

Happy healthy hiker help.

The more you hike the happier and healthier you are.

By: John Muir

John Muir was onto something when he said, “In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.” Hikers battle bug bites, blisters and bruises for the sake of overcoming a challenge and enjoying some quality time with nature. But along with the snow-capped mountain tops and ocean views come an abundance of mental and physical perks.





Hikers are creative.

Forget the caffeine. Those looking for a brainpower boost need not look further than the closest trail. Research shows that spending time outdoors increases attention spans and creative problem-solving skills by as much as 50 percent. The authors of the study also point out that the results may have as much to do with unplugging from technology as they do spending time outside. "This is a way of showing that interacting with nature has real, measurable benefits to creative problem-solving," David Strayer, co-author of the study, tells the Wilderness Society.

Plus, it's not only the lack of technology and surplus of trees, sunshine and fresh air that contribute to this creativity boost in trail blazers. Researchers from Stanford University's Graduate School of Education found that walking gets the creative juices flowing far more than sitting.

Hikers are seriously fit.

Hitting the trail works out your body as much as it does your brain.

Just one hour of trekking can burn well over 500 calories, depending on the level of incline and the weight of the pack you're carrying. Hiking is a great way to get a serious workout without putting too much pressure on your joints. "Trails are often softer on joints than asphalt or concrete," Caroline Stedman, a seasonal Park Ranger at northern Wisconsin's Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, tells The Huffington Post. "So I find myself feeling less stiff and creaky after a hike than a jog down a sidewalk."

If you head for the hills, weight loss results are even better.

Not only are you burning some serious calories, but altitude itself has also proven a weight loss ally.

Plus, tramping through the trails on a regular basis decreases blood pressure and cholesterol. Logging cardio in the form of hiking can lower blood pressure by four to 10 points, and reduce the danger of heart disease, diabetes and strokes for those at high-risk.

And don't lose heart if you're not out of breath on the way back. Both the ups and downs have benefits when it comes to lowering cholesterol, but hiking downhill is two times more effective at removing blood sugars and improving glucose tolerance.

Hiking heals.

Some research suggests that the physical benefits of hiking extend far beyond cardiovascular health, and may even go as far as to help cancer patients recover. In a study published in the International Journal of Sports Medicine researchers measured oxidative stress (thought to play a role in the onset, progression and recurrence of cancer) rates of women with breast cancer and men with prostate cancer before and after hiking. The study found that long distance hiking trips may improve the antioxidative capacity, which helps fight off disease, in the blood of oncological patients. Another study showed that breast cancer survivors who exercised regularly — many in the form of hiking — believed that physical activity complemented their recovery from cancer treatment.

Hikers are happier.

Research shows that using hiking as an additional therapy can help people with severe depression feel less hopeless, depressed and suicidal. It may even inspire those suffering from it to lead a more active lifestyle.

For those who don't suffer from depression, hiking still

offers mental benefits. "Being out in nature, away from the business of our daily lives and technology, can allow people to connect with themselves and nature in a way that brings about peace and a sense of well-being," Leigh Jackson-Magennis, REI Outdoor Programs and Outreach New England Market Manager, tells The Huffington Post. Interested in taking up the sport yourself? So you're ready to hear the crunch of leaves under your feet and see the world from above. Luckily, it's easier to start hiking than you may think. We talked to the experts to find the best tips for beginner hikers:

- Start small. Stepping over tree roots and maneuvering around rocks on a trail can be more tiring than you might imagine, says Stedman. Start out with a few miles at a time and gradually build up to longer treks. "It's also important to start practicing with a pack of some sort," she tells The Huffington Post. "People often underestimate how heavy a backpack might feel until they try hiking 10 miles or so with it."
- Prepare for the worst. Hopefully you won't need to use that first aid kit or emergency shelter, but it never hurts to be prepared. Stedman recommends carrying extra water, snacks, sunscreen, bug spray and at least a small first aid kit, even on shorter hikes.
- Overestimate your trail time. Hiking can be a slower process than newbies realize. That's why Jackson-Magennis suggests erring on the longer side when estimating how long it'll take to complete a trek. As a general rule of thumb — keeping in mind that time is based



off of physical fitness and elevation — you can expect to cover about two miles an hour. Then, add an additional hour of extra time for every 1,000 feet of elevation gain.

