

WATCHUNG SIERRA SAMPLER

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IN BRIEF

Don't be put off by the overdeveloped nature of this county park. With several miles of trails, you have plenty of opportunities to lose yourself among the hardwoods and conifers that flavor so much of the domain. A couple of ponds, a long, narrow lake (where oddly shaped erratics decorate its shoreline), and the well-preserved remnants of a mill town-cum-resort community contribute to the delights of the hike. Other highlights include the diverse bird populations that thrive around water holes, and herds of deer that chomp through the woods.

DESCRIPTION

Gesundheit! That, in a word, is the response we hear most often on bringing Watchung into a conversation. In fact, *Watchung* is actually a corruption of *wachunk*, a Lenape Indian word for "high hills," and there are two soaring ridges of the Watchung Mountains running the length of the park, with a bubbling brook

Directions



Follow I-95 across the George Washington Bridge and drive about 15 miles south to Exit 22. Merge onto I-78 West and continue to Exit 43. Take a right onto Diamond Hill Road/CR 655, followed by another right—at the traffic light—on McMane Avenue/CR 640. At the next traffic light, in 0.8 mile, turn left onto Glenside Avenue/CR 527, and in 1.4 miles hang a right into the reservation, on W. R. Tracey Drive/CR 645. Proceed 1.3 miles, past Lake Surprise and a picnic area, to the traffic circle. Take the first right on Summit Lane, and in 0.4 mile go right again on New Providence Road, which leads in 0.2 mile to the trailhead, on the left across from the Trailside Nature & Science Center parking lot.



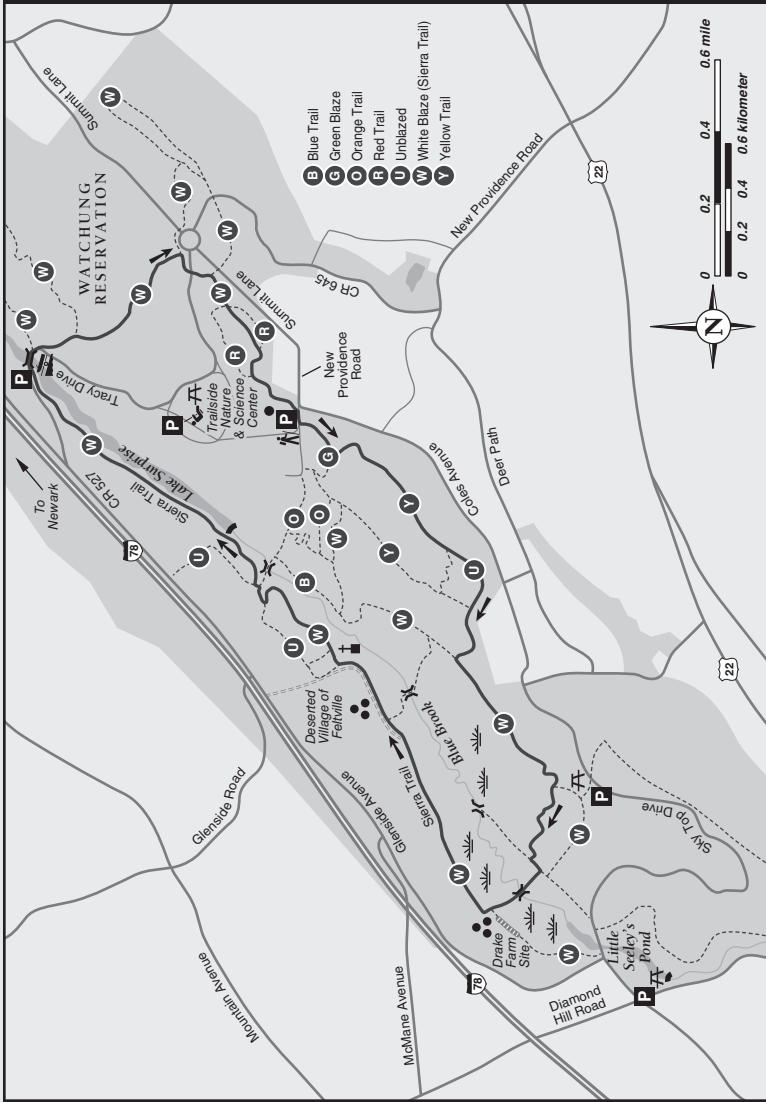
KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 5.7 miles**ELEVATION GAIN:** 659 feet**CONFIGURATION:** Loop**DIFFICULTY:** Easy to moderate**SCENERY:** Gently rolling terrain boasts mixed forests, lake, bogs, abandoned village, and some exceptionally tall tulip trees.**EXPOSURE:** Semi-shady**TRAFFIC:** Can get really heavy on summer weekends**TRAIL SURFACE:** Dirt, roots, rocks**HIKING TIME:** 3 hours**DRIVING DISTANCE:** 39 miles**SEASON:** Year-round, sunrise-sunset**ACCESS:** Free; pets on leash**MAPS:** At Trailside Nature & Science Center; download from tinyurl.com/watchungresmap; USGS *Roselle***FACILITIES:** None along trail, but Trailside Nature & Science Center has restrooms, water, and public phone.**COMMENTS:** The Trailside Nature & Science Center, on New Providence Road, is a great educational resource, with exhibits on taxidermy, animal life, fossils, and energy, as well as a planetarium and various gardens for herbs and wildflowers. For further details, call 908-789-3670 or visit tinyurl.com/trailssidencs.

