

DEC, Private Club Piloting High Peaks Hiker Reservation System

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Crowded conditions along Route 73. Photo © Ken Rimany

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Ausable Club have announced a pilot reservation system to access the Club's private lands, the Adirondack Mountain Reserve (AMR). Since 1978 the State has held a conservation easement on Club/Reserve lands which allows limited access to some of the more popular places in the Adirondack Park's High Peaks Wilderness Area.

A press release from DEC cited "reliable access" and public safety along Route 73 among the reasons for the change. The pilot program is slated to run for three years according to DEC.

AMR trailheads along Route 73 in Keene provide the closest access to the valley formed by the East Branch Ausable River, and Upper and Lower Ausable Lakes in the heart of the coveted High Peaks Wilderness. The trailheads serve one of the most photographed places in the Adirondack backcountry, [Indian Head](#), along

with Rainbow Falls, Noonmark and Round mountains, and about 10 popular High Peaks. Most of the mountains themselves, and their summits, are on “forever wild” constitutionally protected Adirondack Forest Preserve Lands, but are also accessible from the shorter AMR trails.

All State owned Adirondack Forest Preserve Lands will remain accessible at all times, even without a reservation, via routes that do not cross private Ausable Club / Adirondack Mountain Reserve lands. Those most affected by the change will be 46ers and others headed to Colvin, Nippletop, and Dial, which are not otherwise accessible by public trails except by way of the Elk Lake – Marcy Trail. That much longer route comes northwest from the Elk Lake Conservation Easement, one of two major southern access points to the High Peaks. [That easement, part of Elk Lake Lodge lands](#), is closed during big game hunting season (typically late Oct. to early Dec.).

Two other major High Peaks in-holdings with easements are owned by the Adirondack Mountain Club – in the Johns Brook Valley and at Heart Lake / Adirondack Loj. Both Roostercomb and the Garden Trailhead are likely to see an increase in hikers as a result of the reservation system as those trails connect with those from AMR lands at the Wolfjaws, Armstrong, Gothics, Saddleback, Basin, and Haystack. The Garden Trailhead is typically served by the town of Keene’s hiker shuttle from the parking lot at Marcy Field.

What was already widely understood as an explosion in visitation to the High Peaks over the last decade or more, driven by hikers and social media, was exacerbated by the pandemic, and restrictions on parking along busy and narrow Route 73. The 135-year-old [Ausable Club](#) reduced available parking spaces last summer at their parking lot at the corner of Ausable Road and Route 73. The lot had held about 80 cars, but was cut to 28.

Parking has been one of the primary problems even before the increase in hikers the High Peaks. Over the past year however, there were record crowds at some mountains even as legal parking had been reduced. Many of those hikers parked illegally along Route 73, which has a 55 mile-per-hour speed limit and narrow shoulders.

The State installed electronic message boards and added new parking signs; they also conducted social media outreach. State Forest Rangers increased enforcement of parking rules, but faced their own labor shortage as they responded to a significant increase in search and rescue operations. “In recent years pedestrian traffic, illegal parking, and roadside stopping along Route 73 have created a dangerous environment for hikers and motorists alike,” DEC’s press release said.

The new reservation system will be operated by the Ausable Club / Adirondack Mountain Reserve. "Beginning May 1, and through October 31st, 2021, reservations will be required for the 70 available parking spots at the AMR parking lot for daily access to trails on AMR property, as well as the Round Mountain and Noonmark Mountain trailheads accessed through AMR lands," DEC press release said.

"Walk-in users without a reservation will not be permitted. Those arriving to Keene Valley via Greyhound or Trailways bus lines may access with a valid bus ticket from within 24 hours of arrival. Those arriving by bus must check in at the AMR hiker parking lot. The AMR parking lot is only accessible between the hours of 5 am and 7 pm daily, with the exception of overnight parking."



Map courtesy DEC

Advance reservations are required and can be made two weeks in advance. Visitors can make reservations for day or overnight use, including overnight parking. It is not necessary to have a vehicle to make a reservation to hike. Those being dropped off and those arriving by bicycle must check in at the AMR hiker parking lot and produce a valid reservation. All bicycles must be left at the hiker parking lot where a bike rack will be provided and portable restrooms will be available at the parking lot for visitor use. Visitors can begin registering at the new Hiker Reservation web portal, hikeamr.org, which will go live on April 15th, with reservations beginning May 1st."