- Don't ignore your own backyard. You don't have to live in the mountains of Colorado to enjoy some quality trail time. Cities, counties and states all have parks or natural areas to get started hiking, says Stedman. Even very urban areas, like New York City or Washington D.C., have green spaces great for shorter hikes.

- Use the buddy system. Two brains are better than one, so partner up and hike with someone who knows the trail or the area well. "It's also important to tell someone where you are going and when you are expected home," Jackson-Magennis tells The Huffington Post.

If you aren't a hiker yourself, you may have questions about your friends who derive satisfaction from taking the longest possible route over a mountain. While it may not mitigate all of their strangeness, you can take comfort in the fact that your hiker friends have some very legitimate reasons to spend their weekends wandering through mountain passes and woods. Here's why.

Hiking is Healthy

For a long time, most people just assumed this was the case. We felt good while doing it, we stayed in shape in between, and we reveled in the sagely nods of people twice our age coming down the mountain. (I hope I'm still doing this at HIS age!) Until recently, however, very little research had been conducted on the matter. Fortunately, science affirms what most of us have suspected all along. Hiking is awesome for you!

A number of studies about walking and hiking suggest a direct correlation between hiking and a variety of health benefits. So far the list is impressive. Weight loss, prevention of heart disease, reduced hypertension (high blood pressure), improved mental health, and help preventing diabetes are just some of the benefits of regular walking and hiking.

Hiking is Affordable

Compared to taking up any other sports; hiking is about as easy on the wallet as can be. Having a good pair of trail shoes or hiking boots along with a small backpack are useful but not necessary for short beginner hikes. Of course you should always have a water bottle (Make it a reusable one in order to save money and the environment!) but that is hardly going to break the bank.

Hiking is a Life Habit

Hiking has no age limit. I recently ascended to the base camp of Mt. Everest and was blown away by the amount of gray hair steadily making its way up the side of the mighty mountain. Some of my fondest memories as a child were ones where three generations participated. Of course eventually we all slow down but that just lends credence to the old cliché; more time to stop and smell the roses.

If you're a little bit crazy and/or ambitious (like my parents)

you can also start little ones off early by popping them in a specially designed backpack. As they get old (and heavier) your kids can be eased onto the trail where they are walking parts and being carried by others. I am living testament that early exposure breeds a lifetime of habits.

Time for Thinking

A growing body of research also suggests that walking and hiking have mental benefits as well as physical ones. A series of studies focusing on people who struggle with depression showed that people who went hiking coped with their depression much better than people who just went walking in shopping malls.

Hiking and walking are also anecdotally famous for helping people ponder complex ideas and working through difficult problems. Some say it is subconsciously observing the complexity of nature, some that it lowers stress and allows you to think clearer, still others

suggest that hiking and thinking activate parts of your brain that aren't as active in a lab or work setting. Whatever the cause, the number of "AHHA!" moments that have floated into great minds while hiking is another great reason to get out and hike.

Still not convinced?

Despite all the obvious benefits, plenty of people still need just a bit more motivation to edge them off the couch and into their boots. Here are some fun ideas for those of us who need that extra nudge.

Geocaching

According to the Geocaching website, "Geocaching is a treasure hunting game where you use a GPS to hide and seek containers with other participants in the activity." Aided by increasingly accurate and affordable GPS units, geocaching has come a long way in the last 10 years. Where once you would wander in circles waiting for satellites

before maybe finding you treasure, you can now use the web to pick caches with different difficulties, track where other cache hunters have come from, and communicate with the geocaching community about the upkeep of treasure troves you have found. A fantastic way to get kids on the trail!

Bird Watching

For as long as people have been wandering the woods they have been fascinated by birds. Whether it be stunning colors, beautiful songs, or the magic of flight there is something about bird watching that keeps enthusiasts returning to the woods with their binoculars time and time again.

So the next time you find yourself trapped in the Sunday afternoon "What do YOU want to do?" vortex, take a hike and explore! It's affordable, rewarding, and healthy to boot!



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Without any snow, active Bostonians may be at a loss for winter activity ideas. Before the flakes fall—and let's face it, they're coming—you can stay fit and enjoy the outdoors with winter hiking. Whether you're an advanced adventurer or a once-in-a-while trekker, these destinations offer something for all levels. Bundle up in those winter hats and gloves, and hit these six winter hiking trails in Massachusetts.

