



Brush With Adventure

Where artists once found inspiration, the Catskills' Escarpment Trail now challenges hikers.

By [Peter Kick](#), August 1999



Photo by Peter Kick

North Lake from Sunset Rock in New York's Catskills

On the Catskill Mountains' Escarpment Trail, which rides a thin lip of stone above the picturesque Hudson River Valley, it can truly be said that a hike imitates art. These are the fabled mountains where Rip Van Winkle slept, and where a new American concept of wilderness awakened to the brushes of the Hudson River School of landscape painters.

Rip Van Winkle Hollow, at the south end of the Escarpment Trail, is where legend holds that the drowsy Dutchman dozed undisturbed for 20 years. Artists and Sunset rocks above North Lake—also along the Escarpment—are where nineteenth-century artists Thomas Cole and Frederick Church found inspiration for masterworks that now hang in the world's leading museums.

From a hiker's perspective, the real artistry behind the 23-mile Escarpment Trail is the challenging terrain and ever-changing scenery: mixed hardwood forests, dark hemlock groves beside swift-flowing creeks, hardscrabble pitch pine at southern-facing outcrops, and a spruce-fir cap

on the higher peaks. The Escarpment Trail forms a link in the 340-mile, New York-to-Albany-spanning Long Path.

The Escarpment Trail can be hiked end to end in a weekend, or you can fashion a three-day out-and-back of 30 miles that includes loops at each end. Pad your hiking schedule, though, because Catskill miles are not regular miles. The soft sediments underlying these ancient mountains were carved vengefully by glaciers some 22,000 years ago, creating elevation changes both sudden and steep. Around here, it's not the elevation extremes that count, but the cumulative gain in between.

Also, allow extra time to come down off the high ridge, and fill up water bottles at perennial springs in nearby coves (the Escarpment is bone-dry). Then there's the irresistible temptation to sidetrack across the Blackhead Mountains to summit Black Dome and Thomas Cole Mountain. From these and other vantage points, you can make out the southern Adirondacks and Green Mountains, the Berkshires and Taconics, the Hudson Highlands around West Point, and the chalky white Shawangunks. At moments like these, life exceeds art.

QUICK TAKE: Catskill Forest Preserve, NY

DRIVE TIME: The southern trailhead for the Escarpment Trail is 120 miles (2 hours) north of New York City.

THE WAY: From New York State Thruway (I-87) exit 20 at Saugerties, follow NY 32A north to Palenville. In town, pick up NY 23A headed west and follow it through scenic Kaaterskill Clove. Turn right onto North Lake Road (Rt. 18) in the hamlet of Haines Falls. Just before the campground entrance, turn right onto Schutt Road. Trailhead parking is on the right.

TRAILS: Use the 23-mile Escarpment Trail to create a 30-mile dumbbell-shaped route by following the Black Dome Range Trail south after rounding Acra Point. Reconnect with the Escarpment Trail after summiting 3,940-foot Blackhead. Return to Schutt Road via the Marys Glen and Rock Shelter Trails. Carry plenty of water.

ELEVATION: The highest point on the route is Blackhead, at 3,940 feet. The low point is the trailhead, at 2,200 feet.

CAN'T MISS: Sunrise or sunset from Artists Rock or North Point.

CROWD CONTROL: Trails around the frontcountry campground can be busy. Surrounding areas see little trail traffic.

PIT STOP: The Last Chance Antiques Cafe in Tannersville, 5 miles west of Haines Falls on NY 23A, serves a cheese fondue perfect for carbo loading.

WALK SOFTLY: Although camping is unrestricted below 3,500 feet, camp in established sites when possible.

MAPS AND GUIDES: *Catskill Trails*, a five-map set from the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, costs \$13.95 (see address below). Also, *Hiking the Catskills*, by Lee McAllister and Myron S. Ochman (1992; NY-NJTC, New York, NY; \$16.95), is a helpful guidebook.

MORE INFORMATION: NY-NJTC, 232 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016; (212) 685-9699; www.nynjtc.org; nynjtc@aol.com.

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