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Home of the highest peaks in Kennebec County.

KENNEBEC HIGHLANDS PUBLIC LAND GUIDE & MAP

KENNEBEC & MOOSE RIVER VALLEYS REGION

DIRECTIONS

The Round Top Trailhead is a small parking lot located on Watson Pond Road - four miles south of its intersection with Route 27.

Also on Watson Pond Rd. is the trailhead for the 2.9-mile Sanders Hill Loop Trail.



CONTACTS

Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands
Western Region Public Lands Office
P.O. Box 327 / 129 Main Street
Farmington, ME 04938
207-778-8231
www.maine.gov/kennebehighlands

7 Lakes Alliance
137 Main Street / P.O. Box 250
Belgrade Lakes, ME 04918-0250
Phone: (207) 495-6039
info@g7lakesalliance
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ONLINE INFORMATION

- Kennebec Highlands Public Land
www.maine.gov/kennebehighlands
- Public Lands Information
www.maine.gov/dacf/publiclands
- All State Parks and Public Lands
www.ParksAndLands.com
- Maine Office of Tourism
www.VisitMaine.com



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Know applicable laws.

- To preserve Critical Areas, Forest Preserves, Cultural Resources and other designated sites for educational and scientific purposes, such areas and objects are to be left undisturbed by State law.
- The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) Warden Service does search-and-rescue operations and enforces state fish and game laws, boating laws (on inland waters), and ATV and snowmobile laws. To learn more about applicable laws and to purchase appropriate licenses, visit www.maine.gov/ifw.

Help stop the spread of invasive species.

- Eurasian Milfoil is an aquatic invasive. Clean all fishing gear, and watercraft before they are launched and after retrieval. FMI: www.maine.gov/dep/water/invasives/

Moose, deer, bear and other large animals are abundant.

- Observe from a safe distance; do not flush wildlife.
- Drive slowly on area roads, particularly at times of low light.

Wear blaze orange during hunting season.

- Hunting is permitted at this Public Land. Visit www.maine.gov/ifw for hunting laws and seasons.



Ponds and wetlands provide important habitat for fishes, inland waterfowl, and wading birds.

VISITOR RULES

Collection All Cultural objects must be left undisturbed on all State Lands. Additionally, within Critical Areas, Forest Preserves and other designated sites for educational and scientific purposes, such areas and objects are to be left undisturbed.

Fires Fires are not allowed.

Pets Must be attended and under control at all times.

Trash Carry out all trash.

Firearms & Hunting Although hunting is permitted, loaded firearms are not permitted on hiking trails. Do not discharge weapons within 300 feet of any picnic area, parking area, marked hiking trail or other developed area. Hunting license and season information is available at www.maine.gov/ifw

Fishing All those fishing must have a valid license and review the State's open water fishing regulations. Anglers are asked to use lead-free sinkers and jigs to prevent metal poisoning of loons, eagles and other wildlife. www.maine.gov/ifw/

Riders ATVs, snowmobiles, and bikes are permitted only on designated trails.
• ATV Trails, Clubs, and Grants: www.maine.gov/dacf/atv
• Snowmobile Trails, Clubs, and Grants: www.maine.gov/dacf/snowmobile



Keep informed

- Text W-LANDS to 888-514-7527 for alerts from the Bureau's Western Public Lands.
- Text BPLNEWS to 888-514-7527 for the Bureau's monthly newsletter.

Be a responsible visitor and Leave No Trace.

- Learn more at www.lnt.org



Painted turtle. Photo by Jim Vogel.



Blueberry barrens along the Vienna Mountain ridge. Photo by Jim Vogel.

PROPERTY HISTORY

During the late 1800s homesteads were established. Early land use of the Highlands was for farming and forestry. Surviving stonewalls, foundation remnants, old roads, and the condition of the present forest all attest to these past uses.

Vienna Mountain features a large open ridge that has a long history of blueberry cultivation. The remainder of the uplands are early to mid-successional forests. Small bands of mature forest remain around most of the ponds and some of the wetlands. These forests act as protective buffers that reduce soil erosion and runoff, provide cover, and helps sustain the high quality habitat for native fishes, waterfowl, wading birds, and other riparian and wetland-dependent plants and animals.