Connors Farm, Smithfield

Terrain: Two to two and a half mile hike. Moderate with some areas of elevation.

Why go? "It's quiet. The entrance is actually in a residential neighborhood. It's not very well known, and the Smithfield Land Trust calls it one of the most scenic trails they offer. There are some overlooks and beautiful stone walls and I have been told there is a cranberry bog there, but haven't found it yet."

How to get there: Access the trail at small parking lot located between 20 and 24 Connors Farm Rd. For more information and a map, go here.

Ballard Park, Newport

Terrain: A little over a mile of trails. Easy hike.

Why go? "It's essentially a quarry and they have trails going around it." He recommends the overlooks, which include a thirty-foot cliff overlooking an open meadow. Trails are short, very kid-friendly hike. How to get there: Ballard Park is located at the intersection of Hazard and Wickham roads in Newport. Follow the entrance road to a sign with the trail map. For more information and a map, go here.

Westconnaug Meadows, Scituate.

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Why go? "Ironically enough, there are no meadows there. What's nice about it is if you're into trees, they have them all labeled with short descriptions." (They include red oaks, white pines and sassafras.) It's one of the most peaceful, serene trails Germani says he has been on. It's another good one for kids.

How to get there: The trailhead is by the parking area for a ballfield on George Washington Parkway in Scituate. For more information and a

map, go here.

Steere Hill Farm/Heritage Park, Gloucester

Terrain: More than five miles of trails. Moderate, with some elevation.

Why go? "There is a tremendously beautiful hill on the top of the main trail, with a bench underneath it. It opens up to a large field and it's a great view."

How to get there: It's off Putnam Pike in Gloucester. For more information and a map, go here.

Hidden Lake, Hopkinton

Terrain: "You have to do some scrambling up and down on rocks."

Lots of trails.

Why go? "Obviously, there's a lake there and it's not so hidden when you find it. It's a beautiful spot." Really nice when the leaves are turning.

How to get there: The trailhead is on Camp Yawgoog Road in Hopkinton. (It's Boy Scout property.) For more information and a map, go here.

Ben Utter Trail/Stepstone Falls

Terrain: There are some rocky spots, but the trail is about a mile and a half each way and fairly easy.

Why go? "It's very well-known, but it's without a doubt the most beautiful spot in Rhode Island."

How to get there: The hike is located in the Arcadia Wildlife Management Area on Plain Road in West Greenwich. For more information and a map, go here.

Coastal hike: Sachuest Point

You almost feel like you're walking on water at one point along the Ocean View Loop at Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown.

Great for beginning hikers, the refuge's two interconnected gravel trails — the 1.4-mile Flint Point and 1.5-mile Ocean View Loop — are relatively flat and easy to navigate.

Bird watchers will want to bring binoculars, as Sachuest Point is an important stopover and wintering area for migratory birds.



There is also a visitor's center with restrooms, educational displays and signs noting wildlife recently spotted in the area, which include the red-tailed hawk and Northern mockingbird.

If you want to extend your hiking adventure, nearby Norman Bird Sanctuary also offers several miles of trails.

769 Sachuset Point Rd., Middletown. fws.gov/refuge

Serene lake hike: Tillinghast Pond

It doesn't get much more idyllic than Tillinghast Pond Management Area in West Greenwich. Expertly maintained by the Nature Conservancy, the 2,000-acre site is home to four interconnected trails.

Start with the 2.3-mile Pond Loop. Blazed white, the mostly flat path is well cleared and offers excellent views of lily pad-filled Tillinghast Pond.

Along the trail, you'll find benches and observation areas, as well as signs describing plant specimens such as oak and witch hazel. There's also an eco-friendly restroom at the trailhead.

Plain Road, West Greenwich. Nature.org. Search: Tillinghast Pond

Historic hike: Wolf Hill Forest Preserve



The preserve, in Smithfield, has the unusual distinction of having a war memorial in the middle of one of its many trails.

Follow the World War II Memorial Trail for about 30 to 40 minutes and you'll come across the site of a 1943 Army Air Corps twin-engine aircraft crash. A flag-topped memorial honors the three servicemen who lost their lives in the accident.

On the way back, take a short detour to Mercer Lookout for a view of nearby hills and the Providence skyline.

Wolf Hill's trails are frequented by the Rhode Island Hiking Club, which often hosts fast-paced exercise hikes here. Paths are generally well marked, but not always clear. Hikers should watch out for rocks, sticks and roots.

