

My Journey to the Highest Point in Each of the US States

“Taking It To The Top”

“It’s a highpointing journey”

What is highpointing?

Highpointing is the pursuit of reaching the tallest point within a specified area. In practice it is many things – its traveling, exploring, mountain climbing, hiking, fulfillment, planning, exercise, sightseeing, self-discover, and much more.

My pursuit of visiting the highest point in each of the fifty US States is just one example of highpointing. Another example is reaching the top of the tallest mountain on each continent, dubbed the Seven Summits. Comparably, one might choose to reach the highest point of each county in his home state, or whatever region and subdivision is of interest.

As far back as 1909 National Geographic did an article entitled "The Highest Point in Each State" relating to US State highpoint, and according to Wikipedia, “The first person to successfully climb each US State highpoint was A.H. Marshall, who completed the task in July 1936, when there were only 48 states.”

In the late 1980’s the “Highpointers Club” was formed. This club consists of people with the common interest of attaining the highpoint of each of the fifty US States. By the turn of the century membership of the Highpointers Club had grown to over 2000 members. The founder of the Highpointers Club became the seventh person to achieve standing on the summits of all fifty states.

The continental United States is 2,800 miles wide (from west to east) and 1,582 miles tall (from south to north). From my home in Utah, it is close to 2,100 miles to Alaska, and around 2,800 miles to Hawaii. Clearly, a lot of miles must be covered in pursuit of reaching the highest point in each of the states, and typically it takes many years to cover all these miles, along with a good amount of money. As such a relatively few number of people have achieved this feat. From information on the Highpointers club’s website, I estimate as of December 2020 likely less than 400 people have done so. The number I found on the Highpointers website is 305 as of July 2018. Also, it seems annually less than twenty-five people reach their state highpoint.

About the US State Highpoints

The US State highpoints range from landmarks as low as 345 feet to mountains as tall as 20,320 feet. I classify thirty-four of the fifty as mountains, another ten as hills, and the remaining six as landmarks. Some highpoints can be driven to, requiring little or no walking effort, whereas others take skilled mountain climbers' days or even weeks to scale on foot. As such, this endeavor offers a range of challenges, and a variety of experiences.

Too often people incorrectly equate the effort of reaching one state highpoint to that of reaching another; unconsciously assuming that since all are highpoints all amount to equal effort. However, with the highpoints having such a wide range of geographical makeup there are many factors which influence their individual difficulty.

Traits such as prominence, isolation, type of terrain, vertical gain, weather, distance from a road, and natural dangers all influence the struggle of reaching a highpoint. Likewise factors such as personal fitness, experience level, sensitivity to altitude, preparation, risk tolerance, time available, gear required, team size/dynamics, and mental clarity, just to name a few, also influence perceived difficulty.

One Highpointer might avoid walking when a driving option is available, use guides to lead him up the most challenging summits, and/or only venture out in fair weather. Whereas another might tackle highpoints solo or only during winter months and avoid driving in favor of hiking.

Adding to the confusion, the Highpointers Club offers no hard and fast rules for obtaining a highpoint endorsing "any route to the top" be it by horse, automobile, foot, helicopter, or what have you – leaving the means of ascent to personal choice.

Furthermore, one might also incorrectly assume that a list of the fifty US State highpoints ordered by elevation would suffice as a list of difficulty. Unfortunately, that too falls short. For example, Mt Marcy of New York stands shorter than Nebraska's Panorama Point with the latter being nothing more than a spot on a prairie requiring no uphill walking and the former being a mountain rising over 3,000 feet from the trailhead.