

- **The Appalachian Trail: Housatonic State Forest (Sharon), Housatonic Meadows State Park (Cornwall/Sharon), Mount Riga State Park (Salisbury)**

The Trail is named for the Appalachian Mountains, down whose crest it runs. Housatonic (hoo-sa-**TON**-ic) is derived from the native Algonquin words for “beyond the mountain.” Nobody knows for sure where the name Mount Riga comes from, although some suspect the inspiration was the Latvian port city on the Baltic Sea.

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is America’s premier hiking trail, and is always blazed in white. It runs along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains, extending from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine. The Appalachian Mountain Club confidently maintains this is a hike of 2,167.1 miles, but it is impossible to be this precise: the trail is frequently being rerouted, both to provide for local improvement and to move closer to the goal of keeping its path through protected lands.

The idea of a national trail was first expressed by Benton MacKaye in the summer of 1921. Dismayed by the excesses of capitalism, he envisioned a network of utopian villages in the wilderness comprised of work camps, lodges and mountaintop schools, all operated communally as a retreat from profit. They would be connected by a 1,200 mile footpath on which all were welcome and no tolls or fees would ever be collected. A friend of MacKaye’s edited an architectural journal, and in October 1921, the scheme was published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.

For almost ten years, little progress was made on the trail. Starting around 1930, attorney Myron Avery convinced, charmed and cajoled local hiking clubs into building the trail on a volunteer basis. He had little patience with what he felt were elements of mysticism and communism in the original scheme, but he liked the idea of a national trail. While he rejected MacKaye’s principal vision, he expanded the route: when the trail was formally completed on August 14, 1937, the trail exceeded 2000 miles in length. The trail in Connecticut was created by volunteers from CFPA and the local chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club.

Sadly, the next thirty years brought more neglect than expansion, and encroachment from new development threatened to eliminate major stretches of the trail. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a renewed popularization of outdoor activities saved the trail. Congress declared the AT a National Scenic Trail in 1968, the first trail to earn that distinction.

The implication of that law was that where possible, the government began to buy the land on which the trail ran, and failing that, they began to re-route the Trail to run it over protected land. In Connecticut, most of the trail is owned by the National Park Service with a large strip running through Housatonic State Forest. In all, an astounding 75% of the trail in Connecticut has been relocated since 1979.

The largest change came as the result of a single devastating afternoon in 1989. Originally, the trail followed the Housatonic to Cornwall Bridge, where it turned east, crossing the river into Cornwall. The object was to visit the Cathedral Pines, one of the country's oldest and best-developed groves of evergreens. Then, a freak tornado tore down the Pines, diminishing the incentive to swing east of the river. A protected route closer to the river was secured, much of which was anchored by the Housatonic State Forest.

But the historic eastern route has been preserved as the Blue-Blazed Mohawk Trail, a dramatic and beautiful hike in its own right. Together, the Connecticut section of the AT and the Mohawk Trail are natural attractions for long-haul hikers.

Today, the goal of a stable, protected trail has largely been achieved, and few major re-routings are expected. The trail enters the State's western border in Sherman, then returns to New York to circle Schaghticoke (SKAT-i-cook) Mountain, returning to Connecticut in the Schaghticoke Indian Reservation in southwest Kent. It bears generally northeast, crossing Mount Algo and passing just south of Macedonia Brook State Park. Continuing north, the trail crosses Caleb's Peak before descending through Saint John's Ledges to the edge of the river.

Among through-hikers, the next stretch is considered a true gem. For over four miles, the trail hugs the west bank of the river, proceeding in blissful, level tranquility. After ascending some of the highest mountains in the east, this is the trail's longest natural flat segment. (There are actually longer flat stretches where the route passes on roads through built-up areas, but Connecticut has the distinction of having the longest *natural* flat stretch. After reaching Mount Katahdin in triumph, many hikers will forget the road-walks, but almost everybody seems to remember the river walk fondly.) If you're new to hiking, the river walk is a great place to begin.

