

AMC NY-NoJ Chapter Hike Leader Tips

Our Chapter's volunteer leaders lead hundreds of fun, safe hikes each year – thanks for all you contribute to our Club!

The Hiking Committee asked some experienced leaders to share their tips on leading hikes; we hope that what has worked for them will help both new and current hike leaders. Here are some suggestions for leading successful hikes:

Planning the Hike

1. Keep your AMC membership current, for personal liability protection.
2. Check permits/park regulations and follow them (group size limits in the Gunks; no bushwacking in PIPC parks, including Harriman/Bear Mt.).
3. Become familiar with the area: study the map, scout your route, ask others, read guidebooks. If you haven't found it already, *Harriman Trails: A Guide and History* by William J. Myles includes mileage estimates, descriptions and history of these popular trails.
4. Decide the pace, terrain and mileage.
 - Be sure your skill and fitness level is more than sufficient for the difficulty you've selected.
 - Consider leading slower or shorter hikes, which we always need more of.
 - Estimate time needed to complete the hike (start with a basic pace of 2 miles per hour and add time for elevation, breaks; estimate on the high side).
 - When the days are short, plan to be out well before sundown.
5. When selecting your route, consider:
 - Where are the good places for separations/lunch break?
 - Where are the good viewpoints?
 - Is it near public transportation? Is a shuttle required?
 - Where are "bail out" alternative routes for emergencies?
 - Is there an extra side trail you might take with a strong group?
 - Consider leading outside our routine areas.
6. Write a short, clear hike description for the Schedule.
7. Smaller groups mean less work for the leader, less impact on the trails and on other hikers, and usually a more enjoyable hike for everyone. Here are a few ways to keep group sizes reasonable:
 - Use the earlier (or later) public transportation.
 - Hike in a less frequently used area or an entirely new one.
 - Have hikers pre-register (this also allows you to screen out participants who do not have the necessary experience/fitness level and to remind participants about requirements).
 - Ask another leader to co-lead the hike, and plan to divide the group if appropriate (you and your co-leader can use the same route but in opposite directions).
 - Encourage others to begin leading hikes (the more leaders, the smaller the groups).
8. If you're unable to do a scheduled hike, do your best to find a replacement leader (if you need help finding a replacement, the Hiking Committee will help).
9. Plan for possible emergencies.
 - Bring a first aid kit.
 - Carry what water/food/clothing you need, plus a little extra.

- Know the best “bail outs” along your route.
- Know the emergency phone numbers for the park where you are hiking.
- Consider Wilderness First Aid training or retake the course to review.
- Consider other types of outdoor skills/leadership training.

10. Share some of your knowledge: lead a beginner hike, trail navigation hike, spring wildflower hike, history hike.

Start of Hike

1. Greet participants, introduce yourself as leader and identify the hike (as listed in Schedule).
2. Ask everyone to read the release statement and sign in.
3. Welcome new members (ask for a show of hands).
4. Briefly review your planned route and required gear.
5. If someone does not have the required gear, it’s a leader’s right to tell the person that they will not be able to join the hike and state the reason (ie. your hike write-up said “hiking boots required” and they showed up in sneakers). If possible, suggest an alternative walk they might safely do on their own.
6. If meeting public transportation, wait a reasonable amount of time for a late bus/train to arrive. If using a shuttle, explain how that works and where you’re headed.
7. Briefly review rules: staying behind the leader (or appointed lead hiker), staying in front of the sweep, stopping at all trail junctions, letting the leader know if they want to leave early.
8. If many newer hikers, consider briefly describing ways to protect themselves from ticks.
9. Count participants and check that it matches with sign-in sheet. Split the group if appropriate.
10. Appoint a hiker to be sweep and explain to them what you expect of a sweep: they should have and be able to use map, stay behind the last hiker, let you know that things are okay when you stop at trail junctions to wait for them, let you know privately if any hikers appear to be having difficulties. Introduce the sweep to the hikers and briefly describe their role.

During the Hike

1. Enjoy yourself. Set a positive tone for the group.
2. Don’t go too fast. Modify your plans based on the group and weather conditions. Stop after about 15 minutes for a water break and separation (explain what that is if needed). Always keep safety in mind and stay flexible: change plans or turn back if needed (let others know if plans change).
3. Keep the group together.
 - Stop at junctions to wait for the sweep.
 - Don’t let hikers go ahead of leader/appointed lead hiker.
 - Each hiker keeps person behind them in view.
 - Explain what blazes are; consider letting newer hikers lead awhile so they can learn to follow the blazes.
 - Count occasionally to make sure no one is missing.
4. Check that people are okay.
 - If anyone appears to be having trouble, try to assist before it becomes a problem: are they drinking water, have they eaten, do they need to take off a jacket, do they have a medical condition, can you help lighten their load, do they have “hot spots” that should be tended to before they become blisters?
 - Check in regularly with your sweep.
 - If someone clearly can’t keep up (or if their behavior is unsafe or inappropriate), it’s a leader’s right to tell the person they will not be able to continue with the hike. If possible, suggest an easy – shorter, more level, very easy to follow – alternative they can do on their own (ask if other hikers would like to join them). Or the hiker can retrace their steps to return to the trailhead, if it is still nearby. It’s better to deal with problems early before they become serious problems affecting the entire group and possible safety issues.

Don't encourage someone who is still clearly struggling to continue with the hike; it may result in serious problems later.

5. At lunch, let people know how long you'll stop. This is a convenient time to help arrange rides for those who need one (ask for a show of hands of people who need rides to NYC, then people who can offer rides).
6. If someone leaves early, offer to help them plan their route out and, if a driver, get their license number (so you can check at the end of the hike that their car is gone).
7. Suggest to promising hikers that they consider leading or co-leading a hike.
8. Remember to take care of yourself – take time to drink, eat and don't let a strong group push you into a more strenuous hike than you want.
9. Follow basic Leave No Trace principles.
 - When you can, pick up litter you find on the trail; explain to new hikers that they shouldn't leave litter behind, including orange peels, apple cores, etc.
 - Walk right through that mud rather than widening the trail by walking around it (or plan your hike to avoid areas you think will be muddy).
 - Stop for separations at least 200' from water; explain to new hikers not to leave toilet tissue behind and to dig a "cat hole" when needed.
10. In case of an accident, you as leader decide what needs to be done. If the injured person needs professional help, designate a group to go for help (include someone who knows where the accident occurred and how to return). Those best qualified to help should stay with the injured person. If the injury is less serious, assist the person in walking out. Do not immediately call park rangers or 911 for a minor problem that you and the group can handle on your own.

End of Hike

1. Count to be sure no one is missing.
2. If some hikers left early, check to see that the car is gone. If not, you decide what to do: wait for them, send a group to look for them, call the park rangers, etc.
3. Offer non-members AMC membership applications (download copies from www.amc-ny.org or request from Chapter office).
4. Record name/contact info of hikers interested in leading on back of sign-in sheet, and Hiking Committee will contact them. Or, you can offer to co-lead a hike with them.
5. If a minor accident occurred during the hike, record that information on back of sign-in sheet. If the accident required any medical attention; carrying the person out; outside help from park ranger, police, fire department, etc.; or if medical care was given (or offered and refused), a complete accident report must be written as soon as possible and sent to the Hiking Committee Chair and the AMC Joy St. office.
6. Thank people for coming and say goodbys.
7. If you want, suggest that people stop by a meeting place to socialize after the hike.
8. Return hike sign-in sheet promptly.