



Natural Heritage Hikes

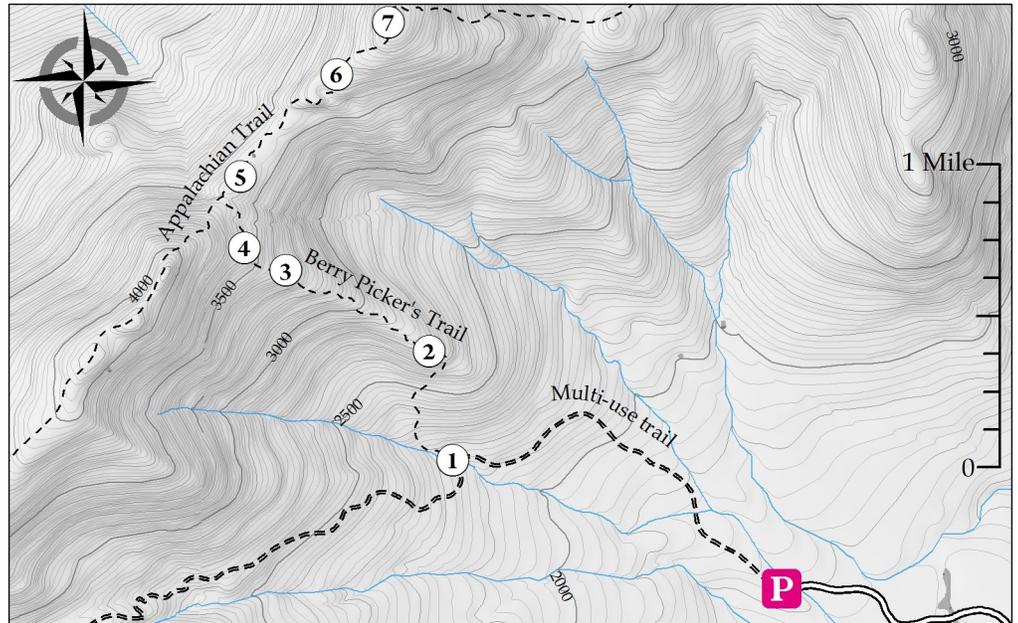
Saddleback Mountain—The Horn

Berry Picker's Trail and AT- 8 miles round trip, moderate

Approaching from the south, the Berry Picker's trail is the easiest hiking route to the Saddleback ridge. The trail follows an old path used by local residents to access the mountain for many years to collect berries. As we follow this route up to the Saddleback Horn, we observe the changes in plant communities and the fruits (edible or not) that we may expect to find along the way. Note— please remain on trails, as alpine vegetation is highly vulnerable to foot traffic.

Getting There

To reach the trailhead, turn off ME-4 in the center of Madrid village and cross the Sandy River over the one-lane bridge onto the paved Reeds Mill Road. At 3.0 miles, immediately after crossing a bridge over Conant Stream in front of a white house (on the right), turn left onto a gravel road. Follow this private gravel road, for 3.1 miles until the road forks. Take a left at the fork and, shortly after crossing a bridge, you will arrive at an ATV gate. Park at the ATV gate and hike for approximately 1.4 miles along an ATV Trail before meeting the Berry Picker' trail. Navigational guides and a vehicle with good clearance are strongly advised. Please visit mainetrailfinder.org for more information.



① **Montane spruce fir forest** -70.482656, 44.930103

Whether in flower or fruit, bunchberry can be hard to miss.



Bunchberry flowers and fruits.

These berries are consumed by a variety of wildlife species including deer, moose, grouse and many others.

Departing from the Fly Rod Crosby multi-use trail, the Berry Picker's Trail winds for the first 0.5 miles through [montane spruce fir forest](#). Red spruce and balsam fir are the dominant canopy trees, but other species including aspen and heart-leaved paper birch are also abundant. In the understory of these dark, closed canopy forests, the bright red berries of bunchberry will be highly noticeable by late summer. [Bunchberry \(*Chamaepericlymenum canadense*\)](#) is a species in the dogwood family and occurs in northern forests across North America. Bunchberry has a relatively bland flavor but historically had a wide range of human uses, from medicinal teas to combinations with meats to make pemmican, a concentrated, long lasting mixture of fat and protein.



Capsules(above) and leaves (below) of three toothed cinquefoil.

② **Rocky Spruce Woodland** -70.484373, 44.935284

Rocky terrain with sharp rocks and toothed plants.

Emerging onto a rocky outcrop, we gain the first of a series of exceptional views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. Scattered red spruce and balsam fir are gaining purchase in cracks in the rock. Closer to the ground we see the process of soil creation, with mosses and lichens growing on moist seeps on the rock face, soon to be colonized by a variety of low shrubs including the common [lowbush blueberry \(*Vaccinium angustifolium*\)](#), [velvetleaf blueberry \(*Vaccinium myrtilloides*\)](#) and uncommon [three-tooth cinquefoil \(*Sibbaldiopsis tridentata*\)](#). Three-tooth cinquefoil is characteristic of these mid-elevation rocky ridges and often grows vegetatively through thin soils and crevices. Although in the rose family, three-tooth cinquefoil does not produce an edible fruit. Instead, its seed is held in a papery receptacle swept away by passing animals.