Just before Cornwall Bridge, the trail climbs back to the crest of the valley and enters Housatonic State Forest. Just north of Route 4, the AT crosses the southern terminus of the Mohawk Trail. It runs behind Housatonic Meadows State Park, connecting with that Park's Pine Knob Loop but not entering the Park. Here in Sharon, the trail explores the high ground west of the river, but swings back, crossing Sharon Mountain and crossing to the east side just below Falls Village. (Look for the northern terminus of the Mohawk Trail immediately after reaching the east side of the river.)

Immediately north of Falls Village, the trail veers northwest, crossing the river and climbing Mt. Prospect (elevation 1,475 feet). It descends to cross Route 44 and Spruce Brook just slightly north of Salisbury. There, it climbs the high ground west of Route 41, passes over Lion's Head and passes over the summit of Bear Mountain at an elevation of 2,316 feet. The trail exits the State into Massachusetts in a dramatic rocky gorge known as Sage's Ravine. In all, Connecticut hosts a beautiful 53-mile section of the Appalachian Trail.

In the summer, expect to see “through-hikers,” hardy souls who began walking in Georgia in the early spring, and hiked the whole length in the hopes of making it to Maine before the snow arrives. Through-hiking the Appalachian Trail is one of the greatest outdoor athletic achievements.

In many ways, the modern AT doesn't live up to MacKaye's utopian ideal. People are discouraged from staying in a shelter for more than one night to make room for following parties. MacKaye never imagined through-hikers, the first of whom completed the journey in 1948. And he certainly didn't predict a linear national park catering to hikers. Still, a trace of his vision remains. The Appalachian Trail still welcomes everyone, and no tolls or fees are ever collected.

But don't expect a wilderness experience. It is one of the most popular trails in Connecticut, and there is always a party passing in the opposite direction or coming up from behind. The Trail is too well marked (and too obviously compacted) to let you get really lost.

• **Housatonic State Forest:**

The Forest consists of four major blocks of land. While the trail generally stays west of the Housatonic River, the Forest consists of blocks on both sides of the river. The AT passes through two of them: the Mine Mountain block just north of Route 4 and the Sharon Mountain block south of Lime Rock.

The Mine Mountain block takes its name from the ore mines on its flanks. When this region was the center of Connecticut's iron industry, these woods supplied cordwood that was burned down to charcoal to fuel the great forges. To this day, the remains of numerous circular charcoal hearths may still be found in the woods. The Forest follows the west bank of the river from Cornwall Bridge (the intersection of Route 4 and Route 7) north, almost to West Cornwall. On the east side of the river is Housatonic Meadows State Park, making this one of the longest stretches of the river permanently preserved from development.

Just north of this block is the Sharon Mountain block. The Appalachian Trail runs along its western side, climbing around a number of hills that exceed 1000 feet, but providing few dramatic overviews. A couple of unusual industries operated on Sharon Mountain. Mines in the mountain quarried great blocks of quartzite that were needed for building blast furnaces and were used in homes as hearthstones. Elsewhere, clay beds were mined for kaolin, also called “china clay.” At the time, kaolin was an essential component of fine ceramics because it retains its white color when fired. Indeed, fine porcelain is called “china” because kaolin was first discovered in China (from a hill called Kaoling, hence the name kaolin).

The Cream Hill block of the Forest is east of the river south of Falls Village. While there is fine hiking throughout the block, the highlight is the beautiful gorge of Dean Ravine near the northern terminus of the Mohawk Trail. If you

don't have enough time to hike the whole Mohawk Trail, find the Dean Ravine parking area and walk into the woods. At the junction with the Blue-Blazed Mohawk Trail, turn left (south). The trail follows the southern rim of the gorge of Reed Brook, then descends steeply to its base. There you'll be looking up at a large outcrop of bedrock that forms a huge wall, and in spectacular fashion, Reed Brook thunders over the top and cascades down to the Housatonic River below. The falls are at their most dramatic in the spring, but even late in the season, the flow of water across the rocks can be fascinating. Backpackers are fond of the campsite at the base of the falls.

