

Picnic Trails

A well-executed picnic walk has a simple three-part structure. First is the walk to your picnic, to build an appetite. Second is a relaxed visit to a very nice place, with food. And third is the amble back, to restart the digestive process. This requires a simple meal, because it must be carried in, and usually any garbage must be carried out, and it allows you to spend more than a few minutes in a nice place that you might otherwise just walk past.

All excursions are uphill to the picnic site, and downhill going back. They are presented in their order of difficulty, from easiest to most difficult, but none are really difficult, and all can be good family outings. All distances are *one way only*.

Walk 1: The Highlands Trail

Two good picnic walks use the Morris County portion of the Highlands Trail, in Morris County's Mahlon Dickerson Reservation. This is a long-term 150-mile project of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, which will eventually link the Delaware and Hudson rivers, by way of Morris and Sussex counties. This trail is marked with distinctive teal-colored diamond blazes.

This first walk is the most formal, because it leads to a designated picnic area, with tables, and is also the shortest, at about a third of a mile each way. From Route 15 in **Jefferson Township**, go north about two miles on Weldon Road. Look for a marked pedestrian crossing, with a small paved parking area on the left. Park here, cross the road and turn left onto the trail.

In the 1850's, five mines were active in what is now Mahlon Dickerson Reservation, and the Ogdoh Mine Railroad opened in 1864 to carry ore to Lake Hopatcong. The trail moves onto a large curved embankment that once carried the ore trains up and down this hill.

At the far end of the embankment you can see where rocks and dirt were excavated to provide material for construction of the embankment. Further up the trail, in a small cut with rocks on both sides, there is a vertical groove in a large rock on the right. This is what remains of the drilled hole that held the dynamite that blew this rock apart when the railroad was built.

In the 1890's Thomas Edison tried to revive the eastern iron industry by inventing a process to refine ore at the mines. He built a large facility in Ogdon, at the end of this line, and often traveled by train on the route that you are walking.

The railroad bed turns left at Saffin Pond, but picnic tables are to the right. The best table is just past the dam, with its view of the waterfall through the trees. Swimming is not allowed, but this can be a fine place for skipping stones.

Difficulty: *Easy*

Walk 2: Highlands Trail Again

A second walk in Mahlon Dickerson Reseration begins about 3 ½ miles further up Weldon Road, at the parking lot for the main picnic area. Follow the teal-blazed Highlands Trail to the right of the directory, which crosses Weldon Road. In early June, the mountain laurel here can be wonderful. The Hedley Overlook is about ½ mile along this trail, with a forested view that includes Lake Hopatcong to the southwest.

The lower end of the Ogdon Mine Railroad (see walk 1) was on the lake. It was a very steep railroad, but only empty cars came up the hill. Iron ore was transferred to Morris Canal barges, then towed across the lake to the canal. In 1882, a rail connection was built to Nolan's Point for the ore. This ended the use of ore barges on the lake, but also brought tourists to lakeside hotels.

Please Note: This overlook is on very large rocks, and *could be dangerous* for energetic small children with independent minds.

Difficulty: *Easy*

Walk 3: Split Rock Trail

A half-mile walk up on a small hill near the Split Rock Reservoir in **Rockaway Township** brings you to the kind of place that can only be reached on foot.

From Route 80's exit 37 in Rockaway, drive north on Route 513. After about 2 miles bear right onto Meriden Road, then after another 2 ½ miles, bear left on to Lyonsville Rd. Turn left at the end of this road, onto Split Rock Road, then watch for a cleared area on the left, with power lines over the road, and park under them, but *only* on the uphill side of the road, as designated by the signs.

Look for blue trail blazes, (on rocks at first) and follow the trail *up* the hill. There is a steady climb here, but it gets less steep when the trail turns right and leaves the power lines. This area can be very rocky, and it sometimes can be hard to know exactly where the path is, but if you watch for blue blazes you will be able to follow the trail.

You are following a small ridge with two pronounced bumps, and a picnic spot is on the second bump. After the trail passes a *very* large rock, there is a flat grassy area for your picnic, or if you prefer, a good selection of nice comfy rocks.

This is a light, airy place with a hilltop feeling. There are small-scale views down this hill and into the forest, and this area is at its best on a warm spring or fall day without leaves on the trees, when views open up in all directions.

That large rock is a reminder that the Wisconsin Glacier changed its mind right about here, then started to recede around 11,000 years ago. As it left, it set down this rock, which gives some idea of how much ice must have been involved.

The Split Rock Trail continues from this point, and it may be possible to walk down to the stream, and up the other side on a very steep trail. A right turn onto the white-blazed Four Birds Trail takes you back to Split Rock Road, on the far side of the dam. But this is a much more difficult walk back, and it may not be possible at all if there is a lot of water coming over the Split rock dam.

Difficulty: *Moderate* if you return back on the same section of Split Rock, but *Difficult* if you continue on the Split Rock Trail to the Four Birds Trail and Split Rock Road.

Walk 4: Turkey Mountain

The visitor center and parking lot for the Pyramid Mountain Natural Historic Area is on Route 511 in **Montville Township**, and the same park also includes Turkey Mountain on the other side of the road.

The trails on and around Turkey Mountain are not as spectacular as parts of Pyramid Mountain, but they can work well for more casual strolls. Pick up a trail map in the parking lot or the Visitor Center, which is also worth a visit.

A moderate uphill walk of about one mile leads to a very nice overlook on Turkey Mountain, with a view mostly to the south. From the Visitor Center, follow the yellow trail across the street and into the woods.

Turn left when you reach the blue trail, across the new stream crossing, and follow the blue trail up the hill. At the next intersection, follow the green trail to the right, which leads to the overlook area. There is a nice selection of grassy or rocky places for picnicking and taking in the view.

If you're there at the right time, you can track the progress of the New Jersey Transit Boonton Line trains below, as the sound of the trains follow the approximate route of the old Morris Canal between Boonton and Lincoln Park.

Difficulty: *Moderate*