

Butter Hill/Stillman/Bluebird Trail Loop from Route 9W

Overview

This loop climbs to the summits of Butter Hill and Storm King Mountain, with many spectacular viewpoints over the Hudson River and the Highlands.

Time: 3 hours Difficulty: Moderate to Strenuous Length: 3.5 miles

Driving Directions

Take the Palisades Interstate Parkway to its northern end at the Bear Mountain Circle. Continue north on U.S. Route 9W for 8.1 miles to a parking area on the right at a sharp bend in the road. (This is the second parking area along Route 9W in Storm King State Park; it has a yellow-on-blue historical marker entitled "Freedom Road" and an adjacent marker commemorating the completion of the Storm King By-Pass Highway.)

Description

From the parking area, walk north along the grassy shoulder of the road. Soon, you will see a triple-orange blaze, which marks the start of the Butter Hill Trail. Follow the orange blazes as they bear right, away from the road, and begin to ascend steeply. Soon, views over the Hudson River begin to appear to the right. The mountain across the river is Bull Hill (Mt. Taurus), and the point of land jutting into the river is Little Stony Point.

In 0.2 mile, you'll reach three stone pillars, with a stone foundation behind the pillars. These are the remains of Spy Rock House, the summer cottage of Dr. Edward L. Partridge, who served on the Palisades Interstate Park Commission from 1913 to 1930. The trail now descends slightly, then continues to climb Butter Hill, first gradually, then more steeply. At the top of the steep climb, you'll reach open rock ledges that afford a wide panorama to the east, south and west. Route 9W is visible straight ahead to the south, with the fire-scarred North Ridge of Crows Nest Mountain to its left. The Hudson River is to the east. You'll want to pause here for a little while to enjoy this expansive view, but the best is yet to come.

After a short level stretch, the Butter Hill Trail ends at a junction with the yellow-blazed Stillman Trail, also the route of the teal diamond-blazed Highlands Trail (some of the blazes at the junction are blue diamonds). Turn right and follow the Stillman Trail up to the summit of Butter Hill, where a rock outcrop just to the left of the trail provides a 360 degree view. The East Hudson Highlands are visible across the river, with towers marking the summits of Beacon Mountain to the north. Bull Hill is directly to the east. On the west side of the river, the North Ridge of Crows Nest Mountain is directly to the south, with Black Rock Forest visible to the southeast. Schunemunk Mountain may be seen to the west, with the Moodna Viaduct (on the Metro-North rail line to Port Jervis) towering over the valley just north of the mountain. In the distance to the northwest are the Shawangunks and, behind them, the Catskills. To the north, the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge spans the Hudson River.

After enjoying this spectacular view, continue ahead on the yellow-blazed Stillman Trail, which descends slightly. Soon, you'll reach a junction with the blue-and-red-blazed Bluebird Trail, marked by a large cairn. Turn right, uphill, and continue on the Stillman Trail. A short distance ahead, after passing through a burned-out area, you'll reach the northern end of the blue-blazed Howell Trail, which leaves to the right. Bear left here, continuing along the yellow-blazed trail, which follows a relatively level route for the next 0.7 mile. After a short, steep climb, you'll reach a limited view to the north. About five minutes ahead, though, you'll come to a much better viewpoint looking north over the Hudson River. Pollopel Island is directly below, with the ruins of Bannerman's Castle on its high point. The rail line running along the east shore of the Hudson is Metro-North's Hudson Line (also the route of Amtrak trains to Albany).

Continue ahead, past the summit of Storm King Mountain, with some more views from rock ledges to the left. After a short descent, you'll reach a panoramic north-facing viewpoint, with superb views. To the east, Breakneck Ridge (marked by the rail tunnel) is visible across the river. The stone building at the foot of Breakneck Ridge (partially obscured by the vegetation) caps a shaft of the Catskill Aqueduct, which tunnels over 1,100 feet below the river. North Beacon Mountain (with communications towers) and South Beacon Mountain (with a fire tower) are to the northeast. To the northwest, the village of Cornwall can be seen along the west bank of the river.

The Stillman Trail now descends and soon reaches a junction with the white-blazed By-Pass Trail. Continue along the yellow-blazed Stillman Trail, which turns sharply left, soon reaching another outstanding viewpoint from rock ledges to the right. This viewpoint faces south, with the village of Cold Spring visible across the river to the southeast, and Constitution Island jutting into the river just beyond.

The Stillman Trail again turns left and descends through a hemlock grove. It continues to descend for the next 0.7 mile on a beautiful stretch of sidehill trail, through hemlocks and laurel. After passing a viewpoint to the north, the trail makes a switchback turn, and it crosses an interesting wooden bridge over a ravine near a second switchback.

At a sharp bend in the Stillman Trail, you'll come to a junction with the blue-and-red-blazed Bluebird Trail. Turn left and follow the Bluebird Trail, which begins a steady ascent. After turning left on a woods road, the trail continues up the mountain on switchbacks. It passes a limited west-facing viewpoint and ends in 0.6 mile at the junction with the Stillman Trail marked by a cairn. Continue ahead on the yellow-blazed Stillman Trail, now retracing your steps for half a mile back to the parking area. The return trip crosses Butter Hill, giving you another opportunity to take in the magnificent 360-degree views from its summit.