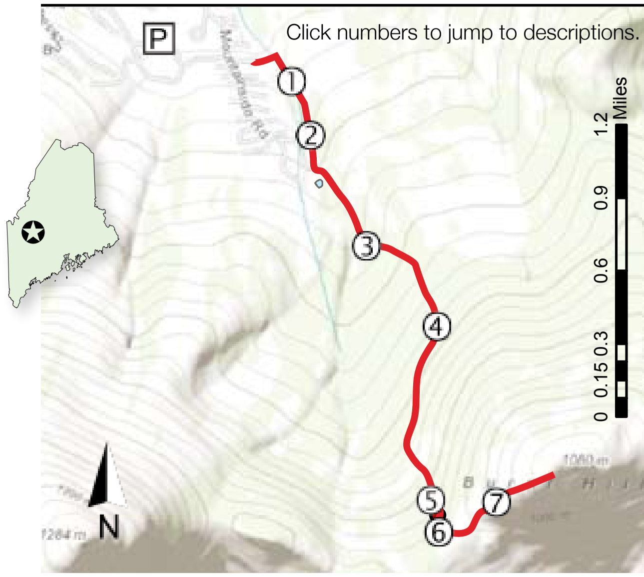
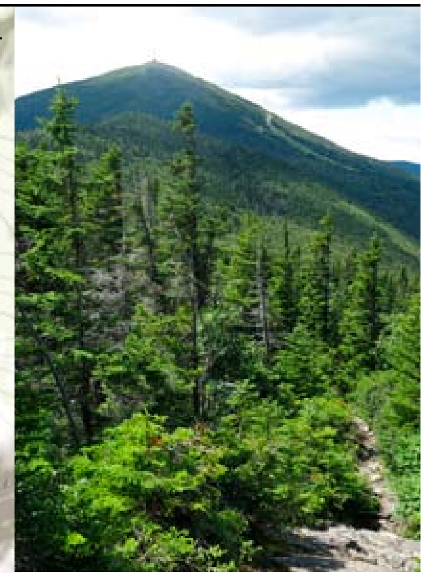
# Burnt Hill

Burnt Mountain Trail - 5.6 miles round trip, advanced

*While "Burnt" is a suitable name for this peak, it could just as easily be called "Logged Hill" or "Windswept Hill." After all, these are all forces that shape its flanks. Burnt Hill, which provides hikers with a stunning 360 degree view of some of Maine's tallest peaks, owes its expansive bald summit to a fire. Scouring winds at higher elevations ensure that forests remain young, herbs remain low, and the summit remains bald. Rotting stumps, lively streams, and forest openings below the summit are enticing stops for history buffs and wildlife-watchers alike.*



## Getting There

The trailhead for Burnt Hill Trail is located near the Sugarloaf Mountain Ski Resort Base Lodge.

**From North:** Starting at the intersection of ME Routes 16 and 27 in Stratton Village (in Eustis), drive 7.9 miles south on ME Routes 16/27. Turn right onto the Sugarloaf Access Road. Parking is approximately 2 miles farther on Sugarloaf Access Road at three different lots near the Main Base Lodge and the Sugarloaf Mountain Hotel.

**From South:** Starting at the intersection of ME Routes 16 and 27 in Kingfield, drive approximately 15 miles north to Carrabassett Valley. Turn left onto the Sugarloaf Access Rd. Parking is approximately 2 miles farther on Sugarloaf Access Rd. at three different lots near the Main Base Lodge and the Sugarloaf Mountain Hotel.

**To Trailhead:** On foot, with the Sugarloaf Mountain Hotel on your left and the Base Lodge on your right, follow the "Main Street." Once past the Base Lodge, follow the driveway past Gondola Village and walk along Adams Mountain Road. Continue past the condominium complex until you reach Mountainside Rd. Continue onto Bigelow Mountain Rd., almost directly across from Adams Mountain Rd. The trailhead for Burnt Hill Trail (marked with signs for "Burnt Mtn Trail") is located at the end of Bigelow Mountain Rd.

Squirrel inside abandoned woodpecker hole

### ① Sneak Peek *-70.29989, 45.053388*

to map

*Follow the path at the end of Bigelow Mountain Rd. The trailhead is on the right.*

A jaunt up the first stretch of the Burnt Mountain Trail is like reading the back cover of a book before you begin the first chapter. Here, major events of the forest's history are expressed in the landscape, but the ending isn't spoiled. Towering paper birch, gray birch, and trembling aspen are reaching the end of their lives in the forest canopy, many of them snapped in half by wind. Beneath these trees, younger sugar maple, balsam fir, and red spruce are inheriting the pools of light left by their fallen neighbors. Flat-topped stumps rot in the woods nearby.

