



# HANOVER CONSERVANCY

*Protecting land & water  
in our community*

## HANOVER HIKE OF THE MONTH

### December – Behemoths of Balch Hill

*The perfect quick and easy holiday hike with visiting family.*

Hiking distance: 0.8 miles round trip

Elevation gain: 160 feet

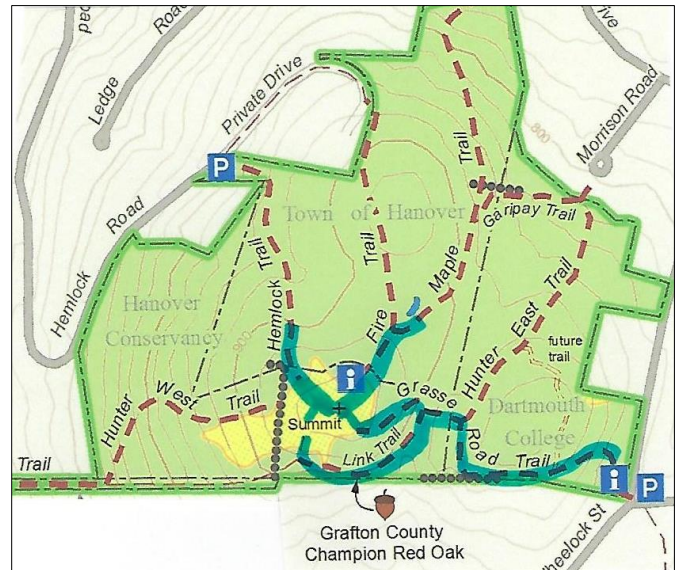
Time: 35-40 minutes

#### Driving directions:

- From Downtown Hanover, drive east for 1.6 miles on East Wheelock Street, up a long hill to the junction of Grasse and Trescott Roads.
- Park in the unpaved informal parking area on the northeast side of this intersection.

#### What you should know:

- ❖ This loop hike takes you through the Balch Hill Natural Area to the summit with its beautiful views. Along the way you'll visit grandfather trees that may have witnessed our town's founding – including the Grafton County Champion Northern Red Oak.
- ❖ You'll be walking on lands owned by Dartmouth College, the Hanover Conservancy, and the Town of Hanover. Conservation easements and other restrictions protect some but not all of this land.
- ❖ Trails have occasional short up-and-down grades but are easy for the entire family.
- ❖ Foot travel only; no bicycles please.
- ❖ Archery hunting for deer is permitted Sept. 15 - Dec. 15; blaze orange is a good wardrobe choice.
- ❖ Dogs are welcome but must be under your control; please pick up after your pet.



#### BRIEF HIKING DIRECTIONS

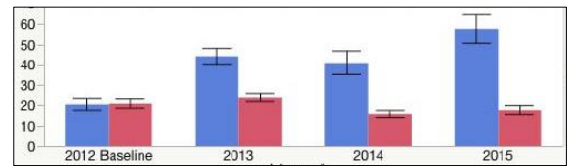
- Take the red-blazed Grasse Road Trail from the trailhead kiosk to summit, crossing a small footbridge.
- From the summit kiosk, take the Fire Trail down to the junction with the Maple Trail.
- Return to the summit and take the Hemlock Trail down to a large fallen tree.
- Return to the summit and head for a group of apple trees and a stone bench. Look for the Piave Trail sign and turn L onto the red-blazed Grasse Road Loop.
- Take this trail to the Champion Red Oak; continue to the small footbridge; turn R to return to your car.

#### FULL DIRECTIONS

- Begin your hike at the trailhead kiosk, across Grasse Road from the parking area. The Hanover Lions Club generously donated this timberframe kiosk in 2011. Here, you can read a bit about the history of this land and pick up a trail guide if you wish.
- The Grasse Road Trail heads across the slope on Dartmouth College land. This section was re-routed in 2015 by an Upper Valley Trails crew to follow a gentler, more sustainable path than the original.

→ The path soon turns to avoid a series of downed trees. What happened here? A short but violent windstorm on Patriot's Day in April, 2007 blew down many trees on this part of the hill, and it will be years before they melt back into the earth.

→ For several years near this spot stood a deer "exclosure" where Dartmouth ecology students conducted a study to determine the effect of deer browse on the vegetation. Two identical plots, one fenced against deer and the other unfenced, were compared each year. Here are the results for the plot in this area. The blue bars indicate total number of plants in the fenced plots where deer cannot enter to browse, while red bars indicate the number of plants in the unfenced plots. In 2012, before the fencing went up, both plots had nearly the same number of plants. Contrast that to 2015! The largest change is in the number of wildflowers, especially Canada mayflower.



→ You've reached the low stone wall marking the southern boundary. Look for fragments of sheep fencing (large rectangles of wire fence) that date from the pre-Civil War "sheep craze" in the Upper Valley. In 1840, Hanover had over 10,000 sheep grazing on its hillsides, including this one, while the human population was around 2,000.

→ Follow the Grasse Road Trail as it makes a right turn away from the wall and heads north among tall, cool hemlocks.

→ At the junction with the Hunter East Trail (route to the Morrison Road neighborhood), turn left and cross a small log bridge over a wet area and onto Hanover Conservancy land.