GPS COORDINATES

N40° 40.965' W74° 22.386'

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and Lake Surprise nestled in between. Even so, hoofing it through Watchung is hardly a rugged wilderness experience. On the contrary, this is a highly developed park that features a playground, greenhouse, various gardens, a riding stable, ball fields, Scout camp, picnic area, trailside museum—even a planetarium. There are also several well-preserved buildings from a 19th-century company town and the ruins of its mill.

Considering all that, the hiking in Watchung is pretty darn good. An intricate network of trails covers almost every inch of the reservation's 2,000 acres, with the Sierra Trail (ST, white blazes) circling the perimeter for a total of 10 miles. The following trek overlaps a large segment of the ST and provides a fine introduction to the varied topography of the largest preserve in Union County's park system. Note that not all trails are blazed, muddy conditions are common in early spring, and distances on the park map vary in scale.

Start at the southwest corner of the parking lot and stride west over the paved road to the archway entrance of the Nature Trail. The path, blazed with both green and white swatches, descends swiftly, passing via a bridge over a rocky arroyo, then cuts upward by a bench and a couple of birdhouses. Two more seasonal streams follow, as well as some ups and downs. Just as you begin to wend to the right, a yellow-blazed spur appears to the left; take it. Yellow gains ground and meanders into an overgrown forest of maples, oaks, and tulip trees, with sassafras sprinkled throughout and ramps, a savory wild leek, abundant in midspring.

Leave Yellow in 5 minutes for the unblazed stem to the left (more of a straight, actually). Ignore all the side traces and increase your pace, as this route brushes against a residential neighborhood, picking up such native noises as barking dogs and lawnmowers. Hang a left at the T onto the ST, then slide through the succeeding junction in about 5 minutes. A series of enjoyable undulations ensues as Sierra descends slightly, snakes upward past beech trees, then drops once more through a couple of gentle switchbacks before yielding to another gradual climb. The grass-sided track finally tilts downhill, colliding with a bridle path, where you swerve left.

In less than a minute, the level, dirt-surfaced trail meets another junction, with the ST veering left and a wide, unmarked gravel path spurting right; go right, toward Blue Brook. Hop over the bridge and press onward, bypassing the left toward a boardwalk and Little Seeley's Pond. The next right is yours, but before turning on it, stroll a few more steps up-trail to the ruins of the Drake Farm Site, where a large pine now hangs over the stone and concrete foundations. If you enter the ruin in warm weather, remember that rattlesnakes occasionally doze unseen by the cool base of such walls.

The ST now travels northeast, evolving meanwhile into a somewhat wilder stretch of trail. The ground slants steeply downward from west to east, and a couple of streams sluice through the path as the surrounding forest, highlighted by white pines, cedars, and locust trees, is slowly being swallowed by vines; you



Ten buildings are all that remain of Feltville, a once-thriving mill town now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

may have to scramble over several fallen trees here. Don't be drawn off the ST by the miscellaneous side trails; the Deserted Village of Feltville lies directly ahead.

No, that's not the title of a new Stephen King horror flick. Feltville originated as a company mill town in 1845, though the remaining buildings were modified when the property was later converted to a resort community. The resort was eventually abandoned, and in 1980 the site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Off-white with green trim, the houses look invitingly intact and well maintained. Look more closely, though, and aside from three that are still inhabited, most are in various stages of decay and may be dangerous to approach. White-tailed deer like to graze in this area.

Stick with the paved road as it leads from Masker's Barn past three houses and a trail to the right that cuts by the old mill site. Another pair of houses (with a second duo down below them) follows, and then the road starts to bend to the left. There is a turnoff to the right for the cemetery just as the pavement reaches the old church and store, a massive pale-yellow structure trimmed in red. Go with that spur (on the near side of the church) to the pocket graveyard. Contrary to what the five headstones suggest, the small fenced plot is believed to hold something like two dozen bodies. The only original stone is on the far right, and supposedly none of the five marks the correct grave. Maybe there's a Stephen King angle to this place after all.

Pick up the white blazes of the ST by the front end of the cemetery as it nudges northeast back into the forest. Bear left at the Y, then bolt right at the T, joining a wide bridle path; as the trail arcs downhill, lurch left with the white markings and scuttle right in another eight steps, onto the narrow conduit between two towering tulip trees. This lush, swardlike setting gives way to Lake Surprise, where ducks often bob on the jade-green surface. In traversing the lakeside clockwise, note the large erratics, the first rocks of any significant size up to now.

As you continue along the lake, the Sierra and the bridle path join for a kiss, then diverge again, with your route running to the right. Now it gets tricky. On reaching CR 645, keep to the right shoulder, pass over the bridge, then cross to the left side of the road. Bear left on the cinder driveway, just a few paces beyond the bridge, but turn right at the first intersection, momentarily leaving the ST. Skip the spur that surfaces in 30 yards, and in a couple of minutes the Watchung stables will appear, roughly 200 yards through a clutch of tulip trees. The ST reunites with the track from that direction, but shears off to the left near the road, 1 minute after passing a wide bridle path on the left. Steer to the right on the cinder track, cross the road, then jump left at the first fork and right at the second, as the ST once more joins the path. Remain with the ST all the way back to the nature center and the parking lot.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

West Orange is less than 20 miles north and well worth a stop for the **Edison National Historic Site**. The self-guided Laboratory Complex and the Glenmont Estate mansion and greenhouse (vehicle pass required) are open again after a lengthy period of renovations. For more information, call 973-736-0550, ext. 11, or visit [nps.gov/edis](https://www.nps.gov/edis).