


new jersey

SUSSEX BRANCH TRAIL

On an icy February morning, the air is so still you can hear the beat of a hawk's wings in the bare blue sky overhead. Tree trunks creak and groan like an old rocking chair, and winter has put a frozen glaze on the landscape. But you don't mind. You've bundled up for a romp on New Jersey's 18.7-mile Sussex Branch Trail, and the solitude will have you feeling as crisp as the season.



Nestled in snow, an old barn sits just off the trail in the heart of New Jersey's once booming dairy country.

New York City is barely 60 miles east of the Sussex Branch Trail, yet the change of pace and scenery as you approach northern New Jersey can be startling. One moment you're racing with traffic on Interstate 80. The next minute you're curling through woodlands and farmsteads. You've traded honking horns for horse corrals and lazy hillsides.

Winter suddenly feels as serene as a snow globe. And winter might be the best season for the Sussex Branch Trail. Its surface is slightly uneven in places—an off-and-on mixture of gravel, ballast, cinder, dirt and grass. But with a little powder on the ground, the trail becomes a pristine highway of outdoor activity. It opens nearly 19 miles to explore between Branchville and Andover, including stops in Lafayette and Newton. You can pick up the path at multiple trailheads and road crossings, and extend your journey on the Paulinskill Valley Trail. So strap on your cross-country skis or hiking boots, or climb up into that saddle, because the Sussex Branch Trail shines when the season shivers.

In terms of elevation gain, you'll notice little advantage starting at either end of the trail. But it's fitting to begin at the northwest in Branchville, which was once the western terminus of the Sussex Branch Railroad Company line. Before the tracks reached Branchville in 1869, local creameries were limited to producing butter and cheese. After the trains arrived, and with improved refrigeration, area farmers were able to transport their milk to distant markets. The dairy industry quickly took off. By the early 1900s, the Branchville Creamery alone was bottling 9,000 quarts of milk each day, and Sussex County bragged about having more cows than people.

New Jersey's dairy heyday dried out by the 1960s due to increased costs and stricter health regulations. Many creameries closed down when the railroad discontinued service in 1966, and by 1977 the last creamery in the county had shut its doors.

Since 1998, though, the Sussex Branch Trail has enabled thousands of visitors to retrace the state's famed dairy



footprint. Most of the original creameries have disappeared, but some have been renovated for other uses, including one within the first few miles heading east from Branchville. Just south of Ross Corner on U.S. Route 206, you'll pass a large building housing several small offices. It was once Becker's Creamery, which operated during the Civil War.

After you cross Route 206, you'll settle into the trail's winter rhythm: the crunching cadence of your footsteps, and the soft "shooshing" of creeks. Weekdays on the Sussex Branch Trail are particularly peaceful, and you aren't likely to pass more than a few locals walking their dogs. Mostly you'll see signs of the animals that have hit the trail since the last snowfall—deer tracks, tiny paw prints and birds' claw marks—and the long ruts of cross-country skiers. Keep an eye out for wild turkeys as well. (Black bears are around, but not commonly seen.)

Highway 15 hums faintly to the north, and farms surround the trail. A narrow tree strip hugs the corridor, but as you approach Lafayette the woodlands grow deeper. A gushing stream ushers you into town, where you'll find several enticing cafés and antiques stores. From there, the pathway doglegs south and grows more remote. Backyards peel away, and the highway vanishes from sight and sound. The corridor becomes closely hemmed in with trees; their shadows zebra-stripe the trail.

A series of lakes, often frozen over during the peak of winter, soon opens up to the west. Someone has fashioned an



The Sussex Branch Trail just north of Kittatinny Valley State Park; (at left) one of several horse corrals just off the pathway.

aging, makeshift bench here on the trail; if it's still standing, the spot very much warrants a pause to soak up the scene and listen to the distant honking of Canada geese across the ice.

Shortly down the trail, you'll reach the one break in the corridor: a 1.1-mile detour along the shoulder of Old Branchville/Newton Branchville Junction Road. It's a bit narrow at points, but traffic travels neither too swiftly nor too heavily. Follow the road as it angles up a hill to the west and becomes Hicks Avenue in Newton. The rail-trail picks up again on your left and leads you to Sparta Avenue. At that intersection, you'll easily spot the kiosk and trailhead across the street on Strickles Pond Road.

From there, the peacefulness of the rail-trail climaxes. Crows caw and flutter in the naked treetops, and their shadows dash back and forth across the trail. You'll pass through rock cuts and steep hillsides and notice how elevated the railroad berm has grown heading up to the entrance of Kittatinny Valley State Park, which skirts the trail to the east. Then, as if to wake you from a winter dream, the trail rejoins Route 206 for the final few miles into Andover. Lake Aeroflex and the Aeroflex-Andover Airport are off to the east, and you'll feel the vibrations of business life more closely again.

Shake the snow from your boots and shed a few layers. Toast hot chocolates at the Gristmill Café (973.786.6400) right there in Andover, or head back up to Lafayette for a steamy lunch at the Millside Café (973.383.1611). However you choose to unwind and recharge from your trip, rarely will a thaw feel more satisfying than after a snowy stint on the Sussex Branch Trail.



GETTING THERE: For the northwest terminus in Branchville, you can pick up the trail just off Mill Street, between Broad Street and Newton Avenue. If you are coming up U.S. Route 206 from the south, take a right on Newton Avenue, then another quick right onto Mill Street. The trail picks up on your right just after you cross a creek. If you are coming from the north off Interstate 84, you will also be following 206 into Branchville.



From points east and west, take I-80 to reach Route 206 heading north toward Andover and Newton. From points south, you can pick up Route 206 off I-287, which links with I-95. You'll find a parking lot on the west side of the highway, near the intersection of Lenape Road and Smith Street in Andover. Take a left on Smith Street, then an immediate right on Railroad Road. The trail picks up from there. You'll find another trailhead with parking farther north just off 206 at the Aeroflex-Andover Airport, and a larger trailhead at the intersection of Sparta Avenue and Strickles Pond Road in Newton. In Lafayette, just off the intersection of Highway 15 and Morris Farm/Meadows Road, there is a parking area with restrooms.

Note: Public transportation is not widely available in the area, and there are only a couple taxi companies. Dad's Taxi (973.579.4807) is one option if you'd like to get dropped off at one end of the trail.

WHERE TO STAY: Bed-and-breakfasts abound in this neck of the woods. If you're looking for warm and cozy, try the Wooden Duck Bed & Breakfast (www.woodenduckinn.com; 973.300.0395) just outside Newton. The trail runs along the edge of the property, and the Wooden Duck has special deals for midweek stays. For other lodging or dining options, contact the Greater Newton Chamber of Commerce (www.greaternewtoncc.com; 973.300.0433) or the Sussex County Chamber of Commerce (www.sussexcountycommerce.org; 973.579.1811).



RENTALS: You can rent cross-country skis at High Point XC Ski Center outside Sussex. The shop is about 12 miles from the Branchville and Lafayette trailheads (<http://xcskihighpoint.com/index.html>; 973.702.1222). Daily rentals start at \$15.

FOR MORE: For a detailed geographic information system (GIS) map of the Sussex Branch Trail, directions and access information, user reviews and photographs, visit www.trailink.com. Find more about local tourism, services and events at the official Sussex County Web site: www.sussex.nj.us.