

Title: Social Distancing in Nature

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The Covid-19 Outbreak has changed everyone's lives. If there's a positive to be found in all of this, it's that it has helped us appreciate the little things. For one, the natural world right outside your window or down the street may be more noticeable than it was before. Social distancing has closed the door to physically gathering with friends and family, but opened the door to experience new outdoor activities.

Hiking continues to remain a common pastime in NH, but the substantial increase of people on the trails has come at the most vulnerable time for these networks. Spring typically calls for seasonal trail closures to protect sensitive ecosystems from the destruction of mud season foot traffic. In these abnormal times, however, residents are now being encouraged to get out on the trail during this period of physical and social isolation. As a community, we can all share an interest in getting outdoors without jeopardizing the long-term viability of trails or our own health. Here are some tips for responsible hiking and other outdoor activities:

(1) Hike locally. This is not the time to notch your 4,000 foot'er list. Visit your town's conservation commission webpage for more local trails, or download popular apps like *AllTrails* or a more athletic version, *Strava*. Hike safely. First responders' time should remain focused on combatting Covid-19, so this is not the time to partake in risky behavior in the backcountry. Overall, follow the guideline of 'hike low and local' to do your part in responsible trail etiquette.

(2) Fishing is a great pastime that provides wonderful opportunities for all ages and abilities. Many NH towns were historically established near bodies of water, so access is easier for us than most people realize. NH Fish & Game is currently stocking trout across the state, providing more substantial opportunities for anglers. Fishing in NH does require a license for individuals age 16 or older. These funds pay for increased access, land conservation, habitat restoration and population monitoring. Visit www.fishnh.com for tips and tricks, seasons, and to purchase a license.

(3) Exploring your local stream or wetland can also yield interesting finds without requiring a rod and reel. Spring is a great time to witness Rainbow smelt and suckers as they migrate from lakes to rivers in their quest to reproduce. In wetlands, frogs and salamanders are beginning their same annual ritual, sparked by the call of Spring Peepers. Spend a damp, warm evening near a local wetland or pond to watch this mass migration. Both activities are best done at dusk and only require a flashlight and a little patience! Want to become further involved? NH Fish & Game is seeking volunteers to aid in a statewide spring frog survey: more info found at www.wildlife.state.nh.us/surveys/frog/html.

(4) We are fortunate to live in a part of the country that is home to a diverse number of species, most evident with migrating birds. Ducks, geese, songbirds, hawks, and raptors are all currently migrating north to spend their summers in NH or use it as a stop on their way further north. Visit a local park, field, or wetland to see who has arrived- some species may only be here for a single day! Check out the apps *eBird* or *BirdsEye* to help identify who you find and to keep track of all of your sightings. Remember, birdfeeders should be removed throughout spring to fall since they're a favorite food source of hungry bears.

(5) Gardening can provide a more invested approach to the common term “shop local”. Now is the perfect time to start vegetables from seed. A simple windowsill can result in an educational lesson for kids and will give them the responsibility of keeping the plants healthy. In NH, our soil becomes warm enough to plant outdoors around Memorial Day. Your county conservation district’s website is a helpful source for gardening, horticulture, and even regional plant sales.

The opportunity to appreciate many of these activities relies on the access, maintenance, and protection of the land you enjoy. Many of these locations are made available by private landowners, town and regional conservation groups, and state and federal agencies. As spring turns to summer and we are hopefully able to ease back into our old routines, these wild places will remain for you to discover. So get out and social distance yourself in nature!



A new sign in Ashland promotes safe hiking practices while the local trails become more crowded.