

Mount Tremper

Distance: 4.3 miles

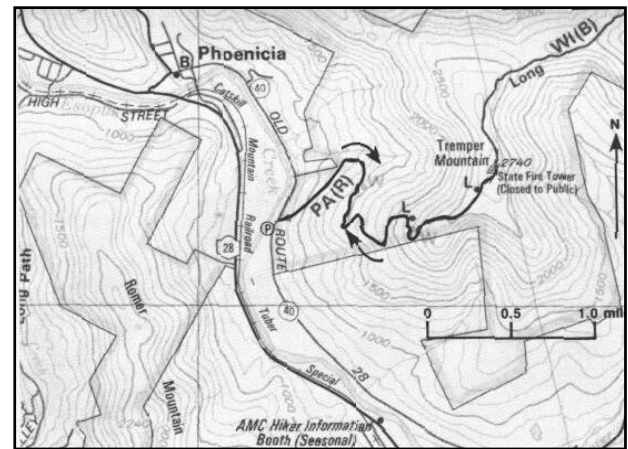
Time: 4 hours

Vertical rise: 1,960 feet

The trail to Mount Tremper is most direct and interesting from the southwest access along old NY 28, or the Old Plank Road, south of Phoenicia. It is also accessible from Willow, off NY 212, on the longer, blue-marked trail from Jessup Road. Both trails form a section of the Long Path as it approaches the Devil's Path from the south through Mink Hollow. Switchbacks characterize the red trail to Mount Tremper, transforming this otherwise difficult 2,000-foot ascent into a moderate hike. The path zigzags across the slope, turning at convenient points of terrain to double back on itself, sometimes nearly 180 degrees. Long before hiking became fashionable, the road was used for log hauling and stone quarrying, and later for fire control and maintenance. The red trail begins on the east side of the Esopus Creek, off County Route 40 (Old Plank Road or old NY 28), 2.3 miles northwest of Mount Tremper Corners, or 1.6 miles southeast of Phoenicia. Parking at streamside is ample, and you will most likely be sharing it not with fellow hikers, but with trout fishermen who enjoy the long run of water here known as "sleepy hollow." You'll be taken with the water's clarity and alpine character. You may see dimpling rises of brown and rainbow trout, whose enduring management has made the creek one of New York State's most valued fisheries. After heavy run-off, though, the Esopus assumes an ugly tinge of mountain grit and remains for days the color of chocolate milk. During these periods, when fishermen are scarce and snow sticks reluctantly in the hemlock shadows, the views from Mount Tremper are at their best. As you enter the Forest Preserve, don't be deterred by the trail's initial steepness, where logs have been placed to check erosion. It soon levels out, bringing you to the trail register at 0.25 mile. Continue over broken rock and red shale footing, gradually gaining elevation. Several larger feeder streams intersect the trail, and a culvert appears as you enter a sparse stand of maturing white pine. Evidence of logging is visible in the abundance of thin, second-growth hard-wood and several decaying stumps. Yellow paint blazes running north and southwest mark the Forest Preserve boundaries. This piece of trail also sports a few of the Long Path's blue blazes. As the trail steepens to fifteen or twenty degrees, you cross another culvert, over an energetic brook that cuts a deep gully in the mountainside as it bursts from an uneven-aged hemlock stand. At this point you are twenty minutes into the hike, or almost a half-mile. You will have reached the first switchback when the trail suddenly turns south and uphill, where large maple and ash dominate an understory of young hemlock. To your left (east) and uphill, a long outcropping that has slid in many places starts an interesting visual transition. Water appears from a spring on your left. Fallen rock can be seen below the trail to your right, now heavily covered with moss, the accumulated stuff of ancient forests. As you come through the next switchback, you'll see a huge pile of quarry tailings, the broken stone that was shoved aside as longer slabs were excavated. It now forms a sort of man-made ridge, covered with thin soil and vegetation. The quarry is accessible from a small, overgrown roadbed on the trail's left that ascends gently into the quarry excavation, which covers an acre or two. Follow it to a high, right-angled rock face, where the slabs were removed. Other than this vertical stone wall, only a small



