

A Favorite Hike in TTOR's Old Town Hill Reservation

Hike submitted by Tom Horth, phgtch@gmail.com

This loop hike on The Trustees of Reservations' Old Town Hill includes two very different, but spectacular sections of the Bay Circuit Trail in Newbury. The hike features great coastal views, very varied terrain, a boardwalk, saltmarsh and a feeling of isolation from urban life.

The Old Town Hill Reservation is one of 100 wonderful reservations across Massachusetts owned and managed by The Trustees Of Reservations. TTOR is one of the statewide members of the Bay Circuit Alliance. Our thanks to them for use of their map of Old Town Hill. For details on the organization and their reservations, including some downloadable trail maps, see their website at <http://www.thetrustees.org/>

Hike length and Elevation gain: 3.0 mi. (4.9 km.), 215 ft. (65 m.)

Difficulty and Conditions: easy to moderate. Trail conditions are mostly very good. Some moderately steep sections. Not suitable for mountain bikes. Dogs are permitted on a leash, but please clean up after them. It is probably wise to avoid "greenhead season," roughly mid-July through the first week of August.

Location: This hike can only be easily reached by auto or bicycle. From Newburyport, go south on High St. (Rt. 1A), which becomes High Rd. in Newbury. Ignore the signs about bridge closure. Pass the Newbury Upper Green (with the small pond) on your right and continue 2.5 mi. (4.0 km.) to Newman Rd. on your right just before Newbury Lower Green. Follow Newman Rd. for 0.6 mi. (1.0 km.) to a small parking area on your left. (Note that the Rt. 1A bridge over the Parker River just south of here is closed and will remain so until at least 2009, so this area is not easily reachable from the south.)

Hike description: At the parking area you will see a Trustees of Reservation signboard. Head down the wide River Trail behind the sign, ignoring side trails. You will cross a short low area that may be slightly wet in wet weather, reaching the Little River at a very beautiful narrow gut with fast tidal currents. Across the river you will see Kents Island, which is part of the William Forward Wildlife Management Area. To the left is Ireland Point at the end of the island where the Little River flows into the Parker River. There are trails on Kents Island, too. A map of these trails and the entire William Forward WMA is available on the website of the Coastal Trails Coalition at <http://coastaltrails.org/xoops/>

Turn right and follow the trail along the river. The trail comes out in an open field. Follow it around to the right until you reach the main River Trail again. Turn left and retrace your steps across the short wet area, then almost immediately turn right steeply up the hill. When you come out in the Bushee Pasture, turn left and walk around the edge of the field, ignoring the short trail back down to the River Trail. The field then parallels Newman Rd. About half way across the pasture you will see a gate to Newman Rd. on your left.

Cross Newman Rd. here and go up the wide Ridge Trail which climbs steeply for a short distance then levels off. The Bay Circuit Trail joins from the left. Keep straight on. When the trail turns right and splits, keep to the right steeply up Old Town Hill. At the top of the Hill the trail turns left then passes an open spot with views to the north toward Newburyport and to the south over the Little and Parker Rivers. Continue on the mostly level trail to the open summit of Old Town Hill, where great vistas open over Plum Island and the coast, and on a clear day extend to Mt. Agamenticus in Maine.

At this point you leave the Bay Circuit which goes down to the right. You should walk straight down the vista until you see the North Loop Trail which goes very steeply downhill to the North Field. Go down but don't follow the trail out across the field. Instead, turn left, staying on the North Loop Trail in the woods. Ignore a trail to the right which goes out to the field and continue until you reach the Boardwalk Trail on your right. Follow this down to the boardwalk, which crosses a stretch of salt marsh near the upper reach of the tides. Notice how isolated from urban life this place seems, with long views and nary a house or road to be seen.

Continue following the Boardwalk Trail as it winds up through the woods to the Adams Pasture Trail. Turn left here and follow the trail to the Adams Pasture itself, with great views over the trees to the saltmarsh. The trail goes down the hill near the left edge of the pasture, cuts through the line of trees and follows a short causeway to Newman Rd. There are a couple of small dips in the trail here, left intentionally to allow high tides to reach the other side of the causeway. If you want to be sure of not getting wet feet here, you might want to time your hike to avoid high tide, which is probably a couple of hours later than high tide at the mouth of the Merrimack as given by local tide tables. See, for example,
<http://tbone.biol.sc.edu/tide/tideshow.cgi?site=Newburyport%2C+Merrimack+River&units=f>

At Newman Rd. you again join the Bay Circuit Trail. Turn left (east) and follow this lightly traveled road across the salt marsh with long views in all directions. The salt marsh is especially beautiful as it turns golden brown in the fall. You will cross a small bridge over a tidal creek. The bridge is too narrow, restricting flow. Note how tidal currents are scouring the marsh on the left. Just as Newman Rd. reaches the woods again and starts up the hill you will be back at your starting point.