

RIDGE LINES

www.naturecompass.org/gmcburlington

Fall 2007

BE SAFE WHEN YOU'RE HIKING IN THE AUTUMN

September and October are glorious months for hiking. Even November sometimes treats hikers to clear, crisp, beautiful days. It's important to remember, however, that hiking in the fall requires extra attention to safety. Here are some tips.

Hunting

All the land crossed by the Long Trail is open to hunting. Many other Vermont trails also cross prime hunting land, so there might be hunters in the woods for much of the fall and winter. The exact dates of hunting seasons change each year. You can get a copy of the current *Vermont Digest of Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Laws* from game wardens, places that sell outdoor equipment, and many country stores. Veterinarians and pet food stores often offer bright-colored cards with hunting season dates.

Hikers should take special safety precautions during late fall. ***Always wear blaze (fluorescent) orange.*** You can get blaze orange vests and jackets at outdoor supply stores. *Never* go out into the woods dressed all in brown, tan, or black. Don't wear clothing with patches of white that might be mistaken for the white tail of a deer. Any pets that hike with you should also wear blaze orange, in the form of good-sized harnesses or "saddle blankets".

Weather

It changes! In the fall, you can start out hiking on a beautiful, warm, sunny day and end up slogging back to your car through heavy rain, fog, and even sleet or snow. Always carry the 3 W's: Wick, Warm and Wind. Wear or carry a layer that wicks moisture away from you (*not* cotton), a layer that's warm (fleece), and a layer that protects you against wind and rain. It's also a good idea to pack a hat and gloves.

Darkness comes surprisingly early in the fall. Bring a headlamp or flashlight in case you have to come down the trail after sunset.

At any time of the year, hikers should think ahead to the possibility of an unexpected overnight. Preparation is even more important when the nights start getting cold. Along with warm clothes, carry enough water and high-energy snacks. You might also want to pack a space blanket. They take up no room, weigh nothing and could save your life.

Animals

Most hikers never see a moose or bear, but it's wise to be prepared. Male and female moose can be dangerous during rutting (mating) season, which lasts from late August till October. Be smart. Keep your distance and don't antagonize an adult moose. If you see a bear, stand still and make some noise. *Don't* turn and run.

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Inside: Two features about hiking with small children, with suggestions for family-friendly hikes near Burlington ... More tips about safety in the fall ... Activities for June through September

Hiking with Babies and Small Children

Successful hikes with little children require planning and preparation. Here are some suggestions from local parents and from several helpful web sites. (There's a lot of excellent advice on the web, including information about videos and other resources. Just search "hiking with children".)

Babies

Most experts say you shouldn't hike with babies younger than one month. If you're carrying an older infant in a front carrier, plan for only 20 or 30 minutes at first. You might be able to hike for an hour or more with an older baby in a good back carrier. The distance will depend on weather, conditions along the trail, your fitness, and whether you and your baby start out well rested.

Babies can't let you know that they're starting to get sunburned or windburned. Make sure your baby has a hat. Use sunscreen recommended by your pediatrician. Check your baby's skin often.

It's easy to provide for breastfed infants. For other babies, keep milk or formula in an insulated bag.

Even for a short hike, bring an extra diaper or two. Remember, you **MUST** take used diapers home with you. **Never bury or burn diapers.** (You might want to dig a "cat hole" and scrape poop into it before wrapping the diaper in a plastic bag for carrying home. You can also put used diapers on a rock in the sun while you're taking a snack break. They'll weigh less and be less smelly.)

Toddlers

You'll be able to hike for longer distances with a year-old baby on your back than with a toddler who wants to do some of his own walking. Plan on **slow** hikes with lots of time for poking in puddles, staring at bugs and picking up rocks. Many two- to four-year olds can complete hikes of a mile or two, especially when the day is warm but not humid. You still might have to do some carrying, especially toward the end of the hike. There are good back carriers available that will hold up to 60 pounds.

A toddler's first hiking experiences should be *short* and *successful*. Carry lots of fluids and snacks. Plan for some specific activities or adventures. (See next page.) Head home early if your little one is getting over-tired or cranky.

Look in your own neighborhood for beginning hikes. Start with a walk up the hill in back of your house or to a local beaver pond. Hike along a bike path or a dirt road. Prepare for these local hikes the same as you would if you were driving to a trailhead, with the same gear and clothes.

Before each hike, talk to your little one about the adventure. Talk about being in the woods. Describe climbing over big rocks. Maybe show pictures of a waterfall or a meadow you'll see.