The wetlands surrounding Beaver and Round Ponds form a good example of an unpatterned fen ecosystem. Unpatterned fens are peatlands that form where drainage is impeded such that peat can accumulate, but where water still flows into and out of the system. The peatland ecosystem is comprised of at least four vegetation types, which occur in different portions of the wetland and provide habitat diversity. The vegetation types are: mixed tall sedge fen, sweetgale mixed shrub fen, leatherleaf boggy fen, and mixed graminoid-shrub marsh. In addition, the wetland is of interest because it represents the northern range limit of poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), a plant of southern affinities that is uncommon in Maine. In Beaver Pond look for water lily and pickerel weed.



Wetland in autumn. Photo by Rex Turner.

Beaver activity has been observed along many of the drainages in the Highlands. Beavers build dams to give them safe access to the hardwoods they prefer to eat. When active, beaver ponds flood adjoining uplands, enlarging wetlands and creating new areas for wetland species to colonize. Once the hardwoods within a safe distance of the pond are gone, beavers often abandon their dam and build a new dam in a different location. These abandoned ponds typically slowly fill with sediment and transition from marshy wetlands back to uplands. By creating and abandoning impoundments along the stream course, beavers create a mosaic of habitats for other plant and wildlife species.

With expected changes in climate over the next century, plant and wildlife species will shift their ranges. Maintaining landscape connections between undeveloped habitats will provide an important safety net for biodiversity as species adjust their ranges to future climate conditions.

PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

In 1998, the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance, now the 7 Lakes Alliance, initiated a project to protect the Kennebec Highlands area in Rome, Mount Vernon, Vienna, and New Sharon, Maine. The Kennebec Highlands' 6,800 acres contain the highest peaks in Kennebec County, including the summit of McCaffey Mountain, miles of pristine streams, several wetlands, and five undeveloped ponds. Managed collaboratively with the 7 Lakes Alliance, The Kennebec Highlands provides trails and open space based recreation close to numerous population centers. Learn about the 7 Lakes Alliance at www.7lakesalliance.org

The Land for Maine's Future program has been a strong financial supporter of the Kennebec Highlands project through four rounds of financing. Phase I and II of the project protected 5,500 acres for public use and habitat. Phase III included the summit of McCaffey Mountain, the highest peak in Kennebec County, and added 1,011 acres to the Highlands. Phase IV added another 283 acres bringing the total amount of protected land to 6,800 acres. Learn more about the Land for Maine's Future at www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf



The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) also played a key role in the 2022 acquisition of the Allen Blueberry fields parcel and the LWCF will be an important source of additional funding to support new parking, roads, and trails to accommodate visitors. In each of these phases, local financial support and foundation funding have been critical to raising the cash match for these acquisitions.



MAINE'S FIERY PAST

At mile one the Sanders Hill Trail passes through a narrow crevice in a slab of outcropped bedrock. Beneath the vegetation, the soil, and the layer of till left behind by the glaciers of long ago, the trail traverses what was once a bulge of hot magma rising from the center of the earth. The surface of the earth is divided into tectonic plates that float on the earth's molten liquid mantle. When two plates collide and one land mass is forced beneath another, plumes of magma rise from the descending plate and travel toward the surface, often forming volcanoes. Magma that cools before it reaches the earth's surface forms large intrusions of granite, like this one, exposed long after it cooled by millions of years of erosion. The small area of granite bedrock exposed here is part of a much larger formation that underlies most of Rome and the surrounding towns!

- Continue this *Natural Heritage Hike* at www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/assistance/hikes/kennebec_highlands_sanders_hill.pdf



Exposed granite. Photo by Jim Vogel.



Mushrooms. Photo by Jocelyn Hubbell.

OTHER DESTINATIONS

Kennebec Highlands Public Land is in the Kennebec and Moose River Valley Region. Other regional destinations to consider include:

MAINE'S LAKES AND MOUNTAINS REGION

- Androscoggin Riverlands State Park** is 2,800-acres with 12 miles of river frontage. The park offers miles of multi-use trails and abundant opportunities for walking, biking, fishing, boating, wildlife watching and hunting. Located off Center Bridge Road in Turner. www.maine.gov/androscogginriverlands
- Mount Blue State Park**, offers a sandy beach on Webb Lake, a popular camping area, boat launch and boat rentals, picnic areas, a playground, a nature center, and an extensive network of trails. During the winter visitors enjoy miles of snowshoe trails, groomed cross-country ski trails, a sliding hill, and an ice rink and warming hut near the park headquarters on Center Hill. Located off Routes 142 and 156 in Weld. www.maine.gov/mountblue

POINT OF INTEREST

- State Route 27**, a designated National Scenic Byway, runs from the picturesque and historic 19th century mill town of Kingfield north through the Carrabasset Valley to the Canadian border. In the south, this byway winds along the Carrabasset River and provides views of Mount Abraham and the Bigelow Range. North of Stratton, the route passes by the manmade Flagstaff Lake and through Cathedral Pines, the largest stand of old growth forest in the state. The majestic red pines cover 220 acres and date back 200 years. Route 27 then traces the Dead River toward Coburn Gore and Canada.



