

Goodnow

The mountain that's a museum

Words & pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, September 23, 2005

NEWCOMB TWP. — The SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry has turned a mountain into a museum: Goodnow Mountain, on the western end of Newcomb township.

The mountain stands in the Huntington Wildlife Forest, which is owned by the college.

The trail to Goodnow's summit is cleverly engineered to control erosion without detracting from the mountain's backwoods experience. Two interpretive pamphlets — one for summer, the other for winter — have been developed by the college to help visitors understand certain features of the natural environment through which they are hiking. At the top of the trail stands an Adirondack fire tower and observer's cabin, restored and open to the public.

Getting there

The clearly marked trailhead parking lot for Goodnow Mountain is just off Route 28N on the west end of Newcomb township, near the Adirondack Park Agency Visitors Interpretive Center.

There are two ways to get from Lake Placid to Newcomb, where Goodnow Mountain stands. Neither route is direct, but both of them are beautiful.

(The Adirondack High Peaks stand directly between the two communities, so you have to go all the way around Mount Marcy and its neighboring summits.)

The western route to Newcomb from Lake Placid is the shorter of the two — about 65 miles, with an estimated travel time of 1 hour 15 minutes. Take Route 86 out of Lake Placid to Saranac Lake; Route 3, then Route 30, to Tupper Lake, then Long Lake; and

Route 28N into Newcomb.

The eastern route to Newcomb is about 80 miles long, taking roughly 1 hour 45 minutes from Lake Placid. You start by going to Jay hamlet on Route 86; south on Route 9N to Keene; south

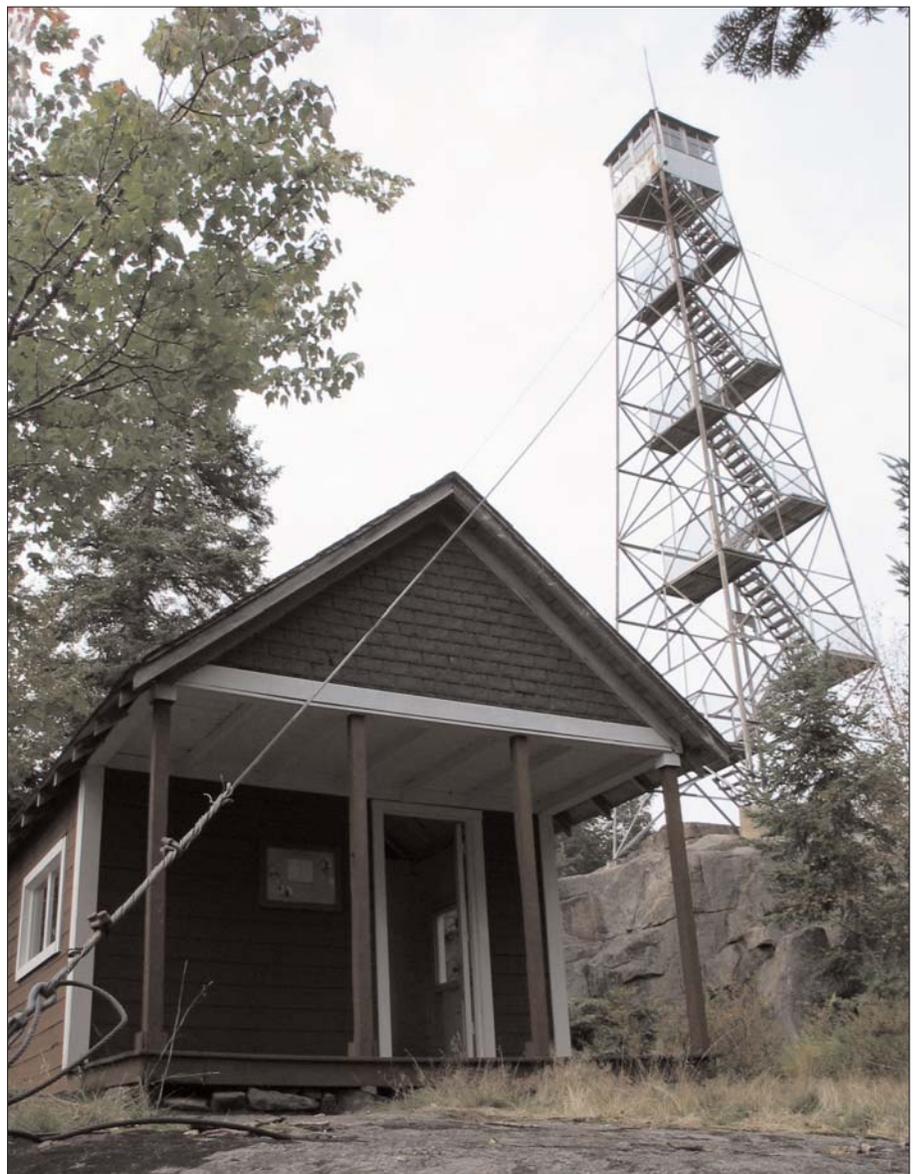
and east on Route 73 through Keene Valley and St. Huberts to the Adirondack Northway (I-87); south one exit to North Hudson (Exit 29); and west on the Blue Ridge Road (aka the Boreas Road) a little more than 20 miles to Newcomb.

