

Good hiking in the Ossipees

By MIKE WHALEY Assistant Sports Editor, Foster's Daily Democrat

It isn't a hike that generally jumps to the top of the fall hiking to-do list, but it should. Tramping around the Ossipee mountains has proven to be a worthwhile venture, one that can draw a hiker back two or three times to experience its full glory.

Located just northeast of Lake Winnepesaukee, this range occupies a nearly circular tract about nine miles in diameter or 40,000 acres. There are 25 named mountains and dozens of unnamed summits within the range.

In 2003, hiking opportunities in the Ossipees were greatly expanded when the Lakes Region Conservation Trust (LRCT) purchased the 5,400-acre Castle in the Clouds property for \$5.9 million. The view points in the range start with its highest peak, Mount Shaw (2,990) and include Black Snout (2,803), Bald Knob, Turtleback Mountain, Faraway Mountain and Mount Roberts.

I made two trips to the Ossipees last week, hiking Bald Knob and Turtleback on the first day, and tooling around the old carriage and bridle trails the second day.

Bald Knob, which can be ascended from a path that begins off Route 171 at the Moultonborough/Tuftonboro townline, is a moderate 1.1-mile climb and will take about an hour. There is a parking turnoff at the Welcome to Moultonborough sign and the first part of the trail is on private property. Note that the "Do Not Trespass" signs are not there to deter hikers.

The views from Bald Knob's open ledges of Lake Winnepesaukee are superb. One of the many Castle in the Clouds carriage/bridle trails ends on Bald Knob and can be followed back to the Castle in the Clouds property and to other mountains, including Turtleback, Faraway and Roberts, with connecting trails to Shaw and Black Snout.

Whaley/staff photo The Ossipee Mountains are accessible by old carriage trails like this one that leads to the summit of Bald Knob. Note Lake Winnepesaukee in the distance.

There is also a trailhead off 171 closer to the Castle in the Clouds with a designated parking area on the left, approximately one mile from the Moultonborough/Tuftonboro town line. The Shannon Brook Trail begins on the right side of 171, 0.2 miles east of the Castle in the Clouds entrance. This trail will bring you to the Castle in the Clouds main property and Shannon Pond where several trails diverge at 1.4 miles and spiderweb into the Ossipee Mountains.

In the summer of 2004, the LRCT blazed about 20 miles of carriage trails and bridle paths built in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including the spur trail to the Turtleback Mountain outlook, which offers a closeup view of Mount Shaw and the main ridge of the Ossipees. Turtleback's summit once had a firetower, but it is long gone with only wires left to preserve its distant memory.

The Ossipees have easy, moderate and difficult hikes, so there's a little something for everyone. What's also nice is one can plan three or four different hikes in the range, which allows one to come back again and again and enjoy this underrated range. As always, remember to carry out what you carry in.

Castle in the Clouds was built in the early 1900s by industrialist Thomas Plant, who called it Lucknow. He had the top of the mountain leveled and used the rock to construct his house. He employed 1,000 workers, mostly Italian stonemasons from Boston, but also carpenters and teamsters. It has a southern exposure and is built on a solid ledge foundation of local pink granite. The house has Maine oak beams, hand hewn in a Bath shipyard.

Recessed cement gives the appearance of seamless construction of the pentagonal stonework. The roof is of Spanish tile. Plant had a hydro-generator installed in the stables. An outside fire hydrant with hose and connectors on each floor of the mansion attest to Plant's concern about fire.

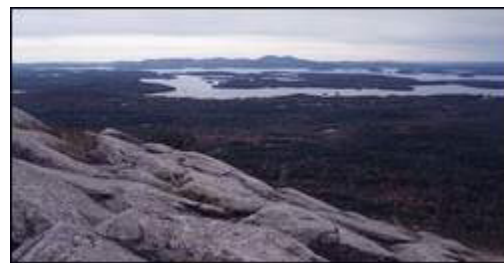
Plant also maintained a farm on the highway, producing beef, pork, lamb, poultry, eggs, dairy products, vegetables and hay. His staff of 20 to 30 workers was hired from area families.

The estate cost more than \$1 million. It was compared to a Rolls Royce: "Rich without looking costly, simple, yet beautiful and artistic." Plant and his wife Olive moved into the mansion in the fall of 1914. Plant also conceived the idea of the Bald Peak Country Club, which opened in 1921 and would later play a hand in his financial ruin.

The beginning of the end for Plant's asset occurred when the Bolsheviks defeated the Czarists in the Russian Civil War. Plant's bonds would not be redeemable by the Soviet Union. He also invested in Cuban sugar. In the 1930s, a \$100 share in Cuban cane sugar dropped to 50 cents. By 1941, he was in debt almost \$500,000, having divested himself of all his assets. His health was failing and he died that year at the age of 82.

This information came from the LRCT website (www.lrct.org) and if you'd care for more in-depth history of Plant, Castle in the Clouds, and Bald Peak, you can access it there, as well as more information on the LRCT. One can order a Castle in the Clouds hiking map from the LRCT for \$3.25. Mail check (made out to LRCT) to the LRCT, Box 1097, Meredith, NH 03253. Note return address and person to whom map will be sent. When the Castle in the Clouds gift store is open, maps may be purchased there for \$2.50.

Since 1979, the LRCT has protected more than 17,000 acres in New Hampshire of shore frontage, islands, forests, and mountaintops.



The open ledges on Bald Knob in the Ossipee Mountains offer sweeping views of Lake Winnepesaukee. (Whaley/staff photo)