

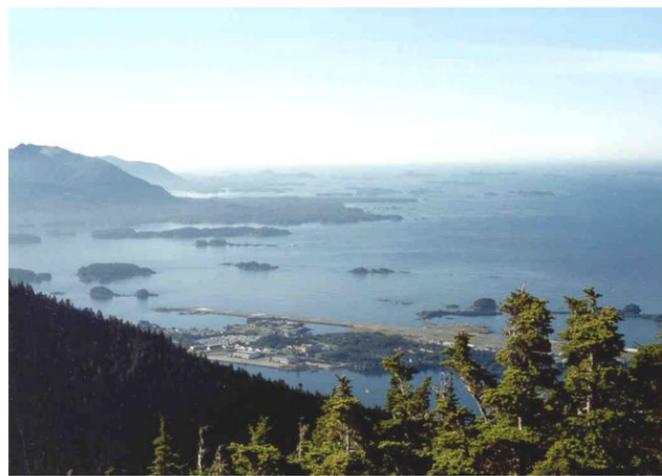


### Spectacular alpine and mountain vistas

The high alpine country that tops southeastern Alaska’s mountainous terrain beckons many people who live in or visit the region. Accessing much of that high country is more of a chore, however, than most people want to undertake. One notable exception is Harbor Mountain just outside of Sitka, the only place in southeast Alaska where it is possible to drive to sub alpine elevations. The Forest Service maintains the Harbor Mountain Road, a narrow, gravel thoroughfare that winds its way up to the 2000 foot level where one will find picnic sites and trails of the Harbor Mountain Recreation Area.

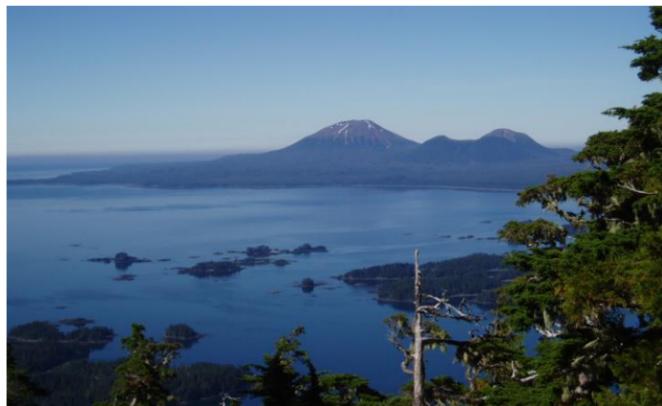


From the end of the road, it is a short hike by trail to the top of a ridge that, on a clear day, affords sweeping views in almost any direction. Looking northwest, your eyes can follow Olga and Neva Straits to Chichagof Island, one of the largest in Alaska’s panhandle. Beyond that occasionally can be seen the 100 mile distant Fairweather Range whose highest peak rises over 15,000 feet. Turning east, it is possible to follow the trail along the ridge and then scramble up to a 3,160 foot summit that will afford a look over peak after peak, valley after valley of this rugged and complex landscape. Or simply stay where you are; to the south and west view the town of Sitka directly below and go island hopping through Sitka Sound until your gaze stretches out over the Pacific Ocean.



### World War II History

The far reaching view atop Harbor Mountain was a key factor in the history of the area’s use. It was not the pure recreational pleasure of that view which prompted the road to be built in 1940-41. The construction company was under contract with the U.S. Army to provide access to a strategic observation point for the military’s operations in Sitka during World War II. Sitka’s Naval Operating Base began as a naval air station in 1939, and by 1941, the Army had installed additional harbor defense facilities which came to be known as Fort Ray. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, coastal defenses from Dutch Harbor to Kodiak, Sitka and Puget Sound needed to be on guard.



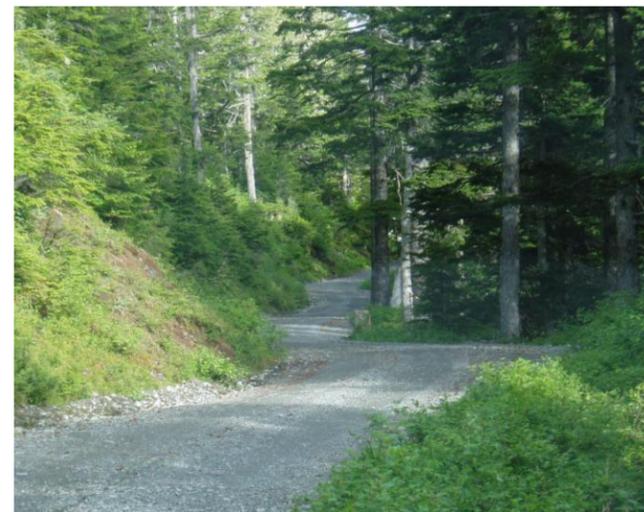
The excellent vantage point from Harbor Mountain could provide early warning of potential attacks to the Sitka defense stations. A lookout shelter was constructed on top of the ridge and concrete was poured in preparation for gun emplacements in case they were needed.

Fortunately for Sitka, the course of the war changed and the guns never had to be installed. Evidence of the military’s stay during the war is still apparent in many parts of Sitka. On Harbor Mountain, some of the timbers from the lookout shelter remain, as do the concrete slabs, one which has been put to use as the base for the current picnic shelter.



More in depth information with historic photos can be found in the pamphlet “A Secret on the Mountain: Sitka’s World War II Radar on Harbor Mountain” prepared by the US Forest Service Passport in Time program in 1998.

