

Mt. Lafayette, elev 5242
Mt. Lincoln, elev 5089
Little Haystack, elev 4760

Time: 7 hours

Distance: 8.5 mile loop

Vertical rise: 3,850

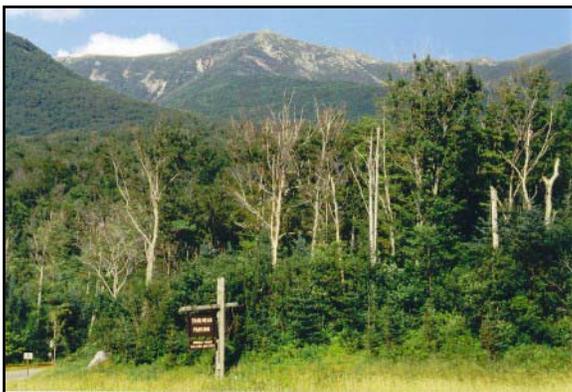
Rating: Strenuous, not for beginners

Location: Franconia Notch State Park



Mt. Lafayette and Franconia Ridge from Lonesome Lake

Summary: *A long climb to an exciting, alpine-style ridge across 3 mountain peaks.*

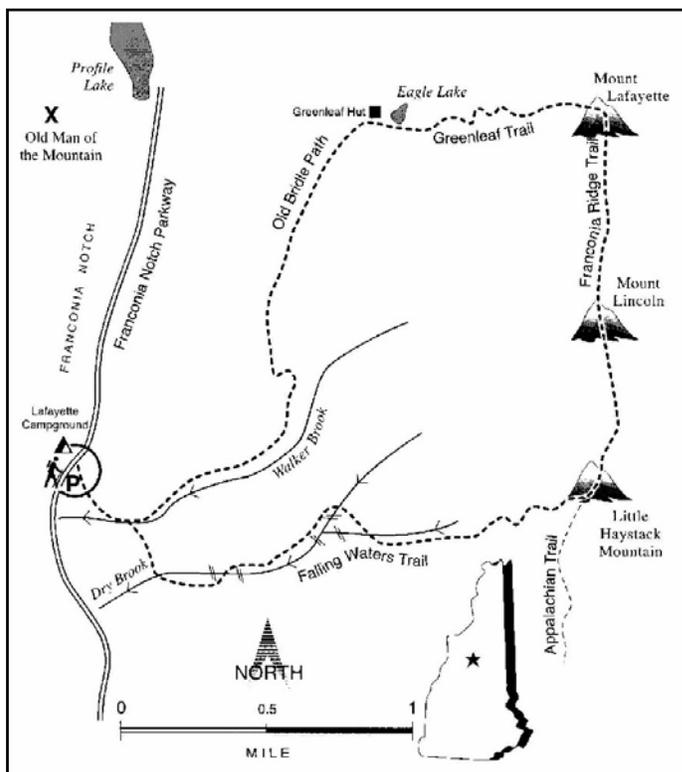


This may be it, the best hike in the East!

While never difficult in a technical sense, this route has you on steep slopes the entire time, climbing, traversing, and descending. Mt. Lafayette looms large over the entrance to the Lafayette campground, which is right besides I-93, the Franconia Notch Parkway. During the ascent, you will see spectacular waterfalls, a unique slanting cliff, alpine-arctic environment above treeline, and wide, wide views, especially overlooking the Pemigewasset wilderness clear away to Crawford Notch and Mount Washington. To get to the trailhead, park your car at Lafayette Place midway of the State Park. Here the Franconia Notch

