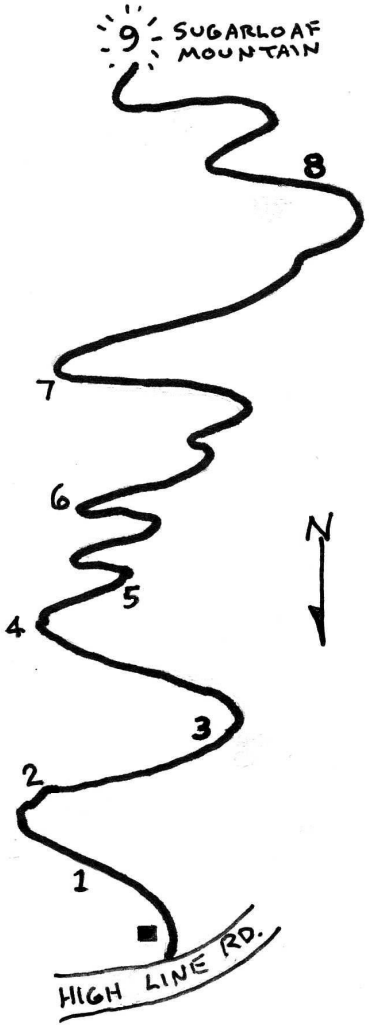
West Sugarloaf Mtn Trail 22

Map not to scale



TRAIL — ROADS

INTERPRETIVE BOXES ■ 2 INTERPRETIVE POSTS

STREAMS ≈≈→ P PARKING AREAS

HIKING SAFETY GUIDELINES

- *Carry water with you*
- *Stay on designated trail*
- *Inform a friend of your hiking plans*
- *Hike with another person*
- *Leash your pet*
- *Carry a cell phone with fully charged and extra battery*
- *Carry important medication/first aid*
- *Call Security or the Trust Nature Center if you need help*

Balsam Mountain Trust

Phone: *(828)631-1060*

BMP Security

Phone: *(828)631-1011*

Interpretive Trail Guide

FOLLOWING NUMBERED POSTS PLACED ALONG TRAIL

West Sugarloaf Mountain Trail 22

aged oak

Terrain: Foot trail with numerous switchbacks on a steep slope. Connects with East Sugarloaf Mtn, Trail. Picnic table on summit of Sugarloaf Mtn

Trail elevation: 680 ft elevation difference between each end

Trail length: One way is 0.7 mile

Trail Difficulty: Moderate to strenous

Must see: Old growth oak forest near summit

1) This young regenerating forest is full of clues regarding its past history. Numerous slender sprouts rise from stumps of former trees clear-cut about 1985. In some cases, remnants of the stumps are visible, but otherwise only an outline is suggested by the ring of new sprout growth. Scattered amidst these young trees are remnants of an older forest disturbance- the salvage logging of American chestnut, dating from the 1930's.

From this old logging road, the foot trail switchbacks up the slope.

2) Looking eastward into a rock-strewn cove, a stark difference in tree age is apparent, compared to the young forest to the west. A few trees visible are 2 to 3 feet in diameter and in excess of 100 years of age, including the closer examples of bitternut hickory, white ash, white basswood and northern red oak. As in any stand of older trees, breakage and death (see the oak behind you) become trademarks of the natural procession of growth and recycling, resulting in a mixture of tree ages.

3) A common shrub throughout the Preserve is **wild hydrangea** (*Hydrangea arborescens*). This clumping plant produces rather flat-topped clusters of tiny white flowers, sometimes with larger-petaled sterile flowers arranged on the perimeter of the flower cluster. During winter the dried capsular fruits make up the clusters, each shedding many thousands of dustlike seeds in the wind. This shrub is valuable in stabilizing roadbanks and provides hardy utilitarian uses in landscaping, being easily transplanted. The pithy twigs are often browsed by deer.

4) The view east across the cove system that harbors Sugarloaf Creek and its tributaries reveals the summit of DoubleTop Mountain. Within this view, the wide crowns of trees pre-dating 1900 are seen in contrast to the narrow crowns of younger forest. Most of these old trees are **northern red oak** (*Quercus rubra*). Because of the steep and rocky slopes on which they are growing, this timber stand escaped logging activities while surrounding areas were cut. Notice the saucer-shaped acorn caps underfoot, many 1 inch or wider; these are conspicuous features of northern red oak.

5) About 50 feet below the trail marker stands a tree with smooth gray bark but with 3 feet of its lower trunk looking burnt. The blackness is not from fire, but from sooty mildew that is thriving on sugar residues. This **red maple** (*Acer rubrum*) is particularly attractive to sap-sipping birds- they have pecked holes in the trunk to bleed sap. Sap flowing down the bark leaves sugar residues after the water evaporates. Not every maple is tapped equally- sugar content and sap flow can vary from tree to tree.

6) The split in the trunk of this large red oak, along with the dark decay deposits at its base, indicate that a partially hollow trunk is gradually giving way. As the weight of the crown continues to grow, fungal decay reduces the structural support afforded by heartwood and with time this tree will fall. A tree does not need solidity of the trunk to live, since sap flow takes place only in the outer layers of wood, but loss of too much heartwood will cause structural failure when tons of wet, growing wood swaying overhead breach a critical point.

7) The remnant snag of a long-dead American chestnut stands nearby, clearly showing evidence of fire at its base. Fires in habitats such as this relatively moist slope are not as frequent as on drier sites, but seasonal conditions can support fire virtually anywhere. Lightning strikes are the chief cause of natural fires, igniting dead trees, snags or logs, or causing leaf litter or understory blazes. An absence of fire scars on living trees in this area indicates this snag burned long ago, or was ignited by a leaf litter blaze.

8) An old stand of **rosebay rhododendron** (*Rhododendron maximum*) greets the trail walker with the dense shade of its evergreen foliage. Sometimes blanketing acidic slopes, ridges or streamsides with a seemingly solid green mass (when viewed from a distance), rhododendron thickets are locally known as "slicks". This thicket is tall enough to walk beneath, but some slicks are too dense to negotiate without resorting to crawling on the ground or clambering over the tops of the plants. Once such thickets become established, they resist tree intrusion through their constant and deep shading of the forest floor. Only fire can prune back the shrubs and permit tree seedlings to compete.

9) Standing at 4580 ft. elevation on the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain, the views north and south reveal rolling, tree-covered ridges that define the southern Appalachian landscape. Where there is soil, trees quickly colonize. This small summit clearing is purposely maintained, otherwise woody growth would cover it. Absence of tree cover on some mountaintops earned them the name of "balds" in the past. Regardless of their origin, without continued intervention, balds inevitably revert to forest. Only bare rock outcrops resist such a pace of succession.