North of this block is the Canaan Mountain block. It is located just south of East Canaan, and abuts Beckley Furnace State Park. When it was acquired, the region still showed the signs of the overharvesting associated with the iron industry. Such land could be acquired inexpensively, and the State (which had been around for some 300 years) knew it would be able to wait until the land had returned to its original productivity. Because it was the wildest part of the lands they owned, the Forestry Commission treated the property with benign neglect, designating the block as the State's first official wilderness area. There are numerous CCC roads and old trails, but most are overgrown to some degree. Don't expect blazed trails, and the iron ore in the ground can make hand-held compasses unpredictable. But if you want to try bushwhacking through wild terrain, this could be your spot.

A rather small block of twelve acres lies south of Route 128 near West Cornwall. The Gold's Pines block is named for Theodore S. Gold, who bought the land in 1870. Gold was a farmer and a teacher, and he bought the plot to clear-cut the trees and burn the wood for charcoal, which he would then sell to the railroads. By this time, the New Haven Railroad was opening its own freight line into the Pennsylvania coal fields, so local charcoal was not needed. As a result, the land was ignored and the trees grew to great height. In 1933, Connecticut foresters marked 92 "Blue-ribbon" trees, each about a hundred feet tall and measuring between 11 and 32 inches in diameter. Their survey led to purchase by the State, which was accomplished in September 1941.

From the start, Gold's Pines have been kept as a showplace of forestry technique. To encourage the pines, competing hemlocks are routinely removed, along with deformed and so-called "decadent trees." Old growth trees tend to stagnate when the groves aren't thinned, so light thinnings are performed about every five years. Today, Gold's Pines is considered the best lumber-producing stand of white pine this side of the Rocky Mountains. It is a great example of what second growth white pine can do with active management. Theodore Gold bought the land for \$500 in 1870, and the State paid \$5000 for the same land in 1941. Today, it almost seems like blasphemy to put a price on this unique property.

Most of the Forest is crossed by numerous dirt roads and paths that make it an ideal place for exploration by horseback riders and mountain bikers. In the winter, snowmobiling is permitted. Hunting is excellent in all blocks, with deer and turkey being the prime game.

In a Forest full of interesting attractions, it's easy to overlook the interesting name. The word "Housatonic" derives from two native words, *wussi*, meaning beyond, and *aden'e*, meaning mountain (the suffix *uk* denotes a place or land). According to Schaghticoke tradition, the name recalls the discovery of the river and valley by those who came over the mountain from the west. Extremely old native artifacts have been discovered in the area, implying that the first humans were entering the state just as the glacier was receding. This beautiful name reminds us of those times, when the first pioneering humans were exploring a newly exposed landscape.

<b><u>Location:</u></b>	<p>Mine Mountain block: This block is most commonly accessed via the Appalachian Trail.</p> <p>Sharon Mountain block: From the junction of Route 7 and Route 128 in Cornwall (opposite the Cornwall covered bridge), turn north on Route 7 and take an immediate left on West Cornwall Road. Follow 3.6 miles to the Forest entrance on the right.</p> <p>Cream Hill block: From the junction of Route 7 and Route 128 in West Cornwall, proceed east on Route 128 for 0.2 mile (passing through the covered bridge). Turn left on River Road and follow for 3.9 miles. Turn right on Music Mountain Road and follow 0.9 mile to the parking area on the left.</p> <p>Canaan Mountain block: This block is most easily accessed via Beckley Furnace State Park.</p> <p>Gold's Pines block: From the junction of Route 128 and Route 125 in Cornwall, proceed west on Route 128 for 1.1 miles to the Forest entrance on the left.</p>
<b><u>Services:</u></b>	
<b><u>Activities:</u></b>	Hiking, hunting, mountain biking.