OVERVIEW

Kennebec Highlands Public Land has the highest peaks in Kennebec County, including the summit of McCaffey Mountain, plus miles of pristine streams, several wetlands, and five undeveloped ponds. It is the largest contiguous block of conserved land in central Maine, and one of the few areas in the region with the potential for landscape-scale conservation. Managed collaboratively with the 7 Lakes Alliance (www.7lakesalliance.org/), formerly the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance, the Highlands are part of 15,000 acres of relatively undeveloped forest and wetland habitat. It is the only forest block of its size, quality, elevation, and bedrock diversity in the central part of the state, proximate to population centers, and having substantial portions already preserved. All of these features are critical to the water quality of the Belgrade Lakes Watershed.



WHEN TO VISIT

The Highlands are a very popular four-season recreation area. Hiking, mountain biking, fishing, hunting, xc-skiing and snowshoeing are among the popular outdoor activities.

ATV riders pass through the Highlands on connector routes from the Mount Vernon trail system to the trails north in New Sharon and Farmington. Snowmobile riders pass through the Highlands from local trails to the south, and New Sharon trails from the north.

Maine's mud season can last from late March through early May depending on location and elevation, snowpack depth, ice out timing and weather conditions. Have a backup plan if your first choice location is not accessible.



Common yellowthroat.

Spring Birders enjoy the highlands year-round. During spring and early summer listen for the black-throated blue warbler and the ovenbird. Near wetlands look for the alder flycatcher, Wilson's warbler, Lincoln's sparrow, and common yellowthroat.

Summer Hikers enjoy the scenic vistas with views of the Belgrade Lakes. Anglers enjoy fly fishing for brook trout during the summer. ATV riders pass through on the multi-use trail to connect to local trails. Mountain bike riders enjoy trails here and at Bradbury Mt. State Park.

Autumn Wear blaze orange during hunting season. Fall foliage may be enjoyed typically mid-September through mid-October. For foliage reports visit: MaineFoliage.com

Winter Snowshoers and cross-country skiers enjoy primitive, ungraded trails. Snowmobile riders pass through the Highlands via local trails with ITS 87connection.

TIMBER MANAGEMENT ON MAINE'S PUBLIC LANDS

The Bureau of Parks and Lands manages its public lands to achieve multiple benefits: public recreation, wildlife habitat, and timber sales. Revenues from timber sales helps fund land management and trail maintenance. The Bureau adheres to strict practices in selectively harvesting timber, minimizing runoff and soil erosion, and taking other measures to ensure that the health of the larger ecosystem is maintained.



KENNEBEC HIGHLANDS PUBLIC LAND

HIKING TRAILS

Please read over the trail descriptions before setting out on a hike and note:

- Hiking trails are open for snowshoeing during the winter unless posted otherwise.
- Wear blaze orange during hunting seasons.
- View the *Natural Heritage Hike* guide to the Sanders Hill loop at www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/assistance/hikes/kennebec-highlands_sanders_hill.pdf. A sortable listing of all *Natural Heritage Hikes* is available at www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/assistance/heritage_hikes.htm

A-Trail (moderate to strenuous, 8.8 to 9.8 miles roundtrip), was designed as a mountain biking trail, with multi-use opportunities for hiking and snowshoeing. 9.8 mile option follows the bike trail; 8.8 mile option uses the hiker only cut-off trail.

The trail starts at the northeast corner of the trailhead and crosses the Round Top Trail at 0.3 miles. It continues west and then turns south, crossing the Goat Path at 1 mile and then descending to intersect an old logging road at 1.3 miles. The trail follows the logging road to the right (northwest), crossing a stream and gradually narrowing to single-track as it climbs.

