

Leading H/B Trips in the White Mountain National Forest

Guidance and Practical Examples

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The WMNF-AMC Partnership

The White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) is within a day's drive of over half the population of the United States. It sees over 6 million visitors each year, many of whom are attracted to two extremely fragile alpine environments that are being literally loved to death. The AMC is a strong supporter of the Wilderness Act, enacted in 1964 to protect designated Wilderness Areas. We are also a partner to the Forest Service in helping to protect and preserve all of the WMNF ecosystems and experiences, including awareness building, conservation research and advocacy, open space acquisition and management, outdoor education, trail maintenance, area accommodations, and hiking/backpacking group leadership.

A lack of understanding of WMNF rules and policies is becoming increasingly endemic and problematic within the hiking community as people depend more on social media, word of mouth and hiking apps and less on books, ranger stations and other official sources. Countering misinformation about the WMNF is becoming increasingly important to preserving it. Armed with the policy and practices herein, AMC leaders can play a foundational role – first, by become knowledgeable authorities on the WMNF and compliant with its rules and regulations – and second, by sharing that knowledge and modeling that compliance for the benefit of others.

The WMNF Outfitter/Guide Program

When AMC leads hikes and backpacks in the WMNF, our stewardship takes place under the Forest Service's Outfitter/Guide program. In order to lead groups in the WMNF, a trip leader must (1) obtain a WMNF Guide Card to carry; (2) follow the rules while in the WMNF; and (3) report their trips promptly once completed.

Once each year, typically in the spring, the Forest Service issues a batch of Guide Cards to the AMC for distribution to staff and volunteer trip leaders. The H/B [Guide Card Coordinator](#) monitors the ActDB for upcoming H/B trips and distributes a current Guide Card to each associated leader if they have not yet received one for the current year.

***Situation:** A trip is posted with a very short lead time, and the leader does not yet have a card.*

Action: Contact the [Guide Card Coordinator](#) directly rather than waiting for the trip to be noticed. If coordinator cannot be reached in time, the [Leadership Coordinator](#) and [H/B Chair](#) carry a few extra cards for just such an eventuality.

H/B POLICY: **If you are the leader of an H/B trip to take place in the WMNF, be sure to receive/obtain an Outfitter/Guide Card. Be prepared to present it if requested by WMNF staff.**

Following the Basic Rules and Practices While In the WMNF

When leading a trip in the WMNF, we are playing the important roles of Steward and Exemplar. This makes it especially important for us follow and model compliance with WMNF rules and guidelines, including Leave No Trace principles. More often than we would like, we learn from our Forest Service partners of a situation where an AMC group misses the mark. Such occasions cause needless stress on the dedicated folks on both sides.

If you plan to lead in the WMNF, please become **completely** familiar with the basic information, rules and guidance that are accessible from the WMNF home page:

White Mountain National Forest home page

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/whitemountain>

If you plan to backpack and camp in the backcountry, this brochure is also key:

WMNF Backcountry Camping Rules

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5363715.pdf

***Situation:** The trail is rocky and has some mud. Several of your participants avoid this by choosing a path starting to be formed in the vegetation alongside the trail.*

Action: Create an educational moment and opportunity for the group to practice leaving no trace.

H/B POLICY: **Comply fully with WMNF rules and guidelines. Model them for the benefit of others we encounter.**

AMC Trips to Wilderness Areas: Headcount Limits

There are six congressionally designated Wilderness Areas within the WMNF. Aimed at further limiting human impact and providing a wilderness experience, more rules apply to these areas than to WMNF terrain in general. Hikers will notice that the trails in wilderness areas are more lightly maintained, signed and blazed than in non-wilderness areas, and there are additional limitations on human use.

Probably the best-known Wilderness Area restriction is that no more than 10 people at a time, total, across multiple groups if present, can be present at a given Wilderness Area location. Leaders are included in the count. This rule in particular is one that WMNF staff are very serious about. A fact that hikers are not universally aware of is that 10 is a **hard** limit. It is **not flexible**. In fact, the Forest Service strongly encourages leaders in Wilderness Areas to limit group size to **six or fewer people**, including leaders.