• **Housatonic Meadows State Park:**

This Park offers access to the west bank of the Housatonic River in one of its prettiest spots. The land was acquired between 1927 and 1931, and was the site of an active CCC camp during the Depression. In a southern block is the Hollister Grove Picnic Area, which offers visitors beautiful riverside picnic sites. Farther north is the main entrance and campground. The Park has 97 wooded campsites, and the rushing of the river provides a soothing white noise that has been called the "camper's lullaby."

The Park takes its name from the meadows that are used for field sports and family outings. But the unquestioned attraction of the Park is the Housatonic

River, cutting its way through the high mountainous terrain of northwestern Connecticut. Canoes and kayaks maneuver their way through the rapids while the rafts and tubes seem more like recreational driftwood. A large section of the river has been reserved for fly fishing, and the use of regular fishing rods and other lures is prohibited. Sometimes, fly fishing seems more like religion than recreation. Trout feed on insects, so the fishermen tie artificial lures to mimic the behavior of what the trout are looking for. The anglers think of themselves as nature's detectives, determining what insects are available in the river and what the fish are currently feeding on. Everything affects the equation: morning versus evening, spring versus autumn, sun versus rainfall. Fly fishing is slower moving, more thoughtful and more in tune with river. You can travel light and fish very quietly. The Housatonic is world-renowned as a classic trout site.

Humans aren't the only ones fishing here. Recently, bald eagles have started to reappear in numbers in Connecticut, and many have been sighted from Housatonic Meadows. In December, the birds fly south from Maine and Canada. This bird is huge, with a wingspan up to seven feet, and unmistakable plumage.

The bird is on the State endangered and Federal threatened lists. As grim as that sounds, it's actually good news. Between loss of habitat, human disturbance, pesticides and poaching, the bald eagle vanished from the State. But efforts to preserve our rivers have paid an unexpected dividend. In the summer of 1992, a pair of eagles nested over the Farmington river in Barkhamsted, and the population continues to grow. Today, up to 100 eagles winter in Connecticut. They are very territorial, and are sensitive to human presence, so the best policy is to leave them alone and observe from a distance. By March, they head north for the season.

As at Haddam Meadows, Housatonic Meadows preserves a floodplain, and was a popular campsite for native Americans. The Blue-Blazed Pine Knob Loop Trail begins in the Park and connects with the AT in Housatonic State Forest just outside the Park boundary. The trail is steep but worth the effort. The Blue-Blazed Mohawk Trail begins across the river at the junction of Route 7 and Route 4.

<b><u>Location:</u></b>	From the junction of Route 7 and Route 4 in Cornwall, proceed north on Route 7 for 0.6 mile to the Park entrance on the right. For the campground entrance, continue north on Route 7 an additional 1.1 miles.
<b><u>Services:</u></b>	Flush toilets, water, parking, telephone.
<b><u>Activities:</u></b>	Camping, picnicking, youth group camping, fishing, hiking, canoeing, cross-country skiing.

• **Mount Riga State Park:**

While the route of the Appalachian Trail is now federally protected, it is more important than ever to preserve the feeder trails. Mount Riga State Park is centered on the Undermountain Trail, Connecticut's northernmost access to the

AT. The Undermountain Trail is only 1.9 miles long, but it is the most heavily used access trail in the State.

While this trail is short, it's rather strenuous. It begins on Route 41 north of Salisbury and ascends dramatically, joining the Appalachian Trail just south of Bear Mountain, the highest summit in Connecticut. While it lies outside the Park boundaries, Bear Mountain is the reason for Mount Riga State Park.

If you have a problem with going uphill, this is not the hike for you. The highway lies at 750 feet elevation, the trail junction is around 1,750 feet, and the summit of Bear Mountain is 2,316 feet. The trail gains over 1,500 feet in a little over two miles.