At 2.1 miles the trail turns left (south) on another grown-in logging road. (For hikers, a steeper, rockier option continues straight uphill, rejoining the bike trail in 0.2 miles.) The trail descends gradually until meeting another logging road at 2.4 miles, where it turns sharply to the right (north). From here it follows the logging road, climbing to rejoin the hiking trail and then ascending in a series of short switchbacks at 2.8 miles.

The trail turns southwest and steadily gains elevation until reaching an open lookout area with views of lower Long Pond at 3.3 miles. From the lookout, the trail meanders along the ridgeline, ending at the summit of McGaffey Mountain (1,288 ft.). Access: Trailhead is on Watson Pond Rd. 4 mi. south of Rte. 27.

Kidder Pond Trail (moderate, 0.4 miles one-way). This trail is used mostly by anglers looking to fish for smallmouth bass and chain pickerel. Kidder Pond is really a shallow lake spanning 19 acres with a maximum depth of 26 feet. Water is turbid and does not support a brook trout fishery. (Anglers fish for brook trout at McIntire Pond, accessed from the north on Roxy Rand Road.) Access: Off Vienna Mt. Rd. near the blueberry field.

Round Top Trail (moderate, 3.8 miles roundtrip, 4.4 miles with spur). The Round Top Trail ascends Round Top Mountain (1,133') while winding through a diverse forest of young and old hardwoods and conifers. The trail, marked with blue blazes, leaves the parking lot in a westerly direction. Within 200 yards it crosses a large slab of granite originally quarried for an old foundation. At 0.2 miles it crosses the A Trail. After an initial rise, the trail meanders through the woods, briefly opening up for a view of Round Top Mountain, before dropping to a junction with the Kennebec Highlands Trail at 1 mile.

After crossing the Kennebec Highlands Trail, the Round Top Trail climbs steadily northward. As the trail approaches Round Top Mountain's summit, views open up to the east and south. Near the top, at 1.7 miles, a 0.3 mile spur trail leads north (description below). The main trail continues northeast, passing an overlook with views of Long Pond, Belgrade Lakes Village, and Great Pond, and then descends to a second overlook at an open area with large rock slabs and porcupine dens. The trail descends steeply, between and over large rocks, and joins the Kennebec Highlands Trail at 2.1 miles. Turn right (south) onto this broad gravel trail. At 2.9 miles bear right at a three-way junction, marked by a trail sign. A hundred yards past the junction (just before a Y-intersection of snowmobile trails) a rock cairn with a wooden sign post on the west side of the logging trail marks the Round Top Trail's initial junction with the Kennebec Highlands Trail. Turn left (east) and follow the Round Top Trail back to the parking lot.

Access: Trailhead is on Watson Pond Rd. 4 mi. south of Rte 27

Round Top Spur Trail (moderate, 0.3 miles), leads to the north end of Round Top Mountain and two overlooks with spectacular views. The first view looks northward and east to Round Pond below, and French Mountain, Mount Phillip, North Pond, and Great Pond. The Spur Trail ends at a second overlook, which includes additional views of Watson Pond, Sanders Hill, and Vienna Mountain (NW through the trees). Access: From the Round Top Trail.

Sanders Hill Trail (moderate, 2.9 mile loop), described in a counterclockwise direction: The trail, marked with blue blazes, leaves from the north side of the parking area, winding westerly and briefly paralleling an old logging road. At 0.2 miles there are nice views from the south end of Watson Pond from atop a large boulder. The trail crosses the inflow for Watson Pond, briefly follows what was a logging road, then, after veering to the left, narrows and begins climbing moderately to the west. The trail eventually turns right (north) after crossing a short wet area and follows the ridgeline through a rock field where there are views to the east of Watson Pond, Mount Phillip, and French Mountain. The trail cuts directly through and over some large granite slabs at 0.9 miles and continues on to a sparsely wooded summit area with views to the east and south through the trees at 1.1 miles.