Parkway divides for a short distance into northbound and southbound lanes. Parking for either lane is connected

to the other by a pedestrian underpass. The trail starts at the east or northbound parking. The campground, picnic area, information and ranger cabin are near the west or southbound parking. Your trails for this hike leave the east parking to the left of the AMC information booth. The Old Bridle Path and the Falling Waters Trail coincide for 1/4 mile. At the bridge over Walker Brook they separate. Turn right across the brook onto the Falling Waters Trail. You leave this stream, which flows from a ravine of the same name on Mount Lafayette. The Old Bridle Path keeps straight for a short distance before bearing left to join the former route before construction of the Parkway. The Old Bridle Path will be your descent trail. Along the Falling Waters Trail you ascend gradually, swinging through woods of maple, beech, and yellow birch for another 1/2 mile to Dry Brook. Contrary to its name, the brook is a crystal torrent early summer. You cross Dry Brook to the south bank and begin a steeper climb. You pass cascades on the left and approach ledges high up in the trees. The trail appears to end at a pool in a narrow ravine. Swiftwater Falls gushes into the pool from a ledge sixty Feet high. You see the trail to the left of the falls. You cross to the opposite bank over rocks at the foot of the pool.



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The climb begins here in earnest, although the trail is graded, and sections of it follow old logging roads. You were impressed by Swiftwater Falls, now Cloudland Falls, twenty feet higher, descends toward you in a white, shifting curtain sliding into the gorge. Above Cloudland Falls, from the steep and slippery ledge, you first look out across the valley. Keep to the north bank. The trail continues up rough and steep as the brook branches into the upper growth of spruce and fir. The trail takes you up a series of traverses between steeper pitches to a left turn at a junction. Here a sign indicates the spur trail 100 yards to the right, which leads down to the base of Shining Rock Cliff. This massive expanse of smooth granite angles up at a rounded forty-five degrees for 200 feet to your left. It gleams in the sun when wet from the drainage off its brow of evergreens. Don't try to climb it. From your parked car at Lafayette Place in late afternoon you can see it really shining. Back at the junction with the main trail you may wonder how much farther it is to the alpine-arctic environment I promised you. In the next 1/2 mile the trail clears the scrub of treeline in a steep ascent into the open rockery of Little Haystack, a minor peak on the Franconia Ridge Trail. If the wind blows rain, and clouds are settling into a blinding fog, this is a good place to turn back. Wait for a better day. The exciting panorama from the ridge demands a clear view. There's no value in a memory of the ridge as gray rocks packed in cotton batting. Besides, the ridge is dangerous in stormy weather. Lightning strikes frequently. Winds can be icy even in summer. You will be almost a mile up in the sky. The col between Little Haystack and Mount Lincoln is exposed, narrow, and in places almost sheer on each side. You are entirely out in the open except for some shrubby growth south of Lafayette's summit.



The next 1.7-mile stretch is the best part of the circuit. Head north (left) along the mostly open ridge on the white-blazed Appalachian Trail, reaching the top of Mount Lincoln (5,089') at 3.9 miles from the highway. The ridge is high and narrow (but not precariously so) with long, very steep slopes on either side, especially to the west. The views down into Franconia Notch on your left and into the Pemigewasset Basin on your right are stunning. From the summit of Mt. Lincoln, you might be able to look down and see your car in the parking lot. Leaving the summit, and continuing north on the Appalachian trail, the trail drops down about a hundred feet, traverses easy terrain, and after passing through a brief pocket of spruce, completes the final 400'-climb to the bare summit of Mount Lafayette.



Once on top of Lafayette (at 5 miles), rocks and an old stone foundation provide good places to sit and relax, as well as protection from the breeze, if needed. The view below is looking down into Franconia Notch, The Cannon Mountain Ski Slopes, and Echo Lake. Multiplicities of mountains rise in all directions, and on the east the rocks fall away to green forests along Lincoln Brook and Franconia Branch, which flow around 4,023-foot Owl's Head anchored like a humped barge in the green sea of trees. After resting and taking in the view, descend on the Greenleaf Trail, and proceed 1 mile down to the AMC Greenleaf Hut. The Hut provides shelter, pit toilets, and refreshments. From there, take the Old Bridle Path for the descent along a ridge where, in June, the rhodora blossoms are showy pink above Walker Ravine. The views from the top sections of the Old Bridle Path are unparalleled. After 2.9 miles, the Old Bridle Path takes you to the junction with the Falling Waters Trail at the bridge over Walker Brook, and thence back to the east parking lot where you started.

