

Mount Willard

Round trip Distance : 3 1/4 miles

Walking time : 2 1/2 hours

Vertical rise : 925 feet

Location : Rt 302 in Crawford Notch State Park

Perhaps the most popular hiking trail in the Crawford Notch region, this well traveled 1.6 mile path provides an easy ascent route to the summit ledges of 2,804-foot Mount Willard. The little railroad station at the north entrance to Crawford Notch is an information center operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club, which has acquired the site of the vanished Crawford House. There at the station you might ask about visibility before you climb Mount Willard, only a day of "ceiling and visibility unlimited" does justice to the breathtaking views from the summit cliff.

For the Mount Willard Trail, hikers park their cars near the station or on the wide shoulders of US 302. Across the road, and despite the whizzing cars, Saco Lake manages to preserve its charm and typifies the romantic term "mountain tarn." From the station usually called the Crawford Depot you step over the Maine Central tracks and take up the trail, which coincides with the Avalon Trail as you enter the woods and come to a junction. Turn left and follow the Mount Willard Trail through woods at the base of the slope. (The Mount Avalon Trail continues ahead to Mount Avalon and Mount Field.) Soon you come to a right turn onto the old carriage road. It once served guests from the famous Crawford House, which burned in 1977. The property is now the site of an AMC hostel. The carriage road at once leads upward. You are scarcely breathing a bit faster before you find that the trail swings to the right away from the road to avoid a totally eroded section. It climbs through the woods above a brook and shortly returns to the road. A right turn keeps you on the grade that was engineered for horses pulling heavy surreys and passengers to the top. You can probably cover the same route with a half hour of walking. It brings you out on top of the cliff. There before you spreads a vast and open sky. Mount Chocorua is the rocky peak.



Nearer on the right looms Mount Willey, solid, bulky, and so steep its spruce forest is scarred by slides. Fortunately they have been less devastating than the slide that buried the Willey family in 1826. Nearer you toward the right Mount Field rises to 4,326 feet. That's twenty-four feet more than Mount Willey. You are standing at 2,804 feet. Opposite across the notch and forming its eastern bastion, cliffs brace Mount Webster. Beyond Mount Webster, the southernmost of the Presidential Range's peaks, Mount Jackson, carries a tangle of spruce and fir to its topmost crags. Beyond those rocks, Mount Washington is a splendid sight against the sky. You may see above the western ridge a puff of smoke from the cog railway's engine. So far your eyes have been distracted out and aloft. If vertigo is no problem you can gaze down into the impressive depth of the notch below the cliff. It's 1,300 feet—and no protection—down to the highway and railroad tracks. The combination of Mount Willard and children tends to make parents nervous. A length of clothesline and a sturdy tree might be the best solution. Cliffs attract kids to the very edge. People come and go. This is a popular hike. The universal reaction at the instant of stepping out on the rock is awe blended with delight (usually indicated by an involuntary gasp). The impact lingers in your memory. It's not the scenery alone; it's the power underlying our green and stone-ribbed world. Descend by the same route. The only turn to watch for is left into the woods off the carriage road at the top of the badly eroded section.