The hike

The trail up Goodnow Mountain is 1.9 miles each way, with a steady gain in elevation of 1,040 feet from trailhead to summit, producing an average slope of 10 percent.

Several features built into the trail make it one of the easiest hikes of any real length in Essex County.

First, thanks to the town of



Fire observer's cabin and tower at the summit of Goodnow Mountain.

Newcomb, lots of rustic benches have been built alongside the trail for those who need frequent rest stops.

The trail designers have also built boardwalks over potentially marshy spots, and lots of simple but sturdy log or stone staircases up the steepest stretches.

The rest of the trail is graded and maintained so that almost anyone with the use of both legs can navigate it with very little difficulty.

How easy is the hike up Newcomb? Adirondack guide Lynn Malerba has used it for her introductory snowshoe hike, if that gives you any indication.

It's a popular trail, though not overwhelmingly so. According to the log book at the trailhead, Goodnow gets between one and two dozen visitors almost every day of the week.

One aspect of the trail environment not covered in the interpretive pamphlet that's available at the Goodnow trailhead kiosk is the dampness we've experienced in the Adirondacks this summer, one of the hottest and most humid on record.

All that moisture created an environment this summer where several lifeforms not usually found in great abundance in the Adirondacks have become very, very common here — specifically, wood frogs and toads, fungi, and mushrooms.

Huge colonies of at least a dozen different varieties of mushrooms can be found on the path up Goodnow mountain, at places nearly covering the trail.

Goodnow's most abundant "wildlife" species, at least on the ground, is the forest toad.

Summit tower and cabin

You'll know you're nearing the summit of Goodnow Mountain when you pass the first of three abandoned structures on your right, the concrete pad of an old building of uncertain utility.

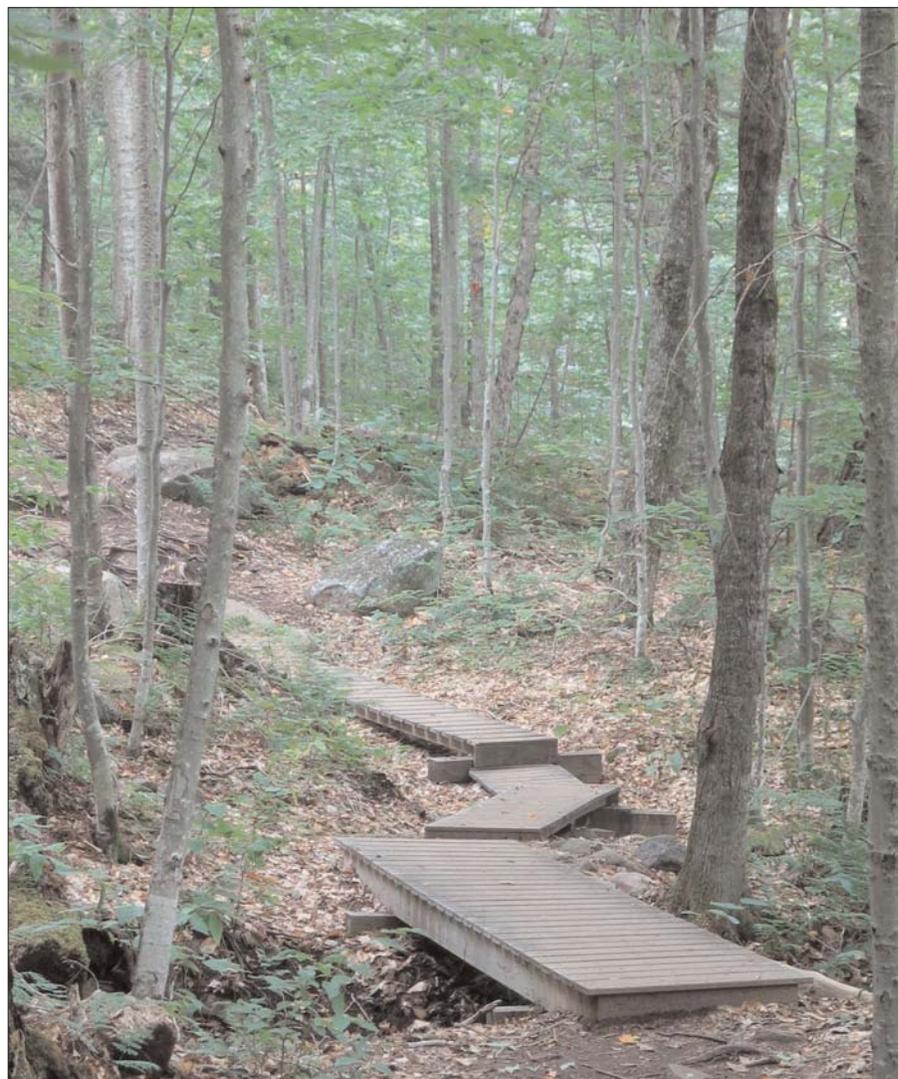
A few hundred feet farther is the horse barn once used by Archer and Anna Huntington, who donated their mountain land to ESF.

