

# The Art of Hiking

## Fact Sheet

The United States presents some of the most varied hiking in the world. Here listed are some things to look for, and more importantly, some ways to help you see them better:

**Geology:** Each hike starts not with the first step, but with the drive to the trailhead. As you drive, observe the lay of the land: are you rising out of citified lowlands toward the mountains, or headed downhill to a streamside greenway? Once you begin hiking, notice how the trail takes its cue from the landscape. Trails, like roads, generally run the path of least resistance, running along streams, climbing up through ravines, and moving toward, up and through mountain passes. Also notice the geology at your feet, how the trail is crafted from geological materials: how it runs along a flat ledge, skirts a glacially deposited boulder, or has steps made from native stone. Use a field guide to find out what kind of rock you are walking on.

**Flora:** No matter where you walk, from the densest forest to the driest desert, you will find plants in all their myriad beauty. The trick with plant observation is to slow down your pace to see them. That means stopping and looking closely at bark, leaf and flower shapes (a hand lens can be a great help with this activity). Get on the level with plants: get down on your knees, or on your stomach to observe the tiniest wildflowers, or lay on your back to look up at the tallest trees. Notice how the vegetation changes as you hike from place to place: how water-loving plants thrive along streams, near ponds, and in wetlands, and how plants that love it dry cling to rocky hillsides or crags. Also notice how vegetation changes the higher you go. You will not find the same plants growing at 1,000 feet elevation as you will at 5,000 feet. Check out your local library for tree and wildflower guides for your area, and learn the subtleties of plant identification in your own back yard.

**Fauna:** Humans are noisy critters, so rarely see wary wildlife. But that can change with a little conscious quietude. Hike in silence and you will begin to see and hear more wildlife. Tune your eyes and ears to the landscape. Listen for animals scared out of their hiding places by your footfalls. Watch for tiny movements at the corner of your eyes (animals do not tend to display themselves fully like on wildlife TV shows; you are more likely to detect the flitting motion of a deer's white tail, or a bit of a body hidden by the foliage). The wild world is also ablaze with animal sign, if you know how to look for it: study the ground and fresh snow for tracks, look at trees and plants for browse marks, study (but do not touch) scat to see what the local critters are eating.

**History:** Many of America's finest hiking trails were built not in wilderness, but on abandoned sites of human habitation. Trails run along old railroad beds or canals. They penetrate old farmsteads, mining and industrial sites. As you hike, look for signs of disturbed landscape: especially humps or mounds that indicate human excavations. Look for features that pop out of the natural landscape, appearing unnatural, such as stone walls, stone foundations, sunken wagon roads, dams or fish weirs in streams, bits of concrete, brick or other building materials, tailings that indicate mine sites. Nature has tried to heal many of these human wounds, so you need to look closely. Also notice the trail itself: it too is an historic artifact built and maintained by volunteer trail clubs or government (often hiking trails also follow historic routes used by farmers, miners, or woodsmen). A trip to your local historical society will really help you in your attempts to hike with humans.

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### Resources

Peterson Field Guides  
National Audubon Society Field Guides  
Sierra Club Naturalist's Guides

Stokes Natural Guides  
Golden Natural Guide