→ The trail bears right then immediately left and heads up the slope past some dramatic pine snags. In ten minutes' walk from your car, you'll reach the 920' summit.



→ Enjoy the sweeping views from this, the only open summit in town where the public is welcome. Twenty-one miles to the south is grand Mount Ascutney. The spire of Baker Tower marks downtown Hanover in the near view to the west, while on the western horizon, 29 miles across Vermont, the sharp peak of Killington appears. To the northwest, our volunteers have been restoring the view toward Gile Mountain in Norwich.

→ Historically, the summit of Balch Hill was used as a pasture for grazing sheep and cattle. Records indicate that it was cleared of most trees for more than a century. In

our experience, those trees badly want to return! We've been working to restore the orchard on the hill and keep the views open by mowing the meadow.

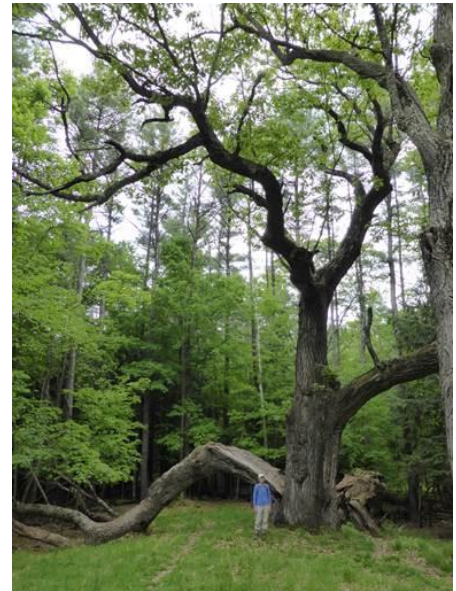
→ Once known as Corey Hill after an early owner, Balch Hill takes its name from former owner Adna P. Balch (1817-1889). Balch, a prominent citizen who served in the legislature in 1876-1877, promoted the development of the railroad in the Connecticut River Valley and was a director of the Hanover Gas Company. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the summit was known as Dewey Hill



*View of Hanover from Balch Hill in winter; undated photo*

Pasture, after owners in those later days.

- You can imagine what demand there might be to develop this hillside with its astounding views, so close to town. That's why the Hanover Conservancy, then known as the Hanover Conservation Council, set out to purchase the summit when a New York developer proposed first 126 condominiums and then 49 luxury homes for this place. The community came together to protect the land, with the Council and Town later adding to it with a second purchase from the Garipay family. Make a note to come back for the annual Balch Hill Kite Day in May or the Hawk Watch in September, to see how much the community enjoys this natural area today. It was worth the effort!
- After visiting the summit kiosk, erected by the Council in memory of Alice Jackson in 2009, begin your tour of Balch Hill's biggest trees. Take the wide Fire Trail behind the kiosk for a short distance to its junction with the Maple Trail.
- Take this right turn and in just a few steps you meet some venerable old sugar maples that may once have marked the path of an early road. These ancients stand out against their much younger brethren.
- Head back up the Maple and Fire Trails to the summit. Pass the kiosk and nearby bench, and head down to the right toward the Hemlock Trail sign. You'll soon come to the remains of an enormous old oak tree, its split trunk and massive limbs now draped across the landscape, having lost their battle with gravity and time. The trail actually passes under the fallen trunk. Here's what it looked like in 2014 (right).
- Return to the summit for your last view before visiting the largest resident of Balch Hill. From the low bench near the summit maple, walk west and downhill toward the view of downtown, to another stone bench near a group of crabapple trees. Just beyond, you'll see a sign for the Piane Trail on the left, nailed to a white birch. Head down this trail only a few steps and make a sharp left onto the red-blazed Grasse Road Loop.
- The trail follows the contour, leading you in a couple of minutes to the County Champion Northern Red Oak, marked with a small sign. Despite its size, it can be easy to miss as its bulk is so far overhead. Look for it opposite the cut trunk of a tree.
- Neighbors are sometimes reluctant to cut trees along boundaries, and we think it was this instinct that protected this massive tree, the largest survivor of its kind in Grafton County. When measured by the state's Big Tree Steward in 2014, it had a circumference of 196 inches, a height of 114 feet, and an average crown spread of 80 feet. Had its cousin on the Hemlock Trail not lost its limbs, that tree would have been even larger.
- After admiring this giant and imagining the history it must have witnessed, continue on the trail that soon bears left to head up a small valley to the small footbridge. You're now five minutes from your car.
- Cross the bridge, bear right at the junction with the Hunter East Trail, and return down the hill to your car.



The volunteer Balch Hill Stewardship Committee cares for this place and always welcomes help. Contact us if you'd like to get involved! We welcome contributions to the Balch Hill Stewardship Fund to help with the costs of annual mowing, vegetation management, and trail improvements.

*The Hanover Conservancy, New Hampshire's oldest local land trust, is a private, non-profit membership organization independent of the Town of Hanover.*

*Learn more about the Balch Hill Natural Area at [www.hanoverconservancy.org/lands/balch-hill](http://www.hanoverconservancy.org/lands/balch-hill).*

*December 2016, updated September 2020*