The obvious rationale behind having these headcount guidelines is both to moderate the impact that people can have on each other's enjoyment of pristine areas as well as to limit the impact of big groups on the fragile terrain and vegetation. Picture yourself settling into just such a spot to enjoy it for an hour or two. Just as you've become comfortable, foam pad clothing layers adjusted perfectly, a couple

of hiking groups arrive, with lots of conversation, motion and associated noise. Is this what you were looking for?

***Situation:** A leader screens for a group of 10 including leaders for a hike in the Sandwich Range Wilderness. She expects some drop-offs. To compensate, she overbooks by two, registering a group of 12. Come the Big Day, the leader, co-leader, and all 10 participants show up.*

Action: Turn back time, this situation is preventable. Target a group size of 6 including leaders. To compensate for some anticipated drop-offs, overbook to a max larger than 6 but no more than 8.

***Situation:** A leader posts a trip to Owl's Head in the Pemigewasset Wilderness, and it quickly fills up with a sizable waitlist. Another leader offers to post a second Owl's Head trip, to take place contemporaneously but with a staggered start.*

Action: This is a thoughtful idea, aimed at meeting the needs of as many AMC constituents as possible. Still, experience shows that literally most of the time, the groups will inevitably converge. Contemporaneously, plan an alternative hike for people to choose, or post another Owl's Head hike that is staggered from the first by at least four hours—or better yet a day or more.

H/B Policy: **Do not book Wilderness Area groups larger than 8, including leaders. The intent is to net out to 6 or fewer after attrition.**

In working to avoid the negative impact of too many people at a given location at the same time, there is another scenario to anticipate: simultaneous trips by **multiple independent groups** to the **same** Wilderness Area. In our trip planning, we can moderate this risk by checking the ActDB (perhaps Meetup as well) for trips that clash with what we have in mind – perhaps by another chapter, or perhaps by the H/B leader you just hiked with the other day. Once such a clash is discovered, individual or joint mitigation measures can be taken.

H/B Policy: **In a case where multiple AMC hikes are planned to the same Wilderness Area destination, they should be staggered by at least 4 hours. If neither leader is able or willing to move, the H/B Trip Approver or Chair will assist in resolving the conflict.**

***Situation:** An AMC group of 6 arrives at Shoal Pond in the Pemigewasset Wilderness, hoping to have a snack while taking a break and enjoying the wilderness ambiance. Upon arrival, the group finds a foursome already there who also are very clearly enjoying the beauty, seclusion and quiet. A negotiation may be needed in order to restore a compliant crowd size (10 technically complies, but is clearly not what the first group was hoping for).*

Action: A choice of demeanor is key: (1) “We’re the AMC, this is an official trip, please get out of our way”; or (2) “We’re the AMC, and we will do everything we can to respect and support your compliant enjoyment of this beautiful day in the outdoors!” Demeanor #2, a.k.a. the High Road, not only increases the odds of fostering several other grateful WMNF constituents: it also reflects on AMC’s image as perceived both by the other group, our group and likely also by our Forest Service partners.

H/B Policy: **In a Wilderness Area, if an H/B group encounters another party such that the total headcount is greater than 10 (or better yet, 6), the arriving group should keep moving so as to resolve the crowding. Absent that, the H/B leader should take a friendly initiative to work out a de-crowding solution with the other group.**

Interpreting the Map

For reference in planning your trip, Wilderness Areas are shaded quite accurately in a darker green color on the AMC White Mountain Guide and Map Adventures maps. If a section of trail skirts the edge of a wilderness area, hikers can assume that trail itself is not in the wilderness area. Conversely, where the map shows a trail section that penetrates a wilderness area, hikers should assume that section to be wilderness terrain. This is true even when the section in question is part of the Appalachian Trail (example: Madison Gulf Trail). Despite the AT's fame and prominence, such sections are nonetheless still subject to Wilderness Area rules.

Wilderness "Zone A"

As an "outfitter/guide," we visit the WMNF more frequently and with more people than would be the case with typical informal visitor parties. Because of this, the Forest Service asks that we NOT lead official trips to the forest's most pristine, unspoiled Wilderness Area zones, which are referred to as "Zone A". Zone A comprises all Wilderness Area terrain that is **more than 500 feet** from an officially designated trail. Forest Service staff attach as much importance to this rule as they do to the group size limit discussed above.