*About 50 yards after the trailhead, the trail turns right abruptly and travels downhill toward the gurgling of a nearby brook.* At this corner, look for a trembling aspen that has been riddled with woodpecker holes, some of which are now used by red squirrels.

### ② For Swimmers and Loggers *-70.298676, 45.050809*

to map

*At the bottom of the hill, the trail turns left to parallel a branch of Brackett Brook.*

Brackett Brook originates in the trough between Sugarloaf and Burnt Hill, where it gathers water from the flanks of both mountains. On a calm summer day, Brackett Brook's slow-moving water gives little indication of its potential ferocity, but large rocks in the streambed tell a different story. During spring snowmelt or after a big rainstorm, Brackett Brook tears through this ravine carrying large cobbles and boulders.

The incredible force of water here wasn't lost on the innovative New England loggers of the 1800's and early 1900's. During high water, typically spring runoff, loggers used large creeks and rivers to transport logs downstream to lumber mills. Because of the convenience offered by flowing water, shallow slopes near waterways were heavily logged. While Brackett Brook is not powerful enough to transport logs, the south branch of the Carrabassett River is. Brackett Brook flows into the Carrabassett River, which joins the Kennebec River in Anson. The water in Brackett Brook will eventually pass Augusta and enter the ocean northeast of Portland.

Flat-topped stump

In 1840, the closest sawmill to Burnt Hill was likely in Kingfield, approximately 10 miles southeast of where you now stand. By contrast, there were at least 21 sawmills where the Kennebec River enters the ocean.

As your route follows the stream, watch for flat-topped stumps, evidence of this area's logging history. *At 0.25 miles, the trail splits inconspicuously and one section makes a short detour to cross Brackett Brook to the right. On days when the water is calm, this pool is an excellent swimming hole. Within 25 yards, the trail will cross back again.*

### ③ Pioneer Trees *-70.294632, 45.045508*

to map

*At 0.7 miles, the trail crosses the second of two logging roads and gradually parts ways with Brackett Brook.*

Paper birch bark

The largest and most numerous trees on the lower slope of Burnt Hill, paper birch, are the first clue that this forest burned. Like the bigtoothed aspen and quaking aspen that are also found here, paper birch is known for its ability to colonize a forest after a large disturbance, such as a fire. Its small, light seeds easily travel long distances in the wind to reach new sites, but they do not contain enough stored nutrients for their roots to grow through leaf litter, or for their shoots to survive in shade. This pioneer species is most successful when its seeds land on the bare soil that is often left after a large fire.

Like many pioneer species, paper birch is shade-intolerant. After paper birches have grown tall enough to generate shade and leaf litter, trees more tolerant of shade begin to colonize the understory. By the time the paper birch has reached the end of its life, the sugar maple and balsam fir present in the understory will dominate the canopy . Paper birch will disappear from the forest as it matures.

#### *Naturalist's Notes*

Here, young striped maple, balsam fir, and sugar maple begin to creep skyward, sheltering an herb layer of blue-bead lily, wild sarsaparilla, Canada mayflower, and wood sorrel. This forest is transitioning from an Early Successional Forest to a Spruce - Northern Hardwoods Forest.

The second clue left behind by the 1908 forest fire is glossy bits of charcoal in the soil. Though they have been concealed by more than a century's worth of leaf litter and new soil, you can find these fire remnants on the trail where hikers before you have eroded away layers of soil. This fire burned approximately 5,500 acres, including the north side of Sugarloaf. It is partially responsible for Sugarloaf's famous skiing above treeline.

### *Naturalist's Notes*

Look for sarsaparilla, blue-bead lily, and bunchberry basking in the sunlit gaps between specked alder, maple-leaved viburnum, and bracken fern.

Braken fern

Blue-bead lily

Bunchberry

Wild sarsaparilla

## ④ Glades in Summer *-70.289916, 45.041889*

to map

*At 1 mile, the trail turns southwest and levels slightly as it begins wrapping around Burnt Hill. Here, hikers pass two swaths of clear cut forest dotted with birch.*

In green, leafy summertime , it's hard to imagine these forest clearings or glades as having smooth, white, snow-covered ski trails – and skiers. But that's what happens here in winter. In summer, these quiet glades with their shrubby thickets, tall ferns, and grasses are prime real estate for both animals and wildlife watchers.