Trailhead and parking area across from 94 Mountaindale Rd., Smithfield. on.fb.me/1Lu7Gn3

Adventure hike: Long and Ell ponds

Sturdy hiking boots are a must for navigating the steep and rocky deep woods trails around Long and Ell ponds in Hopkinton.

The 2.2-mile Long Pond Woods Trail is challenging, but well worth the effort. Natural rock formations create makeshift staircases up and

down the hemlock tree-surrounded path. At times, you'll need to use your hands to maintain balance while climbing.

Lookout points with views of Long Pond and surrounding rock outcrops offer places to stop and rest. The scenery may look familiar; it was a filming site for the 2012 movie "Moonrise Kingdom."

It's best to leave dogs and young children at home. You may hear gunfire from hunters in nearby Arcadia Management Area, and wild coyotes have been spotted in the area.

North Road, Hopkinton. asri.org/refuges/long-pond-woods.html

Urban hike: Neutaconkanut Hill

Dubbed the "last wild place in Providence" by the nonprofit group that maintains it, Neutaconkanut Hill is a natural oasis in the middle of the city.

At 88 acres, it's home to the highest point in Providence, several miles of hiking trails and wildlife including bluebirds and deer.

The area, around the Silver Lake/Olneyville section of Providence, is also rich in history. In Roger Williams' day, Neutaconkanut Hill served as the northwest boundary between Rhode Island and the Narragansett Tribe territory.

Many of the preserve's trails were originally completed by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. The 1.5-mile orange-blazed Pinnacle Trail is a good starting point for first-time visitors.

The Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy will offer a public guided hike Oct. 3 at 2 p.m.

675 Plainfield St., Providence. Nhill.org.

Brooks Woodland Preserve

Miles from Boston: 70

Run by the Trustees of Reservations, Brooks Woodland offers more than 13 miles of trails and roads on land set aside for conservation. Choose from one of the many trail options, or check out the Swift River or Roaring Brook, alongside wetlands.

Free. East Street, Petersham, 413-532-1631, thetrustees.org.

World's End

Miles from Boston: 20

With stunning views of the Boston skyline and charming carriage paths reminiscent of an older time, World's End is a great hiking destination to visit in any season. Walk along the 4.5 miles of footpaths and enjoy the coastal views on the 251-acre property, or bring a thermos of hot cocoa and a blanket for a picnic. When the snow does fall, this Trustees destination is optimal for snow-shoeing and cross country skiing.

Entry is \$6. Martin's Lane, Hingham, 781-740-7233, thetrustees.org.

Blue Hills Reservation

Miles from Boston: 16

Blue Hills is a good option for a quick getaway hike, located only minutes from the city. Try hiking here on a weekend afternoon and enjoy the varying terrain and 125 miles of trails. Stretching from Randolph to Milton, and Quincy to Dedham, Blues Hills Reservation comprises more than 7,000 acres. Bundle up in layers and climb to the top of Great Blue Hill this winter season.

Free. 695 Hillside Street, Milton, 617-698-1802, mass.gov.

Mohawk Trail State Forest

Miles from Boston: 116

Located in the northern Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, this state forest offers 6,000 acres to hike through, with large gorges and mountain ridges. Check out the ponds, open meadows, and streams as you trek along one of the many trails. Bonus: The trails are free from November through April.

Free from November-April. Cold River Road, Charlemont, 413-339-5504, mass.gov.

Wachusett Mountain State Reservation

Miles from Boston: 55

You may know Wachusett Mountain for skiing and snowboarding, but it also offers a number of year-round hiking trails. On clear days, hikers can see Mount Monadnock and the Boston skyline from the mountain's summit. Appreciate the views and the current lack of snow, and come back to hit the slopes later this season.

