**Definition and Brief History of Highpointing**

Highpointing is the pursuit of reaching the highest elevation within a specified area. The formalization of highpointing each of the 50 U.S States is credited to the late Jack Longacre when back in 1986 he took notice of people mentioning their highpoint achievement in log books at the top of various summits, and as a result he went on to form the High Pointers Club. Jack became the seventh person to achieve standing on the summits of all 50 states, and as of year-end 2018 only about 300 more people have followed suit.

The US State highpoints range from landmarks as low as 345 feet to mountains as tall as 20,320 feet. 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.

**Not a One to One Comparison**

Too often people incorrectly equate the effort of reaching one 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 difficulty. Traits such as prominence, isolation, type of terrain, vertical gain required, weather, distance from a road, time required, gear required, natural dangers, and team size/dynamics all influence the struggle (or lack of struggle). As such difficulty/effort rankings tend to be (and rightly so) mostly a matter of opinion, and personal experience. 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 High Pointers Club offers no hard and fast rules for obtaining a highpoint indorsing “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 50 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 the prairie requiring no uphill walking and the former being a mountain rising over 3000 feet from the trailhead.

**What is Difficulty?**

The dictionary defines *difficulty* as a thing that is hard to accomplish, and *effort* as strenuous physical exertion. For purposes of this article, and the Walter Scale, difficulty and effort should be considered alternative words.

For some the difficulty of highpointing might be finding the time to pursue the undertaking, or coming up with the money needed. For others it might be very challenging to plan the logistics of highpointing trips. Others might have no interest in visiting landmarks, and their challenge is to find the motivation to do so.

It is impossible to know and to measure all the factors that make a challenge difficult, and so for the 50 US State highpoint challenge the Walter Scale considers only measurable and predictable variables which when combined result in level of effort.

**Walter Scale Explained**

The goal of the Walter Scale is to explain how much human-only effort, on a scale from 0 to 1000, is necessary to reach a highpoint under one’s own foot-power. In other words, it is a measure of the walking, hiking, and/or climbing effort from the point where one steps out of the automobile, or plane, and makes his way, under only his own power, to the high point. The scale does not try to account for all the various routes or means that lead to a high point; nor all the things that might happen en route, rather it derives its measurements based on the least technical standard route, completed within a typical timeframe, under predictable average weather.

The Walter Scale assigns effort points to each highpoint, with these points being a combination of total hiking mileage, vertical gain, terrain difficulty, nights required, and expected (predictable) cold weather days; all other factor are exogenous to its model, and for the sake of simplicity must be ignored.

**Walter Scale Methodology**

As the baseline, the Walter Scale assigns one point to each round-trip hiking mile. In the case of Denali, the ascent distance doesn’t equal the descent distance because climbers typically repeat sections of the climb for acclimation purposes and in the process of moving up supplies. The West Buttress route from base camp to the summit of Denali is 16.75 miles, but with repeated sections it becomes closer to 22.25 miles on the ascent resulting in a round-trip distance of 39 miles.

The Walter Scale equates vertical gain to round-trip distance by multiplying vertical gain, in miles, by a difficulty factor and adding that to the baseline. The vertical gain used is an estimate of all elevation gain, including gain related to rising and falling terrain.  For example, the elevation difference between Denali’s base camp (of the West Buttress Route) and the summit is 13,120 feet. However, with sections being repeated, as explained previously, the elevation gain of Denali is listed as 19,000 ft.

The scale considers it to be 15 times more difficult to climb 1 mile then to walk 1 mile, and arrives at this number by comparing the distance a reasonably fit person can walk in an hour to the distance the same person can climb in an hour. It is estimated that 3 miles can be walked in 1 hour, and likewise 1000 vertical feet (0.189394 miles) can be climbed in one hour. Truncating the ratio of 3/0.189394, the Walter Scale arrives at the multiplier of 15. As such the Walter Scale awards 1 point for each 352 feet of gain. Decimal places are carried through to the one and only final rounding.

To the round-trip distance and vertical gain points the scale next accounts for terrain difficulty by adding 6 points if a highpoint involves climbing with the use of both hands and feet, but not the protection of a rope, and 12 points if a highpoint involves roped rock climbing or roped glacier travel. Denali, Gannett Peak, Mount Hood, and Mount Rainier each earn 12 terrain points as they impose roped glacier travel. Likewise, Granite Peak also earns 12 terrain points as it necessitates roped rock climbing. While Borah Peak earns 6 terrain points as it involves unroped scrambling using both hands and feet.

Next 1 point for each night required is added in. Mount Rainier, Granite Peak, and Kings Peak each earn 2-night points as a typical trip to their respective summits involve staying over for two nights. Mount Whitney earns 1-night point, Gannett Peak 3, and Denali 17.

As a means of accounting for weather, double points are awarded for each day where afternoon temperature can be expected to remain near or below the freezing point. For example, the average summer month temperature on the summit of Rainier is close to 32 F freezing point. As such a 3-day trip up Rainier earns 2 weather points for the summit day when the temperature likely will be at or below freezing. On Denali, everyday can remain below freezing so an 18-day trip earns 36 weather points. None of the other highpoints qualify for weather points.

Once the points, and any fractions thereof, are summed the results are rounded and then normalized to a 1 - 1000 scale, to allow easy comparisons.

