

Why Do We Hike?

A senior hiking group in western Maine thrives

Allen Crabtree



Editor's note: Just weeks after drafting this article at my request, Allen Crabtree died, on July 30, 2025. He was 84. He had told me he was honored to write this piece about his beloved hiking group even though he had been going through cancer treatments. He was quick to tell me that he'd begun hiking again. A true leader, he organized several members to send us photos.

I first met Allen in 2017 when he attended Writing from the Mountains, a workshop I lead every fall at Cardigan Lodge. He convinced me to take an extra Army surplus sleeping bag he wanted to get rid of, and one morning he jumped my car battery after I had left the dome light on all night. We are sorry he could not see this piece in print, but we are happy to share his message of staying active in later years.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR EVERY MORNING, AND OFTEN SAY TO MYSELF, “You’re getting old. Why are you still hiking?” I have climbed the hills and mountains of the Whites since I was a teenager, and now in my mid-80s I am still at it. Maybe it is because I’m a slow learner that I keep climbing these familiar trails, but hiking is much more to me and my fellow hikers than that. Every Friday I put on my hiking clothes, don my 40-year old Limmer boots and head off to meet my fellow Denmark Mountain Hikers for this week’s adventure.

The Denmark Mountain Hikers, named for the Maine town where my church pastor helped start this group, have been hiking for fifteen years. That’s not a long time, especially compared with the Appalachian Mountain Club or other established hiking groups. But the span of those years has changed us. Our more than 700 hikes in the White Mountains have etched into our memories enchanting bird calls, delicate spring wildflowers, the crunch of snow under our snowshoes, the sweet smell of autumn leaves, waterfalls, glorious sunsets and moon rises, and many more pleasurable assaults on our senses. As special as all these are, the company of like-minded souls is even more important.

Most of our hikers are in their mid- to late 60s, but many are in their 70s and 80s. Our oldest member is 94; and she was walking with us until just a

Members of the Denmark Mountain Hikers—from left, Nancy Sosman, Trudy Dunn, and Susan Gassett—help each other up a steep section of Table Mountain in Bartlett, New Hampshire. ALLEN CRABTREE

few years ago. One hiker observed, “As I have grown older the mountains seem taller, the trails steeper and longer. But I still look forward to our weekly outings with old and new friends.” Growing old means that our bodies are not as supple and resilient as they used to be. We don’t have the same strength and stamina. We still have functional bodies, but our senses may be weaker, so we add devices such as glasses and hearing aids. Some of us have artificial knees and hips. We move slowly and recover slowly from strenuous activity. Most of us use hiking poles to help our balance, especially at stream crossings.

A dozen or two of us gather each week to hit the trails. We go all year-round and in almost every type of weather. In our decade and a half, our hikers have learned to deal with wear and tear on aging bodies. Some have suffered heart attacks, broken bones and sprains, foot and shoulder surgeries, stiff joints and arthritis, COVID-19, dementia and memory loss, and other maladies that many of us suffer as we get older. But, like Energizer bunnies,

after time to heal our hikers step back on the trails with a new appreciation of life and fresh air.

When I ask, “Why do you hike?” the answers are as varied as the people hiking in the group. They hike with us to get out and enjoy nature, keep active and healthy, raise their spirits, and enjoy the company of fellow hikers. Science has proven the mental and physical advantages of getting out and exercising regularly. Every hike has its rewards. The wonders of the trail are there for everyone who takes the time to listen and enjoy them. The views after reaching the summits reward us for making the climb and are, for many of us, spiritually uplifting experiences.



Allen Crabtree rests on a summit. GORDON FARRELL

W. Phillip Keller in his book *Sky Edge, Mountaintop Meditations* (Kregel Publications, 1992) writes, “And though I am now well advanced in years, the lure of the peaks still grips me fiercely, constraining me again and again to respond to the challenge of the upward trail. . . . The person who has spent time at the edge of the sky is never, ever, quite the same again.”

On the first Friday of January each New Year, the Denmark Mountain Hikers gather on the summit where it all began for us: Peary Mountain in Brownfield. Five of us snowshoed to the top on January 10, 2010. My minister, Reverend John Patrick, who leads the Denmark Congregational Church, tricked me into climbing Peary after we had been talking about hiking and backpacking. Peary is an easy, short climb, but the snow was deep, and I was out of shape at the time. Breaking trail through the knee-deep snow was tough. But after relaxing at the summit and enjoying the views of the Whites, we talked about doing this type of thing on a regular basis.

Our weekly outings have grown with a dozen or more joining in. The largest number of hikers sometimes numbers two dozen, and we then divide into smaller groups of faster, moderate, and slower hikers to reduce our impact on the solitude of the trail. We often have a dog or two join us. There is something special about being all together. We share our lives as we learn about the natural world we pass through. Many of our hikers have climbed the 48 New Hampshire 4,000-footers, completed the 52 with a View list, and completed some strenuous hikes in the Sierras and Tetons, on the Pacific Crest Trail, and in Europe.

Our email list includes nearly 1,000 names now. I send out a monthly group hike schedule, weekly hike reports, and photos. The Denmark Mountain Hikers don't have any bylaws, membership cards, dues, or even secret decoder rings. Whoever shows up for the hike each week joins the group and shares the joy. It doesn't take much for our group to have a party—every time we achieve a 1,000-mile milestone under our boots on the trail, a special birthday, holidays, or the return of one of our hikers who has been sidelined with medical challenges. One of our hikers usually brings homemade cookies or brownies, and another reads a poem at the summit on each hike. If it's warm weather, we'll combine a dip in a favorite mountain pool after the hike.

