

How to Interpret Hike Type and Difficulty Ratings

How do I know if this hike is for me? What does easy/beginner or intermediate/moderate mean exactly? These are unfortunately very difficult questions to answer. What's easy for someone may not be so easy for another. They are questions that can really only be answered by getting out and hiking. You might be surprised at what you're capable of 😊

There are, however, a few tips and guidelines that may help you determine if a hike is for you.

The 2 main things that determine how easy or challenging a hike is are **distance** and **elevation gain**:

- **Distance** is how long the hike is. The longer the hike, usually the more challenging it will be. Most hikes are round trip distance (e.g.: a 10 km hike is 5 km there, and 5 km back). A 10 km hike would be quite easy, and would likely take, on average, about 3-5 hours to complete depending on how fast the hiker is moving. A 20 km hike would be more challenging, and likely take about 7-10 hours to complete. A time of about 3 kms per hour is about average for most hikers.
- **Elevation gain** is how high up the hike climbs (how steep it is). This is the more important of the two. The more the elevation gain the more difficult the hike. A 100-meter elevation gain is typically quite easy, whereas a 1000-meter elevation gain is quite challenging.
- Now you want to put the two together. If you take a 5 km hike, which would be very easy if it was flat, and add 1000 meters of elevation gain, that hike will suddenly become very challenging.

The most common ratings and trip types are as follows:

- **Easy/beginner** (they're the same thing). Hikes that aren't super long (5-15 kms) and have little elevation gain (100-500 meters). Examples would be Parkers Ridge (Banff), Nigel Pass (Banff), Burstall Pass (Kananaskis) and Bald Hills (Jasper).
- **Intermediate/Moderate**: Slightly longer hikes (10-20 kms) with more elevation gain (500-800 meters). These are the most common hikes. Examples would be Carthew/Alderson Trail (Waterton), Mt. St. Piran (Banff), Wenkchemna Pass (Banff), Old Goat Glacier (Kananaskis) and Coliseum Mountain (David Thompson).
- **Advanced/hard/challenging**: More elevation and possibly more distance. If a hike is shorter in distance it will be extremely challenging if it has significant elevation gain. However, if it's very long (20+ kms) with moderate elevation gain it can still be challenging. Examples would be Opal Ridge (Kananaskis), Iceline/Whaleback full circuit (Yoho), Mt. Allen/Centennial Ridge (Kananaskis) and Tuff Puff (David Thompson).
- **Scramble**: Best described as "technical hiking". No ropes, harnesses, etc. are needed but you are going to be using your hands and your feet. An "easy scramble" definitely does not mean an easy hike, they are typically very steep. It also means exposure which can be very unnerving for many people. If you've never done a scramble before and/or if you're afraid of heights call the trip coordinator to discuss as this may not be the trip for you. Examples would be Yamnuska (Kananaskis), Heart Mountain (Kananaskis), Windy Point (David Thompson) and Cirque Peak (Banff).

- **Backpacking:** Carrying everything for multiple days on your back (tent, sleeping bag, food, etc.). Can be easy, intermediate or advanced depending on the distance and elevation. Contact the trip coordinator for details. Examples are Skoki Region (Banff), Skyline (Jasper), Mt. Assiniboine (Mt. Assiniboine Prov. Park, BC), Mt. Robson (Mt. Robson Prov. Park, BC), Galatea Lakes/Guinn's Pass/Ribbon Lake Circuit (Kananaskis) and Landslide Lake (David Thompson).

One thing to keep in mind is that the ratings on most hikes are typically taken from guidebooks or other references and are the opinion / perspective of experienced hikers. If a trip is rated "easy or beginner", it usually means that it's easy for someone that is experienced, which means that for someone just starting out it may actually be somewhat difficult.

There is no way to stress enough the value of doing your research! There are so many resources available for all different areas and hikes. Many guidebooks and maps have been published over the years with many different opinions on many different areas and hikes. Google is also a fantastic resource. You can typically google a hike name and come up with 10 different blog posts or trail reports. Most experienced hikers will research a hike before going to ensure they know the trailhead, the route and what kind of terrain they're likely to encounter.

Call the trip coordinator if you have any questions regarding a hike that you are interested in. Please don't be offended if the coordinator is asking questions about previous hiking experience, physical fitness, etc. They are just trying to determine what you may be capable of. Be prepared with hikes that you may have done previously. Know the names of the hikes and the distance and elevations of them. Coordinators want the day to be enjoyable for you and if you're on a trip that's way over your head it's just not fun, for yourself or the group that you're with. If the coordinator determines that a certain hike may not be for you, they may be able to recommend others that will be more within your comfort level.

Hiking should be FUN! The best thing to do is start off slow. Try some easier trails first and then work your way up. If in doubt always check with the trip coordinator. They're always happy to answer questions.

Happy Trails!