Glacial erratic on the south slope of Saddleback Mountain.

③ **The erratic** -70.494102, 44.939019

An impressive boulder marks the beginning of subalpine vegetation.

An erratic is a boulder once held in ice, left behind following glacial melt. Occasionally these large rocks are perched in epic locations, such as this boulder hovering on Saddleback’s shoulder. Although we are not yet fully above tree line, several high elevation plants including [mountain cranberry \(*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*\)](#) are beginning to appear. In Maine, mountain cranberry has a disjunct distribution and includes alpine summits of Maine’s western Mountains and exposed headlands along the Downeast coast. Mountain cranberry has a circumboreal distribution (occurring in boreal areas across North America and Eurasia) and is common throughout the arctic. Also known as lingonberry, it is commonly used in jams and sauces.

Naturalist’s Notes



Mountain cranberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) is distinguished from small cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccos*) by the presence of dark glands on the underside of the leaves.



Leaves and fruit of mountain cranberry.

④ **Subalpine fir forest** -70.496931, 44.940071

Returning to the forest is a bitter pill.

Before reaching the Saddleback ridge, we have one final push through forested terrain. Within this classic [subalpine fir forest](#), red spruce and yellow birch have largely dropped out of the canopy. These forests, stunted by climate and weather, provide critical habitat for Bicknell’s thrush. Bicknell’s thrush is a bird species that has a breeding range restricted to montane fir forests of New England and Eastern Canada. In these forests, one is likely to come across [mountain ash \(*Sorbus americana*\)](#). Mountain ash, also known as “rowan”, is a small tree whose fruits are consumed by many bird species and mammals from the Fall through the Spring. These fruits are quite bitter for



Fleshy leaves and mat forming growth patterns help cushion-plant (*Diapensia lapponica*) grow in difficult alpine conditions.



Cloudberry plants make a single fruit each year with a distinctive, tart taste.



View from The Horn across Saddleback's alpine ridge.

fresh human consumption, but have been used to make jams and wines.

⑤ **Emerging on the alpine ridge** -70.497272, 44.943469

Hardy to harsh weather, but vulnerable to foot traffic.

The alpine ridge has some of most abundant edible berries along the trail, depending on the time of year. However, it is important to stay on the path to prevent damaging the sensitive alpine vegetation. Harsh climate and weather including strong drying winds, shifting snowpack, ice events and cold temperatures have led to certain plant adaptations, including formation of low cushions and mats which allow plants to stay below the snowpack and deflect strong winds; thick waxy leaves which prevent desiccation (drying); ever-green foliage which helps plants photosynthesize as soon as temperatures are above freezing; and anthocyanic (red) leaves during the dormant season which absorb sunlight and convert it to heat (see Northern Woodlands magazine, [May 2013](#)). While well adapted for harsh alpine conditions, many of these plants are rare in Maine and are especially vulnerable to trampling. More common plants along the alpine ridge include [alpine bilberry \(*Vaccinium uliginosum*\)](#), and crowberry ([Empetrum nigrum](#)). These mat forming shrubs in the heath family have edible fruits that are ripe mid-summer.

⑥ **Into the clouds** -70.490924, 44.948431

Cloudberry, a true boreal raspberry, is found in alpine wetlands.

In wetter areas along the alpine ridge, one may observe ripe cloudberrys in mid to late summer. [Cloudberry \(*Rubus chamaemorus*\)](#), like mountain cranberry, occurs both in Downeast peatland communities and on a few of Maine's alpine ridges. Cloudberry is a species of raspberry with a circumpolar distribution. It is enjoyed in communities across the arctic for its distinctive flavor, but very uncommon in alpine areas of Maine.

⑤ **The Horn** -70.487504, 44.950979

Maine's rarest blueberry occurs on Saddleback's eastern summit.

From the summit of 'The Horn', we may view many of the high peaks in this region, including Sugarloaf, Mount Abram, Bigelow and across the Saddleback summit 'lawn.' While a few other Maine mountains have sizable open summits, only Katahdin has more true alpine terrain than Saddleback Mountain. Along Saddleback's lengthy ridge occurs patches of an extensive alpine lawn containing bilberry, crowberry and several grass-like plants including [Bigelow's sedge \(*Carex bigelowii*\)](#) and the tufted [highland rush \(*Juncus trifi-*](#)

*du*s). Additionally, the rare [alpine blueberry \(*Vaccinium boreale*\)](#) also occurs here. Alpine blueberry is more diminutive (reduced in size) than other blueberry species in Maine—its leaves are narrower and the berries are ~1/3 the size of common lowbush blueberry species. These dwarf blueberry bushes are usually less than 3” tall.

Natural Heritage Hikes is a project of the [Maine Natural Areas Program](#) in partnership with the [Maine Trail Finder website](#).

For more Natural Heritage Hikes, please visit www.mainetrailfinder.com.

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