Twice a year our group does trail maintenance on the Southwest Ridge Trail on Pleasant Mountain for the Loon Echo Land Trust. We always have a good turnout of enthusiastic workers, wielding saws and shovels, pry bars and rakes, and leave the trail much better than when we started. It is a good hands-on experience for all of us to better appreciate the dedicated trail

maintenance crews who make the climbing that much more enjoyable. We sometimes host “trail angel” kiosks along the Appalachian Trail at Crawford Notch for passing AT thru-hikers. It is great to hear all their stories and offer them goodies and useful items.

The community of our hikers is also a caring one. We have learned from the challenges and mishaps experienced and try not to repeat them. As we have aged, we keep an eye on those with weaker memories and sense of direction and share clothing and water when someone needs them. We have added more “easy” hikes to adapt to the current group.

WE HAVE EXPERIENCED SOME MISHAPS AND SERIOUS ACCIDENTS. ON ONE OF our earliest hikes, Phil S., then 85 years old, got lost off the trail. We had divided the group into two for our semiannual trail maintenance on the Southwest Ridge Trail, and Phil was part of the upper group that went to the southwest summit clearing fallen trees and brush. The other group worked on the water bars on the lower part of the trail. Phil decided he wasn't up to hiking to the summit, so he turned back. His group was not aware he had left. At a point just below the ledges, the trail takes a sharp turn. Phil continued straight and was soon lost on the side of the mountain. We didn't discover that he was missing until we gathered at the trailhead after the hike. I was able to contact his wife and got his cell phone number. When I called Phil, he said he was fine—a little embarrassed, but lost. We began to assemble to look for him, but Phil came out to the road on his own about a mile from the trailhead. We soon blocked off the false trail that had led Phil astray and erected a couple of large trail cairns and trail markers to direct hikers in the right direction. This spot will always be known to us as “Phil's Corner.”

Now at the start of every hike, everyone signs a roster listing cell and home phones numbers. The group halts at trail junctions to count noses and close any “accordions” created when the group has spread out. We always designate a hike “lead” and “sweep” and give everyone hiking that day a map showing trails and features. If we break into smaller groups, we make sure that each group leader knows who is in their group. Occasionally someone will wander off the trail, usually because they were talking and not paying attention. Some of our hikers, we have learned, have absolutely no sense of direction. All our lost hikers have been found fairly quickly, and having cell phone numbers to contact them helps greatly.

We also have dealt with injuries and medical emergencies. Every two years a group of our hikers refresh their Wilderness First Aid (WFA) and



Several of the Denmark Mountain Hikers rest after climbing Lowe's Bald Spot, an outcropping with a view of Mount Washington. DALE NELSON

cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training in Conway, New Hampshire, so that we can be prepared if one of our hikers, or a stranger we meet, needs medical assistance. We have dealt with broken bones, sprains, heatstroke, cuts and scrapes, insect stings, hyperglycemia, hypothermia, and even a death. I like to think that by hiking with people who took wilderness first aid, I have my own insurance in case the day comes when I experience my own medical emergency.

We unfortunately called all our emergency skills into use in August 2014, when one of our hikers collapsed while we were climbing Mount Jefferson. Twelve of us were hiking the Caps Ridge Trail that day. Nearing the summit, Greg L. suffered a heart attack. He was 63 years old and one of our strongest hikers. Our group of hikers responded with their WFA skills and performed CPR on Greg for two and a half hours.

Everyone pitched in in an orderly way, relieving each other doing the CPR while I assessed the situation and Greg's condition with the SOAP note (which stands for subjective, objective, assessment, and plan). There was no panic or wringing of hands. Greg would have been proud of us. We learned later he had died of a heart attack. He had no history of cardiac problems.

I had a great deal of trouble contacting his wife but with the help of the Bridgton police, I finally gave her the sad news from the mountainside. She said that Greg had always told her that when he went he wanted to die on the side of a mountain. It was a picture-perfect day, and we could see everywhere from the spot where he died.

Rick Wilcox and his Mountain Rescue Service team had gathered at the trailhead ready to assist, and New Hampshire Fish and Game and the Mount Washington Observatory also responded. The sun was starting to set, so I led the hikers back down the trail while we still had light, while John Patrick stayed up high until the New Hampshire Army National Guard helicopter arrived to lift Greg's body off the mountain. Rick met John as he came down in the dark, and we drove Greg's truck back to his home, where we comforted his wife. She joined the group and has hiked with us several times. Greg's laugh and positive manner were uplifting to all of us. We still miss him.

Now each of our hikers is asked to complete and have in their packs a medical emergency form, in case they have a medical situation on the trail. This is an important legacy that Greg left us. Thankfully we haven't had to use them since Greg's demise.

ALTHOUGH MANY OF OUR GROUP HIKE SOLO ON THE NON-GROUP DAYS, I believe the rewards of hiking increase when we're together sharing the natural world.

So when we ask, "Why do we hike?" the answers are many. For the joy of it, for each other's company, for the natural world, and to stay fit. As long as the mountains are there, our hikers will be there too.

ALLEN CRABTREE of Sebago Lake, Maine, was the retired executive director of New Hampshire Fish and Game and was one of the original members of the New Hampshire Outdoor Council. He wrote a guidebook called *Go Take a Hike: Hiking Tips and Outings for Seniors in Western Maine and the White Mountains* (independently published in 2017). He dealt in old books, and he and his wife, Penny, ran a pick-your-own blueberry farm.