

Mount Washington, NH, 6,288 ft. –August 28, 2019, HP #22: Heavy Rain in the Forecast

Following a disappointing “complimentary” motel breakfast in Millinocket ME, I got on the road heading to New Hampshire’s Mount Washington 240 miles away. At Augusta ME I exited Interstate 95 heading west on rural Highway 219. The highway number changed several times as it twisted through the scenic countryside and passed through a handful of quaint towns. After 72 miles I passed through Gilead ME and three miles later I entered New Hampshire. Just ten miles into New Hampshire, at the town of Gorham, I turned south onto Highway 16 entering the White Mountain National Forest home to Mount Washington. As I made my way ten more miles to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, I passed the Mount Washington Auto Road as well as Wildcat Ski Resort.

The drive took four and a half hours, so I felt I needed to hurry if I hoped to climb Tuckerman Ravine and up to the summit of Mount Washington and then back down before nightfall. As quickly as I could get my boots on and my backpack ready, I found the trailhead sign for Tuckerman Ravine and started hiking - the time was 1:40 p.m. Except for a group of teenagers accompanied by chaperons I did not notice anyone else heading up this late in the day.

Mount Washington is one of the peaks in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The notorious peaks of the range are named after American Presidents. Mount Washington is the most topographically prominent mountain east of the Mississippi River, and one of the 48 New Hampshire mountains that top out over 4,000 feet above sea-level. Tuckerman Ravine resides on the east side of Mount Washington and to the south of the summit.



At 4.1 miles it is only two tenths of a mile shorter to hike to the top of Mount Washington in comparison to the hike to Katahdin’s Baxter Peak I had done the day before. However, climbing Mount Washington involves more vertical gain.

With a late start time, and heavy rain in the forecast, I was hiking quickly, almost running, and I covered the nearly two and a half miles to the Tuckerman Ravine Shelter near Hermit Lake in one hour. At this point the old road, turned hiking trail, ends and the trail becomes a single track. From Hermit Lake to the summit is over 2,400 feet of vertical gain in just over one and a half miles; 1,400 feet of vertical gain per mile is steep. Keeping with my quick pace, I covered it in one and a half hours including a fifteen-minute break at the top of the ravine where the trail turns north to reach the summit.

A stone’s throw below the summit are two large car parking lots. The Tuckerman Ravine trail dropped me off at the lower of the two, from which point I walked up the paved road a few yards to a staircase leading to the summit. All said and done, scaling the 4,250 vertical feet from car to summit, required two and a half hours - an hour shorter than I had heard the one-way hike needed.

On the summit is the modern Sherman Adams Visitor Center, along with two historic buildings. The stairs ended at one of the historic buildings where I noticed a couple of white vans parked. Before entering any of the buildings I first found the wooden summit marker labeled with “Mount Washington

6,288 ft.” and posed for a couple of photos next to it. Wandering around the summit I discovered the Appalachian Trail crosses it, and a sign noted Katahdin was 332.4 miles away. I also watched a Cog Railway train ascend the western slope of the mountain. Luckily, the summit was wind-free despite being notorious for its extreme gusts holding various records for the highest wind speeds ever recorded.

Back at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center parking lot, as I was preparing for the hike, the fellow parked next to me mentioned he had just come back from hiking to the summit of Mount Washington, and also that he had used an Auto Road shuttle for the return. I had planned to hike both up and down but with rain now looking imminent, I decided to enquire if a shuttle was even possible on short notice and this late in the day. I also felt it would be nice to check out the Auto Road which has a long history.



Inside the historic wooden shingle clad building next to the vans, I was informed that a 5:00 p.m. shuttle, the last of day, was available but at a premium price. When I mentioned the lower price my neighbor from the parking lot had been charged, the driver said he would cut me that deal provided I tipped him. The building was originally the old stage office, but now seemed to be a gift shop. It was interesting to notice that it is anchored to the ground by three large chains slung over its roof – an indication of the extreme weather the mountain is known for.

With the shuttle arranged and some time to spare I wandered over to the Tip-Top house, as the other historic building is named. Constructed from native stone the Tip-Top house was originally built as an inn. Nowadays it is a museum containing artifacts from the mountain's history. Apparently, the structure is the oldest existing, albeit former, mountaintop inn the world over. Inside the Visitors Center I noticed the Extreme Mount Washington museum sponsored by the mountains weather observatory, but I did not have time to visit it.

Following my visit to Mount Washington, I learned the weather observatory housed inside the visitor center was well-known for its mascot, a black cat named Marty who roamed the mountain top. During my visit I did not see Marty. Since then, I have heard he passed away in November 2020 having lived 12 years on the rooftop of New Hampshire.

The shuttle left the summit on schedule zigzagging its way down the east side of the mountain. I road shotgun, and two older gentlemen were the only other passengers. The driver used the low gear which prompted me to ask him if the frequent trips up and down the steep road wore out the transmissions of the vans prematurely. The shuttle returned the three of us to the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center before 6:00 p.m. just as the rain started. As agreed, I handed the drive a tip.

As I drove out of the parking lot, headed to Stowe VT, heavy rain began to fall.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/xUR3Z85UhtwVaXHD6>