Where the mature forest meets the shrubby gap, species that depend on both habitats congregate. For example, red bats roost in dense hardwood forests, but hunt for insects in clearings by night. Yellow warblers and common yellowthroats inhabit early-successional shrublands, where they attract birds of prey and egg-eating animals like raccoons. Plant-eating (herbivorous) mammals like snowshoe hares and mice congregate in thick brush, attracting coyote, lynx, and other predators. Even moose and deer will occasionally wander through these glades.

## ⑤ The Power of Wind *-70.291236, 45.037913*

to map

*As the trail steepens dramatically at 1.7 miles, the forest grades into Subalpine Fir.*

Near the top of the hill, the canopy is a mosaic of dense red spruce, balsam fir, and paler heart-leaved birch, interspersed with sunny openings. Young balsam fir and mountain holly shrubs thrive in the sunny patches, with lower-growing blue-bead lily, bunchberry, mountain wood fern, big-leaved aster, and starflower growing where there is the most light.

While historic fire and natural succession have been the primary forces shaping the forest downslope, wind has sculpted much of the plant growth on the upper slopes and summit of Burnt Hill, resulting in a Subalpine Fir Forest. In this forest type, trees can't grow very large because as soon as they break rank with their neighbors, they are toppled or snapped in half by wind. Because older trees are constantly falling, the forest is perpetually riddled with gaps that are rapidly filled by new growth of fir.

Continuing up the trail, the forest transforms into a brighter variation of Subalpine Fir consisting of almost entirely paper birch and large, multi-trunked mountain ash. This is an area of subalpine fir forest that has burned. Balsam fir lingers in the understory, and will eventually fill in as the paper birch dies off. A brook is audible nearby.

*Within 100 yards, the trail plunges back into the darker forest and continues steeply uphill.*

## ⑥ Clinging for Life *-70.290352, 45.032495*

to map

*The trail reaches the relatively flat shoulder of Burnt Hill at 2.1 miles.*

Here in the Spruce - Fir Krummholtz, wind battered black spruce and balsam fir don't stand much taller than you. Krummholz  is the gatekeeper of true alpine communities. Exposed to constant battering winds and growing in thin soils, the trees are shaped a bit like flags, with higher branches growing on the downwind side of the trunk. Blueberries, Labrador tea, mountain holly, and sheep laurel are sheltered between trees or

### *Naturalist's Notes*

The term krummholz comes from the German "krumm" (crooked), and "hulz" (wood). Because trees lose nutrients every time they lose a branch, these trees have adopted a low, twisted growth form to help them avoid blasting wind and snow.

Alpine bilberry

Highland rush

tucked into rock crevices.

On a calm day in early summer, this is a good place to listen for white-throated sparrows, cedar waxwings, and the rare Bicknell's thrush.

## ⑦ Welcome to the Alpine Zone *-70.285928, 45.033913*

to map

*By mile 2.4, most of the trees have fallen into the distance.*

You've reached the alpine zone. Here, blue blazes alternate with rock cairns to mark the trail. Vegetation and soil here are fragile and easily damaged, so it is important that hikers follow these marks.

Fire and wind are both responsible for Burnt Hill's bald summit; fire cleared the peak of vegetation, and since then wind has made it very difficult for soil to accumulate or trees to survive.

In the thin soil between the rocks, highland rush, three-leaved cinquefoil, and alpine bilberry are prominent. This is a Mid-elevation Bald, a rare community found on exposed bedrock summits or upper mountain slopes at moderate to high elevations.

The summit of Burnt Hill offers a spectacular 360-degree view toward surrounding mountains. You are in the presence of some Maine giants. The striped flank of Sugarloaf, Maine's second tallest mountain, is almost due west; the multi-peaked Bigelow Range is due north; Little Poplar Mountain is to the northeast and Owl's Head is close and to the southeast.

## Naturalist's Glossary

**Alpine:** Above the treeline.
**Canopy:** The highest layer of vegetation in the forest; usually the tops of trees.
**Erosion:** The process by which soil and rock is transported deposited in other locations.
**Understory:** The layer of vegetation that grows between the ground and the highest layer of tree branches in a forest.

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***Natural Heritage Hikes is a project of the Maine Natural Areas Program in partnership with the Maine Trail Finder website. For more Natural Heritage Hikes, please visit www.mainetrailfinder.com.***

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