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 from that he went on to from 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 accomplished this task.

The US State highpoints range from landmarks as low as 345 feet to mountains as tall as 20,320 feet. Many have roads to the highpoint thus requiring little or no human-only effort, whereas others take days or even weeks to scale and should only be attempted by experienced mountaineers.

Too often people incorrectly equate reaching one highpoint to that of reaching another; unconsciously assuming that since all are highpoints all count equally in the effort of reaching them all. 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 all influence the struggle (or lack of struggle). As such difficulty rankings tend to be (and rightly so) mostly a matter opinion, and personal experience. One highpointer might use guides to reach the most challenging summits, drive roads to the highpoints when possible, and/or only venture out in fair weather. Yet another might attempt the highpoints solo, or in the winter, and deem it unsporting to not hike at least some of the way to the top. Adding to the confusion the High Pointers Club offers no hard and fast rules for obtaining a highpoint and promotes “any route to the top” be it by horse, car, foot, helicopter, etc. - “the means of ascent is a personal choice”.

Also one might also incorrectly assume that a list of the 50 US State high points 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 but the latter is a prairie requiring no uphill walking and the former is a mountain rising over 3000 feet from the trailhead.

Then again what exactly is difficulty? For some the difficulty might be finding the time to pursue this effort, or coming up with the money needed. For others it might be very challenging to plan the logistics of a of highpointing trip. Others might have no interest in visiting landmarks, and their challenge is to find the motivation to do so.

The goal of the Walter Scale is to explain the amount of foot-power (aka walking, hiking, climbing effort) required to obtain a US State highpoint by way of the least technical standard route under fair weather. The Walter Scale assigns effort points to each highpoint, with effort points being a combination of total hiking mileage, vertical gain, terrain difficulty, nights required, and expected cold weather days. The elevation gain used is an estimate of all vertical gain, including gain related to rising and falling terrain. Mileage used is the round-trip distance.

As the baseline, the Walter Scale assigns one point to each round-trip mile. To figure in vertical gain, the Walter Scale equates vertical feet to horizontal miles by multiplying vertical gain in miles by a difficulty factor and adding that to the baseline. 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 persons 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 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, or 12 points if a highpoint involves roped rock climbing or roped glacier travel. Next 1 point for each night required is added in. For example, if the foot-power required in reaching a high point necessitates two days of travel, one point is added in for the over-night stay. As a means of accounting for weather, double points are awarded for each day where afternoon temperature can be expected to be around or below freezing. For example the average summer month temperature on the summit of Rainier is close to or below the 32 F freezing point. As such a 3 day trip up Rainier earns 2 weather points for the summit day when temperature likely will be at or below freezing. On Denali, everyday can remain below freezing so an 18 day trip would earn 36 weather points.

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

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