Situation: An AMC leader wants to take a group up Owl's Head Mt.

Action: Take the group via the Lincoln Woods, Franconia Brook, Lincoln Brook, and Owl's Head Path trails to the "old" summit (still accepted by the Four Thousand Footer Club). This is the only permissible route for an AMC-led group to take.

Situation: An AMC leader is receiving lots of encouragement to plan an AMC trip up Mt. Isolation in the Presidential-Dry River Wilderness, with a contingency plan to skip the two lower crossings of the Rocky Branch if they turn out to be too difficult--and instead, just bushwhack on the east side of the brook until the trail crosses back to the east side.

Action: Go with that plan – it is legal: the bushwhacking track stays within 500 feet of the trail despite the fact that the latter is now on the opposite (west) side of the stream until it crosses back and the bushwhack reunites with it.

Situation: Rather than risk hiking all the way to the Rocky Branch brook on a Mt. Isolation hike and finding it uncrossable – as well as to save some distance and elevation gain – an AMC leader is considering a plan to take a northerly shortcut to a point higher up on the brook. This is sometimes referred to as the Engine Hill Bushwhack. It serves as a rough hypotenuse between the point on the Rocky Branch Trail a half mile east of the brook and the point on the Isolation Trail a half mile north of the Rocky Branch Trail/Isolation Trail junction. This is a popular hiker route, especially in winter.

Action: The Engine Hill Bushwhack is NOT an acceptable route for official AMC trips, because its hypotenuse is on Wilderness Area terrain and ventures farther than 500' from the nearest trails.

Situation: A leader has a desire to lead a full wilderness bushwhack (Zone A) with some interested friends.

Action: Lead this as an unofficial, private, non-AMC hike among friends. To avoid any confusion, **no AMC Leader paraphernalia** (patch, hat, jacket, etc.) should be prominent on anyone.

H/B Policy: **Formal AMC hiking groups are not permitted to hike in “Zone A” (Wilderness Area terrain more than 500 feet from any official trail). If you are with an informal group, be careful NOT to display paraphernalia/SWAG that might cause an onlooker (e.g., another hiker or Forest Service personnel) to construe you as an official AMC group.**

Further Detail on Wilderness Areas

This document captures and covers what we need to know in order to fulfill our role as solid partners to the Forest Service as we plan and manage our trips in the WMNF. For further detail and historical perspective on how the WMNF Wilderness Areas are defined and managed, see:

WMNF Wilderness Management Plan

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5186044.pdf

Reporting Your WMNF Trip

H/B requires leaders to [report their trips online](#) within a week of completing them. Your trip reports will be referenced by the H/B Committee to help both in managing and reporting on our trip portfolio and understanding leader activity. Also, if a trip destination is within the WMNF, our H/B Trip Reporter will share the report for that trip with our contact in the Forest Service.

Policy Roll-Up

If you are the leader of an H/B trip to take place in the WMNF, be sure to receive/obtain an Outfitter/Guide Card. Be prepared to present it if requested by Forest Service staff.

Fully comply with WMNF rules and guidelines. Model them for the benefit of others we encounter.

Do not book Wilderness Area groups larger than 8, including leaders. The intent is to net out to 6 or fewer after attrition.

In a case where multiple AMC hikes are planned to the same Wilderness Area destination, they should be staggered by at least 4 hours. If neither leader is able or willing to move, the H/B Trip Approver or Chair will assist in resolving the conflict.

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Formal AMC hiking groups are not permitted to hike in “Zone A” (Wilderness Area terrain more than 500 feet from any official trail). If you are with an informal group, be careful NOT to display paraphernalia/SWAG that might cause an onlooker (e.g., another hiker or Forest Service personnel) to construe you as an official AMC group.

Conclusion

The greater the extent to which H/B leaders can comply with this policy and associated guidelines, the greater will be the degree of satisfaction on the part of Forest Service staff with us and with the club as a whole as partners in fostering conservation, education and recreation in the WMNF.

A final point to consider. Above, we have delineated a special set of practices for hiking responsibly in designated Wilderness Areas. To the extent that we are able to embrace similar practices more broadly in the backcountry, Mother Nature will not complain.

- AMC Boston Chapter Hiking/Backpacking Committee