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Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary

Miles from Boston: 101

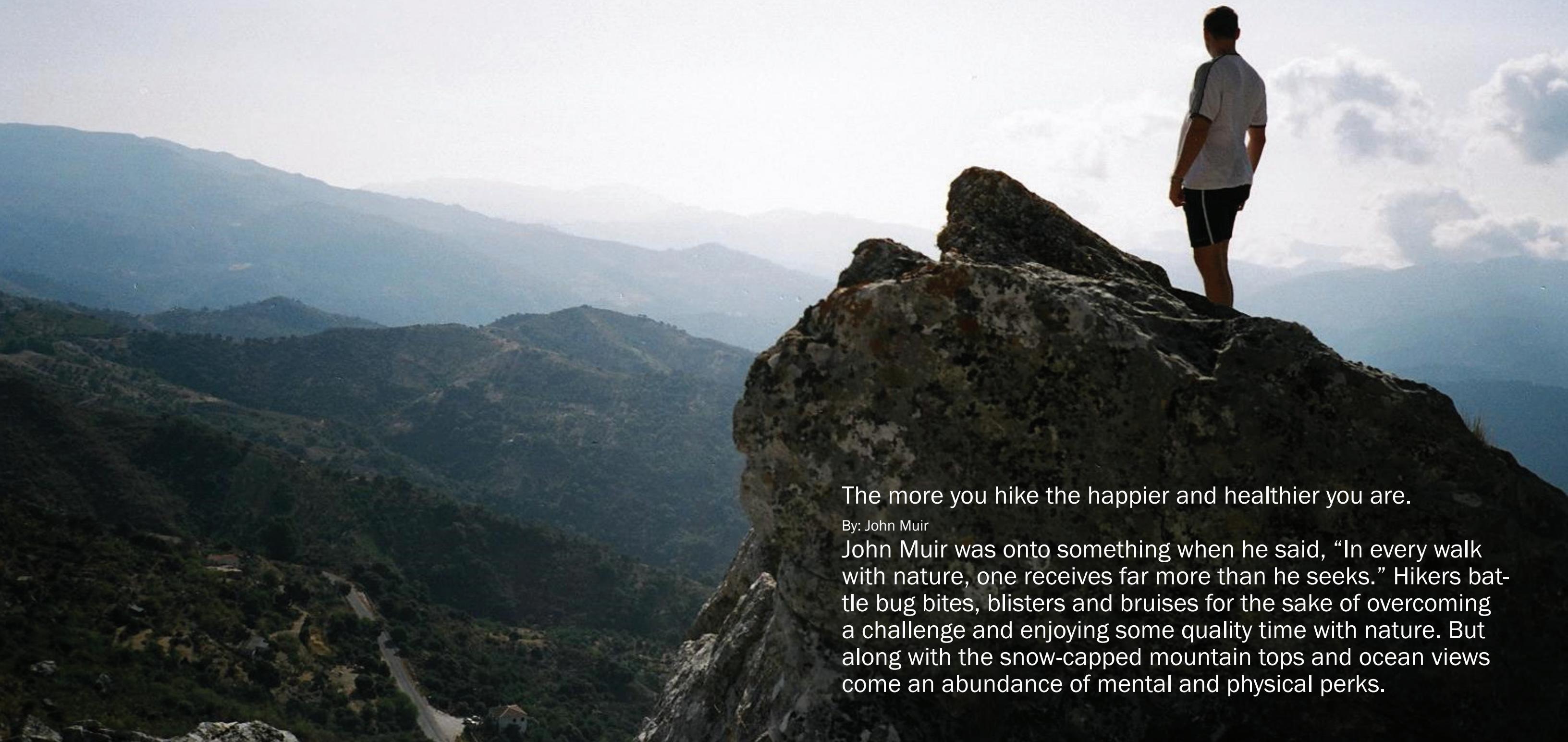
Arcadia's five miles of trails meander through forest, meadows, wetlands, grasslands, and marshes. The sanctuary is open all year round, and runs programming—like bear tracking and nature field trips—throughout the winter months.

\$4 admission. 127 Combs Road, Easthampton, 413-584-3009, massaudubon.org.

Mass Audubon's Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary

The Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield offers more than 12 miles of trails for your family to explore. One of Mass Audubon's largest sanctuaries, Ipswich River offers varying terrains, from forests and meadows to wetlands near the river. Not only does the sanctuary boast beautiful and manageable trails, but members can also rent canoes to paddle down stretches of the Ipswich River. The Observation Tower Trail contains climbable drumlins and eskers – geographical features carved by glaciers about 15,000 years ago. After hiking, stop in at the Nature Center, where your kids can view native birds in the sanctuary's bird habitat garden.

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87 Perkins Row, Topsfield; 978-887-9264; massaudubon.org; admission for adults is \$4; children ages 2-12 and seniors, \$3.

Purgatory Chasm State Reservation

Purgatory Chasm also has its origins in glaciers, with its formation