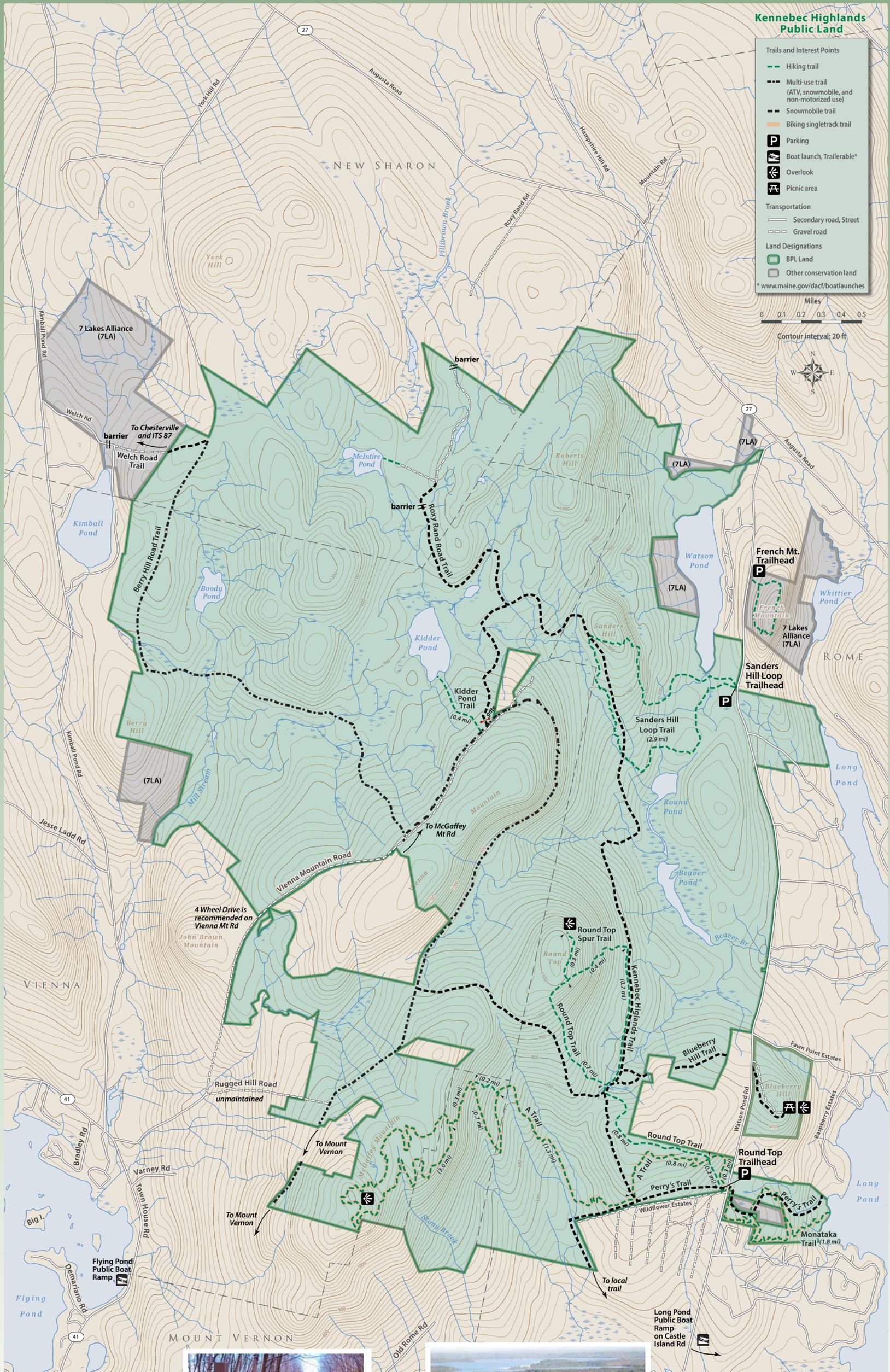
The trail continues northwest over the Sanders Hill summit (854 ft.), then descends crossing a rough gravel road (which also serves as a snowmobile trail). The trail loosely follows the course of the upper section of Beaver Brook before once again crossing the road/snowmobile trail next to a bridge over the brook. Continue to follow the trail southeastward along the brook before veering back northeastward towards the trailhead. The trail crosses two small brooks in a northeasterly direction, swings east through a young mixed growth forest and past a large rock (Snapper Rock), and finally turns north to reach an old logging road. Turn right (east) onto the logging road and continue back to the parking lot.

Access: Trailhead is located on the west side of Watson Pond Road, 1.3 miles south of Watson Pond Road's junction with Route 27.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING & SNOWSHOEING

Kennebec Highlands provides opportunities for primitive, ungroomed cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

- Skiers are allowed on all trails, including the snowmobile and multi-use trail.
- Snowshoers may use hiking trails unless otherwise posted.



View from Round Top



Sanders Hill Stream