The equation is as follows: Points = 1000 \* [mileage + 15\*(vertical distance in miles) + difficulty + nights + 2\*temperature] / (Largest of The High Point Scores)

**Table 1: The Walter Scale of US State Highpoint Difficulty**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Walter Scale** | **High Point** | **Vertical Gain (ft)** | **Round-Trip (miles)** |
| 1000 | Alaska - Denali (M) | 19000 | 39 |
| 506 | Wyoming - Gannett Peak (M) | 8650 | 40.4 |
| 368 | Montana - Granite Peak (M) | 7700 | 22.2 |
| 366 | Washington - Mount Rainier (M) | 9100 | 16 |
| 291 | Utah - Kings Peak (M) | 5350 | 28.8 |
| 263 | California - Mount Whitney (M) | 6750 | 21.4 |
| 222 | Oregon - Mount Hood (M) | 5300 | 8 |
| 181 | Idaho - Borah Peak (M) | 5550 | 6.8 |
| 151 | New York - Mount Marcy (M) | 3200 | 14.8 |
| 147 | Colorado - Mount Elbert (M) | 5000 | 9 |
| 141 | Maine - Katahdin (M) | 4200 | 10.4 |
| 126 | Nevada - Boundary Peak (M) | 4400 | 7.4 |
| 120 | Arizona - Humphreys Peak (M) | 3500 | 9 |
| 106 | Texas - Guadalupe Peak (M) | 2950 | 8.4 |
| 98 | New Mexico - Wheeler Peak (M) | 3250 | 6.2 |
| 81 | Virginia - Mount Rogers (M) | 1500 | 8.6 |
| 68 | Oklahoma - Black Mesa (H) | 775 | 8.6 |
| 64 | South Dakota - Black Elk Peak (M) | 1500 | 5.8 |
| 55 | Minnesota - Eagle Mountain (M) | 600 | 7 |
| 31 | Connecticut - Mount Frissell-South Slope (M) | 450 | 3.6 |
| 28 | Vermont - Mount Mansfield (M) | 550 | 2.8 |
| 27 | Maryland - Backbone Mountain (M) | 750 | 2.2 |
| 21 | Illinois - Charles Mound (H) | 275 | 2.5 |
| 20 | North Dakota - White Butte (H) | 400 | 2 |
| 14 | Louisiana - Driskill Mountain (H) | 150 | 1.8 |
| 12 | Tennessee - Clingmans Dome (M) | 330 | 1 |
| 10 | Arkansas - Magazine Mountain (M) | 225 | 1 |
| 7 | Hawaii - Mauna Kea (M) | 230 | 0.4 |
| 5 | Wisconsin - Timms Hill (H) | 120 | 0.4 |
| 3 | Missouri - Taum Sauk Mountain (M) | 30 | 0.4 |
| 3 | North Carolina - Mount Mitchell (M) | 100 | 0.2 |
| 2 | New Jersey - High Point (H) | 40 | 0.2 |
| 2 | West Virginia - Spruce Knob (M) | 20 | 0.3 |
| 1 | Kentucky - Black Mountain (M) | 0 | 0.1 |
| 1 | Massachusetts - Mount Greylock (M) | 20 | 0.1 |
| 1 | Rhode Island - Jerimoth Hill (L) | 0 | 0.2 |
| 1 | South Carolina - Sassafras Mountain (M) | 0 | 0.1 |
| 0 | Alabama - Cheaha Mountain (M) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Delaware - Ebright Azimuth (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Florida - Britton Hill (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Georgia - Brasstown Bald (M) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Indiana - Hoosier Hill (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Iowa - Hawkeye Point (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Kansas - Mount Sunflower (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Michigan - Mount Arvon (H) | 10 | 0 |
| 0 | Mississippi - Woodall Mountain (H) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Nebraska - Panorama Point (L) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | New Hampshire - Mount Washington (M) | 20 | 0 |
| 0 | Ohio - Campbell Hill (H) | 0 | 0 |
| 0 | Pennsylvania - Mount Davis (H) | 0 | 0 |

M = Mountain, H = Hill, L = Landmark

**Conclusions**

The Walter Scale reflects the Pareto Principle which states that for most tasks roughly 80% of the results come from 20% of the effort. According to the Walter Scale reaching 39 of the 50 highpoints (aka 78%) requires only 19.96% of the effort. The remaining 11 highpoints (aka remaining 22%) requires 80.04% of the effort.

Denali has a score basically twice as big as any of the other mountains. In fact, it requires the next two highest ranking mountains plus one other to come close to its score, and the seven highest single day highpoints combined only barely exceed its score. The average score is less than 91, whereas the highest 10 average 350 points (or 251 without Denali). Remove Denali and the average score drops to 72.

The Walter Scale classifies highpoints as mountains, hills, and landmarks. The Walter Scale considers 33 of the 50 to be mountains and they require 97.12% of the effort. Another 10 are deemed hills requiring 2.86% of the effort. The remaining 7 are labeled as landmarks requiring only 0.02% of the physical effort.

**About the Author**

The author’s highpointing calling reaches back to May 2001 when he and two friends, having never heard of highpointing, drove to the top North Carolina’s Mount Mitchell. By the fall of that same year he tagged a second highpoint without yet having a goal to reach all fifty. Over the next eight years he completed another 6, followed by another 7 between 2010 and his 2014 climb of Denali. Following Denali he tagged another 4, and then went into highpointing hibernation for over four years. August 2019 his highpoint desire returned and over the next couple of months he increased his highpoint count to 29. Realizing the remaining 21 seem less physically severe, the author began to wonder what percent of the physical effort remained, as such he developed the Walter Scale. Although his remaining highpoints only account for 3.72% of the overall physical effort he knows they will come with their own type of difficulty related to planning, travel distances and costs. He is not holding himself to it, but he hopes to complete all 50 within a 20 year timeframe.