foundation and a few rusted iron remnants bear testimony to the once-thriving industry. During your exploration, beware of the quarry-dwelling rattlesnakes, who habitually bask in the warm sun of early spring. (They are shy and wary of you.) Many of the nineteenth century hotel owners disliked the imposing quarries. By the early 1880s Major Jacob H. Tremper's Tremper House was competing for business with the Catskill Mountain House, so could ill afford competition with the nearby bluestone quarries that robbed the hills of their peace and quiet.



Alf Evers writes in *The Catskills from Wilderness to Woodstock*, "Boarders grumbled at the ugly quarry scars on mountainsides. They noticed with displeasure a conspicuous quarry erupting even before 1880 near the Catskill Mountain House and a short walk from the romantic Moses Rock, and saw quarry •• after quarry breaking into other mountain forests. Quarries began to threaten the Tremper House from its flanks, while others were unpleasantly visible. In all parts of the mountains boarders never knew when their surries or tallyhos might meet a ponderous stone wagon driven by a cursing teamster in the cloud of dust raised by its horses' hoofs and its wheels."*



After you have visited the quarry, where the dust has long since settled, follow the trail along a flatter section into an oak forest, which turns into the oak and laurel cover typical of higher elevations in the Catskills. At about 1,800 feet above sea level you switchback about 120 degrees on a steepening grade, where paper birch and an occasional white pine appear. You'll have a few glimpses south-west toward southern high peaks during early spring. Once through the switch-back, you can look through the trees at northwesterly views toward Sheridan Mountain. The trail steepens, heading directly uphill, nearly due east. Within a few minutes you see a lean-to on your right. At this point you are 1.6 miles from the trail-head. Keep a sharp eye out for this shelter if you intend to use it, because it's easy to miss, positioned as it is, downhill and facing south. It is in better condition than the summit lean-to, is more private, and has a water source nearby. Finally, after one more switchback you will climb slightly and walk a long ridge. Just as you expected the summit to appear, you will discover that the ridge continues for another half-mile through a canopy of twisted oak, tormented and battered by exposure. After twenty minutes more hiking, you will reach a stand of bright-barked beech trees on your left, and soon after that the second lean-to. The fire tower just ahead is open to the public after being restored in 2001. Great views are attainable here. The fire tower was built to replace the one on Slide, after the Mount Tremper tract was acquired between 1906 and 1910. Fires occurred on Mount Tremper in 1881, 1888, and again between 1916 and 1917. The area gave heavily of its hemlock stands between 1836 and 1879, with one local tanner recording an all-time harvest of 170,000 cords of bark. The Tremper House Hotel was built in 1879 near the existing railroad bed at the base of the mountain. It was the Catskill's first railroad hotel, in an era when remoteness was more in fashion, and was visited by so many colorful personalities that it threatened even the popularity of Charles Beach's Catskill Mountain House. Young Oscar Wilde "chose to deliver his aesthetic lectures," according to Evers, "only at the Tremper House and the Kaaterskill Hotel. Wilde praised the Catskills' scenery, but shocked hotel proprietors by stating that their mountain houses are always built in the wrong spots. The top of a mountain is no place for a mountain house ... it should be put in the valley, there the picturesque and beautiful is ever before you."*

Directions to Trailhead :

From Hunter, take Rt 23A East to Rt 214. Take Rt 214 South to hamlet of Phoenicia, located east of Shandaken and west of Mount Tremper. Turn into the hamlet of Phoenicia. Head east through the hamlet, and follow Ulster County Route 40 out of town. Proceed about 1.5 miles to reach the trailhead and parking area on the left side of the road. (Red-blazed Phoenicia Trail)