A little bit past the little barn is a side trail leading to the ruins of a covered well that once provided drinking



Above, a composite shot of the Goodnow Mountain fire observer's cabin interior.

Below, one of the boardwalks that eases the hike up Goodnow while also protecting several of the more delicate portions of the trail.



water to the fire observers who stood guard on Goodnow tower.

As is the case with every tower summit I have climbed, not a trace of the Goodnow fire tower can be seen until you're almost upon it.

The tower is impressive, standing 60 feet above the bare rock of Goodnow's summit, half of that extending above the forest canopy. While not the tallest in the state — several towers stand as high as 80 feet — it does hold the record for Essex County. The 360-degree view from the top of the tower is superb, said to be one of the best in the area.

Just as impressive as the tower's height is its condition. The entire tower, including the cab, has been restored — not a mean feat, especially considering the winds that wail over Goodnow's 2,690-foot summit all the year round.

At the foot of the tower stands a cabin where a fire observer (and, often, his wife) lived for six months out of the year.

Like the tower itself, the observer's cabin has been restored and rudimentarily equipped so that it gives visitors a sense of what it must have been like to live for half the year on that lonely summit.

The open, intact observer's cabin on Goodnow is a real rarity. Among the other Essex County fire towers:

- The observer's cabins at the foot of Mount Adams are disintegrating, awaiting restoration.
- Of the two cabins for the Vanderwhacker tower, one is intact and locked up tight, while the other is rapidly falling apart.
- The two observer's cabins that used to stand on the summit ridge of Poke-O-Moonshine fell victim to a firebug sometime after the tower was closed in 1988.
- The Hurricane tower's cabin is long gone, circumstances unknown.
- The Mount Belfry observer's cabin was built in 1934. I do not know its status.
- As for the tower on Palmer Hill, I'm not sure if it ever had an observer's cabin, so close is it to a road, making it possible for the fire observer there to "commute" to work.

Side trip: Whiteface tower at Adirondack Museum

BLUE MTN. LAKE — The little fire tower erected high atop Whiteface Mountain in 1919 is still standing — but not on Whiteface Mountain.

In 1973, shortly after the state stopped manning the Whiteface tower, it was taken apart, shipped to Blue Mountain Lake, and reconstructed on the campus of the Adirondack Museum.

Today, the 22-foot Whiteface Mountain fire tower serves as an exhibit of what most of the 102 fire observation stations once standing around New York state looked like.

The historic marker that once stood atop Whiteface next to the fire tower, placed during the 1935 commemora-

tions of the Forest Preserve's first half-century, was brought to Blue Mountain Lake along with the tower.

Curiously, the information shown on the marker is inaccurate, showing the fire tower as having been erected in 1909. True, that was the year when a fire observation station was first *manned* atop Whiteface — but the tower was not built there until 1919.

To visit the Whiteface Mountain fire tower at the Adirondack Museum, take a jog south at Long Lake off the route between Lake Placid, Tupper Lake and Newcomb. Blue Mountain Lake is about 12 miles from Long Lake on Route 30.

