops or other treats beside a section of the trail to create a hiker's scavenger hunt.
- 9.) Invite a friend. It is more fun and good motivation to share the adventure with a peer.

10.) Turn back before the top if your child is fatigued. The rule of thumb is to hike a distance equal to half your child's age. Many children under 10 years old have hiked to the top of Okemo Mountain, but it is okay to turn around part way up. The mountain will always be there another day.

HIKER'S CHECKLIST

Whether hiking Okemo Mountain or any other peak in Vermont, here's a list of the basics to bring, including a few extras that help make the outing more fun for your kids:

The Basics (for each person)

- Fleece or other insulating layer
- Weather-proof jacket
- Ball cap - for sun and bug protection
- Sturdy shoes with high-traction soles
- Water - 1-2 quarts per person
- Snacks and/or bag lunch
- Small plastic bag for trash
- Leash - if you bring a dog

Emergency and Group Gear

- Bandana
- Tissues
- Bug spray
- Sunscreen
- First aid kit
- Whistle
- Compass
- Trail map
- Flashlight or headlamp

Optional items

- Trekking poles - makes the descent easier on your joints
- Fun snacks and sweets - to entice kids up the trail
- Guidebook(s) to flora and fauna
- Camera