

Mount Defiance/Skylands Manor Loop from Shepherd Lake

Overview

This loop hike climbs to panoramic viewpoints on Mount Defiance and traverses the historic Skylands Manor area.

Details Time: 3 hours Difficulty: Moderate Length: 5 miles

Driving Directions

Take Skyline Drive to its northwestern terminus at Greenwood Lake Turnpike (County Route 511). Turn right, continue for 1.5 miles, and turn right onto Sloatsburg Road. Continue for 2.1 miles and turn right onto Morris Road. In 1.3 miles, just before the entrance to the Skylands section of Ringwood State Park, turn left onto Shepherd Lake Road and proceed for 0.8 mile to Shepherd Lake. Past the entrance booth, bear left and park in the designated parking area (a parking fee is charged from Memorial Day to Labor Day). NOTE: Shepherd Lake is a popular destination on summer weekends, and the parking area can fill up early in the day. (Note: Google map may show this as Sheppard Pond.)

Description

From the parking area, follow the paved path down to the beach on Shepherd Lake. Continue through the boat launch parking area and past the boat house, with the lake to your left. You will notice the red-on-white blazes of the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail, which you will follow for the first part of the hike.

After passing a kiosk, where an orange-blazed trail begins, continue on a gravel road along the lake, following both red-on-white and orange blazes. In about a third of a mile, both trails turn right, leaving the road. Continue to follow the blazed trails, which head uphill on a footpath. At an intersection with a woods road, the orange-blazed trail turns left, but you should continue ahead, now following only the red-and-white blazes of the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail.

The trail climbs to the top of a rise, then descends to cross a mountain bike trail. Continue ahead on the red-on-white-blazed trail, which passes an old stone foundation to the left. After crossing a gas pipeline, the trail begins to climb the northern shoulder of Mount Defiance, first gradually, then more steeply. Just below the 1,040-foot summit, there is a limited view to the west over Ringwood Manor and the Cupsaw Lake area.

After a short but steep descent, the trail follows the crest of the ridge, paralleling impressive cliffs on the right and passing an interesting split boulder. At the end of the cliffs, the green-and-white-blazed Halifax Trail comes in from the right and briefly joins the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail. You will soon head down the mountain on the Halifax Trail, but for now, continue ahead for another 350 feet along the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail until you see a large rock outcrop to the right of the trail.

Climb this outcrop, which is studded with cedar trees, to reach a panoramic view from the top. The New Jersey State Botanical Gardens at Skylands Manor may be seen in the foreground, with the Wyanokies in the distance. The Wanaque Reservoir is visible to the left. This is a good place to take a break.

When you're ready to continue, retrace your steps on the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail back to the junction with the Halifax Trail. Turn left (west), following the green-on-white blazes, which climb over a small rise and then level off. Just before the trail begins a steady descent, you'll reach a fork. The trail heads left here, but you may wish to follow an unmarked path to the right which leads up to a rock outcrop with a view over the gardens of Skylands Manor.

Continue down the mountain on the green-on-white-blazed trail, which follows a series of gradual switchbacks - the remnants of an old bridle path. At the base of the descent, where the green-on-white trail ends, turn right onto the white-blazed Crossover Trail, which follows a gravel road along the base of the mountain. When you reach a paved road, turn right and follow the road through the grounds of Skylands Manor, passing an English Tudor guest house with a sundial clock on its chimney to the right.

Just beyond a greenhouse, you'll reach a road junction at the entrance to Parking Area A. The double blaze seems to indicate a right turn into the parking area, but you should instead bear left and then immediately turn right and follow the park access road downhill, passing between two stone eagles that once adorned New York City's Pennsylvania Station. After crossing an intersecting road, follow the white blazes as the trail bears left, reenters the woods, and descends steadily, passing through some wet areas. At the base of the descent, the trail turns right and follows the route of a buried gas pipeline to paved Morris Road.

Turn left on the paved road, cross a stone-walled bridge over Cupsaw Brook, then follow the white blazes as they turn right and reenter the woods, passing to the right the stone foundation of an old mill. The white-blazed Crossover Trail climbs gradually to reach a T-intersection with a woods road - the route of the yellow-blazed Cooper Union Trail. Turn right onto the Cooper Union Trail, which soon reaches a junction with the blue-blazed Cupsaw Brook Trail (which begins here). Bear right and follow the blue-blazed trail, which begins a steady descent.

At the base of the descent, the red-on-white-blazed Ringwood-Ramapo Trail joins from the left. Follow the joint trails, which cross a stream on rocks, then turn left, leaving the woods road. (In this area, the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail is marked by both red-on-white blazes and brown wands with solid red blazes).

After traversing a wet area, the blue-blazed Cupsaw Brook Trail leaves to the left. Continue ahead on the Ringwood-Ramapo Trail, which turns right and crosses Cupsaw Brook on a wooden bridge. After passing a cascade to the left, the trail bears right, away from the brook, and begins a steady ascent. At the top of the climb, the trail turns left onto a woods road and soon reaches the traffic circle near Shepherd Lake. Turn left and head up to the parking area where the hike began.