Don't take your child on a trail that you don't know. Walking the trail yourself before a family hike will alert you to poison ivy or stinging nettles. You can also prepare yourself for things that might frighten a child, such as open rock faces, steep drop-offs or gaps in the trail.

Most hiking parents find that it's best to start soon after breakfast. (Don't get the kids up unusually early. Follow your family's normal morning schedule.) You can hike a while, have a mid-morning snack on the trail, and be home in time for lunch and a nap.

What gear you should tote depends on your child's age and daily habits. The most important things are liquids and snacks. Carry lots of both. *Don't wait for your child to ask for something to drink.* Kids can get dehydrated even if they're in a carrier.

Pack a small first-aid kit and maybe a towel or blanket to sit on during stops. You might want to bring a small shovel for digging or closed containers for treasures such as pine cones and interesting rocks.

Put sunscreen on your child at the beginning of the day and reapply frequently. Make sure your child has a wide-brimmed hat. It's probably better if children wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt. If you decide on shorts and a T-shirt, bring warmer clothes in your pack. Little children lose body heat quickly. Children should wear hiking boots or good sneakers, not sandals or "cros".

Carry antibacterial hand wipes, especially if your child is still in diapers. Don't fret about other kinds of dirt. Adults and kids get dirty hiking, and that's part of the fun.

Little children aren't peak baggers. Reaching some specific location isn't as important as what you do along the way. Don't get hung up on miles or destinations. You want your little one to love hiking. Make sure all of her early adventures are successful and happy!

More advice about hiking with children - Interview with Beth London

Beth and her husband David run Poker Hill School in Underhill. Learning about nature is an important part of the school's philosophy and curriculum. Beth, David and their staff have helped scores of children develop a life-long love for the outdoors. Many Poker Hill students have come back when they're older to participate in summer hiking camps at the school. Teenagers who got their start at Poker Hill have hiked the Long Trail together. Beth's advice is invaluable for parents who'd like to get their children interested in hiking.

First - "Start out slowly!"

At Poker Hill, children take walks around the backyard pond and go uphill about a half-mile to a tepee hidden in the woods. "They're little! Getting that far away from school, and going into the woods, feels like a real adventure." Beth and David also take the youngest hikers to Indian Brook Reservoir, Mills Riverside Park and the trail behind the Old Red Mill in Jericho.

Second - "Do your homework before hiking with children."

Adults at Poker Hill School walk the trails before heading out with the children. They plan on specific stops for short activities and adventures along the way. For example, Beth might tell the kids about big hollow tree that they'll be able to hide in, or a huge rock where they'll stop to take everyone's picture. She knows ahead of time exactly where the group will take breaks for snacks or lunch.

Adults always make sure the children have sturdy shoes, socks, a hat and extra clothes. Four- and five-year olds can carry their own little packs, but they might need adults to carry water.

Homemade trail mix (peanuts, M&M's and raisins) makes a great hiking snack. When there are students with nut allergies, hiking snacks include crackers and cheese or cheerios and dried fruit.

Poker Hill adults make sure that children know basic safety rules such as "adult first, adult last" and "don't pick any plants". They know they'll have to repeat the rules over and over.

Beth stressed the importance of planning for that last half-hour, which can often be the hardest part of a hike. On Poker Hill hikes, adults keep children's spirits up by telling stories or singing familiar songs. Beth says that kids often get caught up in a long, silly, repetitive song and forget that they're getting tired.

Third - Adjust the hike for the age of the children.

Four-year-olds

"For most four-year olds, hiking for the sake of hiking doesn't appeal." One four-year old told Beth, "I don't know what's so great about hiking. It's nothing but walking, 'cept you do it for a *long* time!" The staff at Poker Hill School keeps children interested by including fun activities.

Sometimes, Beth shows the children a letter from an elf or a fairy asking for the children's help in finding specific items such as a round flat rock, an acorn or a pine cone.

For other hikes, a staff member goes out on the trail ahead of time and stashes things like seashells or an egg from the school's chickens or a bright plastic flower. Before starting out on the hike, the children are asked to look for things that don't belong.

Another great activity is to read a book about fairy houses and then plan a hike around finding a good place to build one.

Five-year-olds

"Many five-year olds can enjoy hiking to a specific destination, after they've learned to like hiking." After experiencing lots of shorter hikes, Poker Hill kindergarteners have hiked from Stevensville Road to Butler Lodge and through Nebraska Notch to Taylor Lodge.

