

The Changing Climate of Winter Hiking in New Hampshire

BY: DIANA MOORE



Winter and fall are my favorite seasons for hiking. In fall, I buzz around the Whites mountains, relishing the cooler weather while donning my fleece and layers, feeling like I'm in brand new clothing, even though I've had it for years. As an AMC hike leader, I take people to the summit views to revel in the breathtaking beauty of New Hampshire mountains covered in colors on fire. In winter, I turn my sights to the Whites. Nature's winter canvas is painted in monochrome with pops of color, and her sculptures in ice hanging from every tree and suspended waterfalls – a single moment halted in time.

Every year I celebrate the commencement of winter hiking with a trip to Whites between Christmas and The New Year. I celebrate again during February vacation week, while my son is off visiting his father, I disappear once more into the Whites and find myself while hiking in the winter splendor of the mountains. It's a much needed mental and spiritual retreat from the daily stresses of my life. Wandering through the woods combined with achieving a sought-after goal is both rejuvenating and affirming. I am not the youngest anymore, and I am certainly not the most fearless. I carry a great deal of respect and reverence for the mountains and forests, and on every trail, I hike, I begin with a mindful moment of respect and gratitude.

Hiking the Wildcats in winter has been a looming and intimidating goal for me, and yet I was able to safely complete a hike from the Nineteen Mile Brook Trail across the Wildcat Ridge and down the Polecat ski slope. It was not easy, but it wasn't the most difficult trail I've ever done either. What I wasn't expecting was

the deep spiritual stirring I felt during the hike. To the left of the trail were magnificent views of the Carter Range and to the right was Mt. Washington, known as Agiocochook to the Abenaki, and the Presidential Range beginning to become battered by a weather front. My soul was moved to the core by the sublime splendor that surrounded me – The visual grandeur of mountains and the powerful presence of their spirit touched something deep within me. This hike made my top three list, and I would be honored to share this experience with others next year.

This past December, during the Christmas break in 2023, I was prepared to hike several mountains, but only got out on a hike once, as it was raining in the mountains. Rain and 40-degree temperatures in the high peaks in December was new to me. The same thing happened a few months later in February, in 2024. I was unable to complete my planned hikes, not due to extreme winter weather, but due to rain and mild temperatures. While this was a very frustrating, considering the amount of money paid to stay in the area, the food, and time off from work, it also led me to wonder if this would become the new normal. Should I expect this more often now?

Winters are getting shorter in New Hampshire. A study published in *Northeastern Naturalist* in 2021 concluded that the snow season on Mount Washington has decreased by 1.7 days per decade between 1931 and 2018. In 2023, it wasn't until late February that reliable backcountry terrain for skiing could be found. This trend is extremely concerning not only for the impact to New Hampshire tourism as a business, but to New Hampshire residents and the

quality of winter recreation in our backyards. This year, ice-in on Lake Winnepesaukee was not declared until February 8, and ice-out was declared by March 17 making the winter of 2023-24 the shortest presence of strong ice on the lake ever recorded. Research at UNH2 has shown that winters in New Hampshire are warming more rapidly than any other season and are expected to be 10°F higher by the end of the century. This would lead to earlier snow-pack melt and an even earlier ice-out on Lake Winnepesaukee.

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.” – Rachel Carson

Climate change shows itself in other ways too. Another study published in the Journal of Biogeography in January 2023 reports that climate change trends are showing trees at higher elevations are growing approximately three meters higher every decade. If this continues, Generation Alpha could well see their 52wv mountain summits obscured by an encroaching treeline. Will we have to recompile the list? I remember reading that the summit of Mount Hale used to have views. Now the only rewarding feature of the summit is the presence of the striking yet demanding gray jays.

Other impacts of climate change will affect us here in New Hampshire, and maybe you’re already experiencing it. Black Bears, are coming out of their dens in winter. I had my bird feeder ransacked in January, and I thought that it was safe to put out feeders in winter. With warming weather trends, nuisance and harmful pests have an opportunity to thrive, such as mosquitos and ticks. We’ve already seen how ticks can decimate the moose population if the ticks are not wiped out in winter due to warmer weather. And our beloved moose may begin to migrate further north in search

of cooler winters. Perhaps you have seen even more instances of climate change effects here at home.

As the winter hiking season comes to an end, I am left wondering what the season will be like in 2025. I still plan to celebrate the opening of the season this year between Christmas and New Year, but with my son away at college starting this year, I may not plan a February disappearance and just wait until I see what plans a warming Mother Nature holds for winter next year.

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- 2 Lemcke-Stampone, Mary D.; Wake, Cameron P.; and Burakowski, Elizabeth. *New Hampshire Climate Assessment 2021 (2022)*. The Sustainability Institute Publications. 71.
- 3 Tourville J, Publicover D, Dovciak M (2023) Forests on the move: tracking climate-related treeline changes in mountains of the northeastern United States. *Journal of Biogeography*, 00, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jbi.14708>
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