

Giant Ledge and Panther

Difficulty: easy-moderate

Distance: 3.4 miles to giant ledge, 6 miles to panther

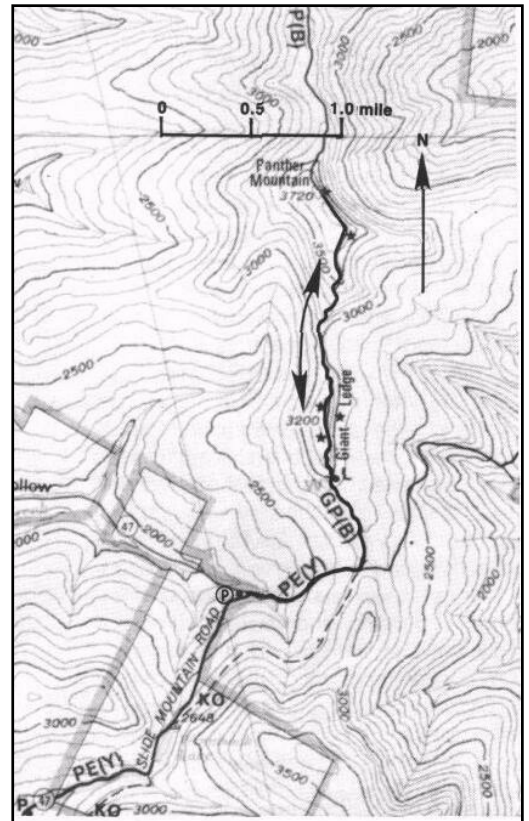
time: 3.5 - 4 hrs

Elev. gain: 1000', 1500' to panther

This is one of the easier hikes in the Catskills, although short sections are steep, and the footing can be rough.

Giant Ledge is unique in the Catskills. The west side of the ridge has the typical smooth rounded shape caused by glacial action and years of erosion. The east side provides panoramic views of the northern and southern Catskills, as well as the Esopus Valley and forest canopy below. The viewpoints sit atop a sheer cliff dropping to the forest floor 180 feet below.

This fairly easy and highly rewarding hike will take you into one of the Catskills' deepest recesses. The long ridge of Panther Mountain, which includes the lower, southerly Giant Ledge, reaches from Fox Hollow in Allaben and south to Winnisook Lake. To the east it is flanked by the extensive wilds of Woodland Valley, and to the west by Big Indian Hollow. It is here that the fledgling Esopus gains momentum, nurtured within Panther's long ridge and the western landscape with its rustic Bavarian-looking homesteads and cozy mountain hotels. Even the placenames sound rugged: Hemlock, Spruce, and Fir Mountain, Eagle Mountain Road, Elk Brook, Lost Clove, Big Indian. As you drive in from Big Indian you will begin to feel why this valley was the birthplace of legends. The most famous legend, many versions of which have emerged as happens in folk telling, involves Winnisook—the Big Indian. The general plot in most versions of the legend is that Winnisook, a man over seven feet tall, fell in love with a valley farmer's daughter, who eventually rejected her husband to join Winnisook and his people. This went on for several years until Winnisook was eventually shot by Gertrude's jealous husband during a typical livestock robbery; the dying Indian hid within a hollow tree, where he was later discovered dead by his lover. An account from Lionel Delisser's *Picturesque Ulster* (1894) offers this summation: "Win-ni-sook was buried at the foot of the pine tree in which he had been found, Gertrude and her dusky children living near the grave until the time of her death." Still other versions of the legend maintain that Winnisook became a civilized farmer who was overcome by wolves. In his memory, local farmers carved his statue from a large tree, which stood near the site of his death. No matter which interpretation is embraced, and there are many to choose from, the active imagination will find such events to be plausible, as they are tame in proportion to the obvious fantasy of many period legends. When you consider the history of the Catskills early wars, pioneer expansion, and frequent confrontations between Indians and settlers, the tale is even more enticing. Make up a few paragraphs of your own while you hike into Giant Ledge.



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Turn south at Big Indian off of NY 28 and on to County Route 47 between Shandaken and Pine Hill, and go 7.3 miles to the hairpin turn on the way to the slide mountain trailhead. At the hairpin there is a large parking area on your right. The trail to giant ledge begins across the road on your left. It follows the yellow Phoenicia-east branch trail first, intersecting with the giant ledge-panther-fox hollow trail (blue) in a little more than one half mile. The hike to giant ledge is 1,5 miles. This initial section goes uphill over a rough and rocky trail, crosses a dry streambed (seasonal) and again ascends through a hardwood forest and into some large sedimentary rock gardens. The hike to the blue trail junction will take no more than a half-hour, when you will reach a long flat walk with an unmaintained trail going right and down- hill onto the private lands of the Winnisook Club. Turn left, and within a stone's throw you will be at the triple-trail junction where the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail joins the blue trail to Giant Ledge. There is no designation or mileage listed for Giant Ledge itself, which actually is not a single identifiable site but consists of a long ridge and is an attractive camping spot. Once upon the ledge, or series of ledges, pick a vacant vantage point (this is a very popular spot) on the east side. You will be looking toward Fork Ridge and into Woodland Valley, with Terrace, Cornell, and Wittenberg to your right (southwest). To the northeast you will be able to identify the lower peaks of Garfield and Sheridan, with Romer to the east and Tremper beyond it, including various members of the Devil's Path Range from northeast to east. On the west side of Giant Ledge, several open rocks make possible views of Hemlock, Spruce, Fir, Big Indian, Eagle, Haynes, Balsam, and Belleayre Mountains. There are many isolated outlooks all over the ridge here, so take some time to poke around and explore the many footpaths that run from east to west, leading to additional viewpoints. The ledge is predominantly scrub hardwood covered, but at its north end there is a virgin "spruce grove, which you'll see extending to the ledge's base. You'll have more time to explore the ledge on your return from Panther, which is another 1.75 miles beyond the ledge and an additional 500 feet in elevation.



This takes you another forty minutes of hiking, going slightly downhill at first and then climbing vigorously through large boulders and thick hardwood forest, passing a spring on the right. You have several views of Slide, Wittenberg, and Cornell as you cross open rock terraces. The Panther summit is an expanded version of Giant Ledge in terms of views and topography, with isolated openings in the dense coniferous forest-yielding views of the Panther Kill Valley, Fork Ridge, and the village of Phoenicia with its two bridges crossing the Esopus. While the ledges on Panther face mostly to the east, some face west, and you can even look around for northerly views of Sheridan, Garfield, North Dome, Sherrill, and Balsam. On the north side of Panther, the trail (completed in 1936) descends into Fox Hollow over a jeep trail that would make an attractive cross-country ski run, suggesting that this could be an adventurous two-car loop if you had skiing in mind. The loop ups the trip mileage to seven total, about three of which can be skied if conditions are powdery. There are some breakneck sections where walking would be advisable. From the summit of Panther you are an easy 1.75 miles from Giant Ledge and another 1.5 miles from your car.