Finally - "If you have to rush, don't do it!"

Beth reminds parents to relax and to try to see nature through their child's eyes. ***"You want to head home with your child feeling happy, excited and enthusiastic about her next hike. Remember: For a four-year old, pretty much everything is new. Give kids a chance to find stuff!"***

Some nearby places for hiking with small children

Ethan Allen Homestead – Mostly flat trails take you through fields and marshland and next to the Winooski River. Take Route 127 out of Burlington, getting off at first exit (North Avenue and Beaches). Then follow signs.

Mud Pond in Williston – This is a great place for you and your child to feel away from it all, just a few miles from Tafts Corners! There's a mile-long uphill trail through woods to a beautiful little pond with a sturdy observation platform. Take Route 2 through Williston village. Turn right on Oak Hill Road. Just over the interstate, turn onto South Road. After 1.9 miles, take another right onto Mud Pond Road. The parking area is on the right.

Shelburne Bay Park and **LaPlatte Nature Area** – Both of these areas are reached from Bay Road, which connects with Shelburne Road. For the flat LaPlatte trails, park in the large fishing access lot and walk across the road. The parking lots for Shelburne Bay Park are a little farther down Bay Road. These trails run along high banks over the river and aren't appropriate for toddlers. Older children will love the exciting views but should be closely supervised.

There are several good walking areas in Colchester. The easy trail in **Delta Park** goes through woods to the lake and is good for young children. From Porter's Point Road in Colchester, turn onto Airport Road and then take a left onto Windermere Way. Go 0.7 miles to the Park.

Not far from Delta Park are **Airport Park and Colchester Bog**. Walk on flat trails and boardwalks, with nearby playgrounds and restrooms. From Porter's Point Road in Colchester, turn onto Airport Road and look on the right for the Park. The Colchester Bog Trail continues onto the **Causeway**, an old railroad bed extending across Lake Champlain almost all the way to South Hero. The two-mile Causeway is a great walk for older kids.

There are also beautiful trails in Winooski that take hikers along the river and by dramatic cliffs, a dam and fish ladder. You can get current maps and information from the Winooski Valley Park District at www.wvdpd.org.

In the Essex/Underhill/Jericho area, there are paths around **Indian Brook Reservoir** and **Colchester Pond** as well as behind the **Old Red Mill** in Jericho. **Mills Riverside Park** (entrance from Route 15 just outside Underhill Flats) has extensive trails through fields and forests.

A bit farther away, the Nature Conservancy has preserved a beautiful old forest in Charlotte. The trail at **Williams Woods Natural Area** is a little over a mile long and will give children a feeling of being in an untouched forest. Take Route 7 south and turn right toward Charlotte village and the ferry to NYS. At the stop sign, turn left on Greenbush Road. After about three miles, look for wooden sign on the right. (The sign is under some trees and not easy to see unless you're going slowly.)

Nature Walks in Northern Vermont and the Champlain Valley, a book by Elizabeth Bassett, has maps, directions and descriptions of many local destinations. *The Day Hiker's Guide* is also invaluable.

BE SAFE WHEN YOU'RE HIKING IN THE AUTUMN - cont.

Emergencies

When you're hiking, *you* are your first resource. Rescuers won't be able to get to you quickly. For most trail injuries, do basic first aid and then help the injured person back down the trail to a car. In a life-threatening situation, or if the injured person can't be moved, send one person for help if possible. If you're alone and you're on a well-used trail, stay put and yell or blow a whistle at regular intervals. If you can't reasonably expect another hiker to come by, you might have to start down by yourself, even if it means crawling or scooting along on your bottom. (Hikers with cell phones can call 911, but this option should be saved for true medical emergencies. Getting professional medical help on the trail is a whole lot more complicated and a whole lot more time-consuming than calling an ambulance to your home.)

Getting Lost

Make sure someone knows where you're going and when you should be back home. Pack a trail map and a compass unless you've hiked the same trail many times. Remember that Vermont's woods are full of animal paths and there are ski or snowboard trails in many areas that intersect or parallel hiking trails. Watch for blazes to keep you where you want to be. Blazes are 2" by 6" rectangular markings. They are white along the Long Trail and blue on side trails. Double blazes mark important turns. Blazes are usually on trees, but they're also painted on rock on some trails and open summits. Cairns (rock piles) may also mark trails that cross open rock. If you're hiking with a friend and you know you both tend to get lost in conversation, take turns looking out for blazes. If it's been snowing, remember that snow or ice might be covering the blaze you need.