If this isn't adventuresome enough, take the Undermountain Trail up from Route 41 to the Paradise Lane Trail (the first branch trail on the right). This leads to the Appalachian Trail just north of Bear Mountain. While the altitude gain is equal, Paradise Lane and the north face of Bear Mountain are steeper than the Undermountain Trail and the south face of Bear Mountain.

If you elect the steeper route, try to be conscious of the temperature change. Because of extremely local terrain features, this spot gets slightly lower temperatures than surrounding areas. Ecologists call these "microclimates," and they can account for dramatic changes in plant or animal species. Here, the driving force is convection: solar heating warms the air on the south faces of the hills causing it to rise in thermal columns. Cool air sinks back to the surface forming great loops: rising on the south side of a hill and descending on the north. As a result, you can expect a cool breeze on even the hottest summer day. In the spring, snow will last longer here than most other spots.

The summit of Bear Mountain offers a truly spectacular view. Like so many other pieces of high ground in Connecticut, this one was preserved by Robbins Battell of Norfolk (see Haystack Mountain State Park). In 1885, he secured a 999 year lease to the summit. He commissioned a local mason to build a summit tower of native fieldstone. It took Owen Travis three years to haul the stones by ox cart and erect the tower. It stayed intact at its 40-foot height until the 1960s, when people took to picking rocks from the tower and throwing them. The tower was rebuilt three times, once using a helicopter to bring in concrete to stabilize the structure. Finally, it was decided to keep the base but forgo the tower. Today, the remnants form a platform from which to enjoy the amazing view. To the east is a vista of plowed fields and orchards that doesn't seem to have changed much for the last hundred years. Behind lie the two large lakes, appropriately called Twin Lakes. To the north lies the bulk of Mount Everett, identifiable by the fire tower on the summit. Look down at the northern base of Bear Mountain: you will see a fold in the terrain that suggests the deep, narrow gorge of Sage's Ravine. The Connecticut/Massachusetts border passes through this ravine. The view to the west is partially obscured by trees.

The stone on the tower proclaims this as "the highest ground in Connecticut" at 2,354 feet. Both allegations are in error. Advanced surveying technologies have

established the elevation of the summit at 2,316 feet, thirty-eight feet below the earlier estimate. In addition, it was discovered that there is a nearby point that is slightly higher. The summit of Mount Frissell, just slightly west in Massachusetts, is taller than Bear Mountain; and owing to the accident of where the state boundary was drawn, an otherwise unremarkable spot on the flank of Frissell is actually a little higher than the summit of Bear Mountain. Geographers now say that Bear Mountain is the highest *summit* in Connecticut.

The iron industry dominated this corner of the State for over a century (see Beckley Furnace State Park). An iron forge near Mount Riga was one of the State's first, and local legend holds that this forge cast the anchors for "Old Ironsides," the frigate USS *Constitution*. As you hike to Bear Mountain, you'll find plenty of evidence of Connecticut's Iron Age. In places, the trail uses old charcoal roads and the mountain is dotted with charcoal pits and hearths. Many of the small ponds in the area are actually the remnants of old ore pits. Underfoot, you may see "clink," a hard, black stone that almost looks like lava pellets. Clink is the stony residue of incombustible material left from the burning of charcoal. Countless tons of charcoal were consumed in Connecticut, and wherever a steam engine operated, clink is sure to be found. So much was generated that these cinders were often used to pave roads and trails. It is sometimes called Housatonic Obsidian.

The Appalachian Trail provides campsites for backpackers. Two are near the Undermountain Trail at the Ball Brook and Brassie Brook campsites.

<b><u>Location:</u></b>	From the intersection of Route 44 and Route 41 in the center of Salisbury, proceed north 3.2 miles to the Undermountain Trail parking area on the left.
<b><u>Services:</u></b>	
<b><u>Activities:</u></b>	Hiking.