The reservation system was one of the options included in the High Peaks Advisory Group's (HPAG) [final report](#). The HPAG was tasked in [2019](#) with providing recommendations addressing increased public use of High Peaks. They issued their report earlier this year and it is available on the [DEC website](#).

DEC's press release included the following statements:

DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said, "With the increasing number of visitors to trailheads accessed through AMR, exacerbated in 2020 by New Yorkers looking for a nature break as a respite from COVID-19, DEC and AMR are working together to promote sustainable recreation and protect public safety. To address concerns at this particular location, we are excited to announce this unique pilot reservation system, which will help protect visitors and our natural resources, while also ensuring equitable access and educating visitors about sustainable use."

Ausable Club President Roland Morris said, "The Adirondack Mountain Reserve is pleased to partner with DEC and the Town of Keene in continued efforts to protect and preserve public access to AMR and the High Peaks wilderness. The reservation pilot is a groundbreaking private/public partnership intended to improve hiker safety and the wilderness experience, while also protecting the natural resource for generations to come. For 137 years the AMR has protected the reserve and this important action in partnership with the DEC continues that tradition."

State Department of Transportation Commissioner Marie Therese Dominguez said, "The Adirondacks are one of the great wonders of New York State and offer some of the world's most stunning scenic vistas. The Department of Transportation is pleased to partner on this important initiative, which will enhance safety for all, and make it easier for residents and visitors alike to experience the natural beauty of this portion of the High Peaks region."

"The Town of Keene supports the pilot reservation system for access through the AMR easement. This reservation system helps to address public safety and protection of the environment, which are important issues addressed in the HPAG Report. The reservation system is also an effective strategy for a private landowner to manage the high levels of use their easement attracts," said Joe Pete Wilson, Supervisor, Town of Keene.

Some Adirondack Park advocates have issued statements of support as well.

"This pilot program for the upcoming High Peaks Wilderness hiking season is part of a critically needed set of user management tools for both the DEC, the Town of Keene, and the adjacent, cooperating private landowner, the AMR," said Adirondack Wild: *Friends of the Forest Preserve*'s David Gibson.

"We have been calling for a pilot reservation system for a number of years to reduce Wilderness congestion, restore wilder conditions, and increase both hiker education and public safety. Now, we wish to thank the High Peaks Strategic Advisory Group, the DEC, the Adirondack Mountain Reserve, the Town of Keene,

and other stakeholders involved for their study of the problems, and for their upcoming cooperation and commitment to initiate this pilot beginning on May 1.

“We have no doubt that the pilot will contribute to improved management of hiking pressures off of Rt. 73,” Gibson continued. “It will help protect this limited Wilderness resource, enhance opportunities to experience more wilderness solitude and naturalness, respect the private landowner providing access since 1978, and increase public safety in the Town of Keene along this heavily traveled corridor.”

“We look forward to cooperating in any way we can to make this a successful pilot reservation project and to participate in its evaluation. Our expectation is that traffic and hiker congestion at this particular hiking hub will begin to ease and the hiking public come appreciate even more the wilderness values they are there to experience while minimizing public health and safety risks for the entire community.”

“This is a big leap forward for fair access to the High Peaks for everyone,” said Adirondack Council Communications Director John F. Sheehan. “Until now, people with homes inside the park and people with access to cars had a huge advantage over the rest of the state when it came to finding a parking space or camp site in the High Peaks. A system like this really levels the playing field. It doesn’t cost anything, but it gives everyone an equal shot to get your own spot, even on a holiday weekend. All you have to do is reserve a parking spot and go.”

“This is an important step for diversity and inclusion on the Forest Preserve,” said Sheehan. “No matter where you live or how rich or poor you are, everyone with access to a smartphone, computer, or public library will have access to the most popular locations in the Adirondacks too. You don’t need to be an insider or have friends who can save a place for you. You don’t even need a car.”

“We are also encouraged by the inclusion of additional money in all of the current budget proposals for additional care and preservation of the ‘forever wild’ Forest Preserve,” said Sheehan. “We need many tools to correct the problems of overuse in the High Peaks Wilderness Area and other popular locations. We will need more rangers, more sustainable trails, improved parking, sanitary facilities and public education. And in the most over-loved places, we will need reservation systems like the one AMR and DEC are taking for a test drive.”