

South Dakota / Black Hills (Custer SP)

Black Elk Peak (Harney Peak)

DISTANCE: 7 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1150 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back or Loop

Harney Peak is the high point of the Black Hills, an isolated range in western South Dakota. It is 7,242 feet (2,207 meters) in elevation. Harney Peak is the highest mountain east of the Rocky Mountains in North America; to find a higher mountain to the east, you have to travel to the Pyrenees on the border of France and Spain.

It's a moderate hike of seven miles round trip, with 1,142 feet of elevation gain.

Harney Peak Climbing Basics

- Prominence: 2,922 feet (891 meters)
- Location: Western South Dakota. West of Rapid City and Interstate 90. Located in Pennington County.
- Range: Black Hills
- GPS Coordinates: 43.86611° N / -103.53167° W
- Difficulty: Class 2. Moderate. Hiking on good trails.
- Trailhead Elevation: 6,100 feet at Sylvan Lake Trailhead.
- Elevation Gain: 1,142 feet from trailhead to summit.
- Round-Trip Distance: 7 miles from trailhead to summit (3.5 miles one-way).
- Maps: USGS Quads: Hill City, Custer; Trails Illustrated: Black Hills Southeast; Black Hills National Forest map.
- Camping: Several campgrounds are in Custer State Park. The best for Harney climbers is 39-site Sylvan Lake Campground. Make reservations at 800-710-2267 or book on-line at Camping Reservations. Backpackers can camp on Harney, but not within a quarter mile of the summit.
- Lodging: Hotels and motels are in Rapid City, Hill City, and Custer.

Harney Peak is Easily Climbed

Harney Peak, a sacred mountain to Native Americans, is easily climbed by several trails. The most common route, gaining 1,100 feet, travels 3.5 miles up Trail #9 from Sylvan Lake. A round-trip ascent commonly takes four to six hours, depending on your speed and fitness. The trail begins in Custer State Park, then enters the Black Elk Wilderness Area in Black Hills National Forest. The trail is heavily used in the summer. No permits are required but hikers must register at registration boxes at the wilderness boundary.

Harney's Best Season is Summer

The best time to climb Harney Peak is from May through October. The summer months, June to August, are ideal. Severe weather, including thunderstorms and lightning, regularly brew up on summer afternoons and can quickly move onto the peak. Watch the weather to the west and descend from the summit to avoid lightning. It's best to get an early start and plan to be on the summit by noon. Carry rain gear and extra clothes to avoid hypothermia as well as carry The Ten Essentials.

Early spring and late autumn weather can be very unsettled with the possibility of snow, rain, and cold. Winters are cold and snowy, and the road to Sylvan Lake is closed. For up-to-date mountain conditions, call the Hell Canyon Ranger District/Black Hills National Forest at 605-673-4853.

Finding the Trailhead

To access the trailhead at Sylvan Lake from Rapid City and Interstate 90, drive west on U.S. 16 to U.S. 285 for 30 miles to Hill City. Drive south on US 16/385 from Hill City for 3.2 miles and make a left (east) turn on SD 87. Follow SC 87 for 6.1 miles to Sylvan Lake. Park at a large lot on the southwest side of the lake or at the trailhead parking on the east side of the lake (may be full in summer). Alternatively, reach Sylvan Lake by driving north from Custer on SD 89/Sylvan Lake Road.

Trailhead to a Viewpoint to a Valley

From the trailhead on the east side of Sylvan Lake, follow Trail #9. The trail gently climbs northeast through a pine forest to a viewpoint that overlooks a lush valley and the southern flank of Harney Peak. Granite cliffs, domes, buttresses, and spires rise from the dark forest. If you look carefully on the highest rocks, you can spy the summit tower-your goal. The trail continues east and slowly descends 300 or so feet into a valley with sun-dappled meadows and a trickling stream. Cliffs, Lodgepole Pines, and Ferns

The trail crosses the stream and starts climbing through a forest of lodgepole pine and Douglas fir. The tall, straight lodgepole pines were favored by Plains Indians for the framework of their teepees. Above the trail loom granite cliffs. Moist rocky canyons between the granite formations are filled with birdsong and ferns. Over 20 fern species grow in cliff habitats in the Black Hills and on Harney Peak, including the maidenhair spleenwort, forked spleenwort, and the very rare alternate-leaved spleenwort, which is found in only a few locales, most in the eastern United States.

Up the Final Ridge

After 2.5 miles, the trail begins climbing steeply, passing several great overlooks where you can stop and catch your breath. After several switchbacks, the trail reaches the southeast ridge of Harney Peak and continues climbing to the final craggy cliffs guarding the summit. As you climb, look for prayer offerings-colored bundles left by the Lakota on this sacred peak. Look but leave them in place and respect their religious significance. Finally scramble over rocky slabs to stone steps which lead to an old fire lookout tower perched on the edge of the cliffs. The stone structure, built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), makes a good refuge if the weather turns bad.

Harney Peak's Summit

Harney Peak, the highest mountain for 100 miles, offers stunning views. From the summit, the hiker sees four states-Wyoming, Nebraska, Montana, and South Dakota-on a clear day. Below stretches a tumble of forests, valleys, cliffs, and mountains. After enjoying the view, rest and eat your lunch, then gather your things and hike back down the trail 3.5 miles to the trailhead, having successfully ticked another of the 50 US state high points!

Black Elk's Great Vision From the Summit

From the summit of the sacred mountain, called Hinhan Kaga Paha by the Lakota Sioux, you will agree with Sioux shaman Black Elk, who called the mountain "the center of the universe." Black Elk had a "Great Vision" atop the mountain when he was nine years old. He told John Neihardt, who wrote the book *Black Elk Speaks*, about his experience on the mountain top: "I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being."