The original road up Harbor Mountain was a crude cat road negotiable by heavy equipment vehicles and never intended for wide use by the public. Indeed, its use was restricted to the military until the Sitka Naval Operating Base was decommissioned in 1944. But Sitkans were aware of the virtues of Harbor Mountain. They had access to the area by way of a trail built in 1936 that climbed the adjoining Gavan Hill ridge and circled around to Harbor Mountain. However, the portion of the trail that provided access to Harbor Mountain was closed to the public during the war. Once threats of the war died down, Sitka residents were quick to take note of the new possibilities for recreation on Harbor Mountain now that the road was in place. Shortly after the Forest Service took responsibility for maintenance of the road in 1945, the pressure was on to get the road into suitable shape for use by the public. Of particular interest was winter use of alpine areas. Though snow accumulations right around town didn’t often amount to much, at a 2000 ft. elevation they amounted to enough for a possible ski area to be developed. In 1949, two special use permits were granted by the Forest Service; one for installation of a rope tow in a bowl area on the mountain and one for use of an army weasel to transport skiers up the road. Even though the poor condition of the road limited its use, it seemed that Sitkans were being granted their wish to have access to Harbor Mountain by way of the road.



Maintenance of the road, however, was no easy proposition for the Forest Service. The road had been built in a hurry and was a jumble of steep grades and sharp turns where washouts were common because proper drainage had not been installed. It was passable in summer months by vehicles able to withstand rough conditions, but could not be plowed for winter use. The costs were prohibitive to make the needed improvements on the whole road. For many years, the Forest Service maintained only the first couple of miles of the road and managed the rest as a trail.

Sitkans, meanwhile, continued to protect and make what use of the area they could. Temperate summers allowed some use of the road and people who couldn’t drive often chose to walk. The open muskegs and lush sub alpine meadows, together with unusual weather-sculpted conifers that abound at higher elevations, provided an interesting and pleasant change from the



dense forests below. Wildflower lovers found different species in bloom from week to week. The creation of a picnic area and shelter made Harbor Mountain even more enticing.

During winters, skiing activities continued in the bowl area until 1955 when an avalanche killed the two sons of a prominent Sitka physician. The tragedy put skiing interests on hold and prompted studies of specific sites on Harbor Mountain that would be safe for skiing. An appropriate site was found, and in 1969, the newly established Sitka Ski Club applied for a special use permit to install another top tow. An ambitious Junior Chamber of Commerce member even proposed to transport skiers to the area by helicopter because of the problems with the road. The Ski Club’s permit was denied, however, because they couldn’t afford the required liability insurance, and serious downhill skiing interest dwindled. Determined cross country skiers persisted, though, and soon found themselves in competition with drivers of snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles for use of the mountain. The popularity of Harbor Mountain as a recreation spot had been clearly established.

In the early 1970’s the Forest Service made a commitment to maintaining the entire Harbor Mountain Road. The original course of the road was never changed, but drainage improvements were made and the road was graded to minimize some of the problems vehicles had encountered in the past. The road up the mountain is closed to standard passenger vehicles in

the winter. A series of road gates manage the off-road winter recreation enthusiasts.

### Location

In 2002 a new, two-lane gravel road was constructed to access Harbor Mountain. Drive approximately 4 miles northwest of Sitka along Halibut Point Road. A highway sign identifies the new bypass road. The first ¼ mile is a paved two lane highway which transitions to a two-lane gravel surface up to Milepost One. At Milepost One there is a large parking lot to the left and a water tower to the right. Beyond this point the road becomes a narrow, one lane, winding, steep, and gravel road with six sharp switchbacks, short sight distances and few turnouts. This road is not suitable for motorhomes, RV's, busses, trailers or large vans. The road winds about 4.5 miles upward through four gates before it ends at a parking loop. As you climb up above the timberline, you will begin to see hints of the vistas you can expect to find from the top.



### Picnic Area

As the road nears the 2000 foot level and begins to flatten out, you will find a picnic area off to the right. From the parking area, a planked walkway crosses fragile muskegs to the main picnic shelter. Gnarled and stunted trees, many of them bearded with lichen, are scattered throughout the area and lend the landscape another-worldly character. A few small trails lead to four aging and secluded picnic sites, all with spectacular views on a clear day. This high country is often draped in clouds, however, but even then, it has its charm. Mists creep along the ridges, and trees and distant peaks appear and disappear in fog to give the place a fitting air of mystery.

### Harbor Mountain Ridge Trail

If ones interest is hiking rather than picnicking, from the Picnic Area continue along the remaining ¾ mile of road to the parking area at its end. There a trailhead, marked by a bulletin board, climbs up through a wooded area in a series of switchbacks opening into a large sub alpine meadow on a ridge. At various times during the summer, this meadow is dotted with the colors of several species of wildflowers in bloom including blue flowered deer cabbage. A side trail turns to the right and follows



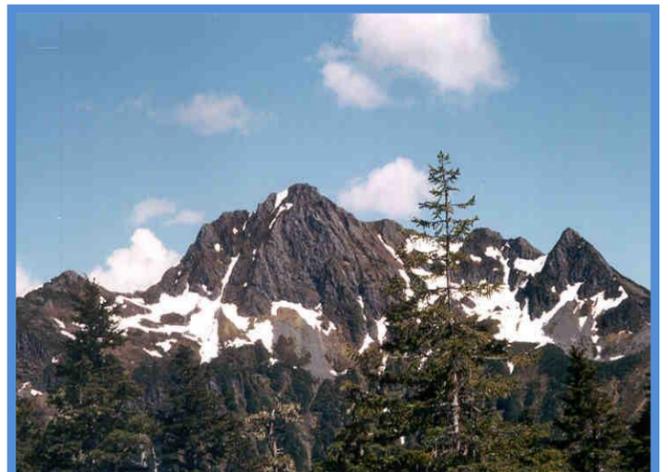
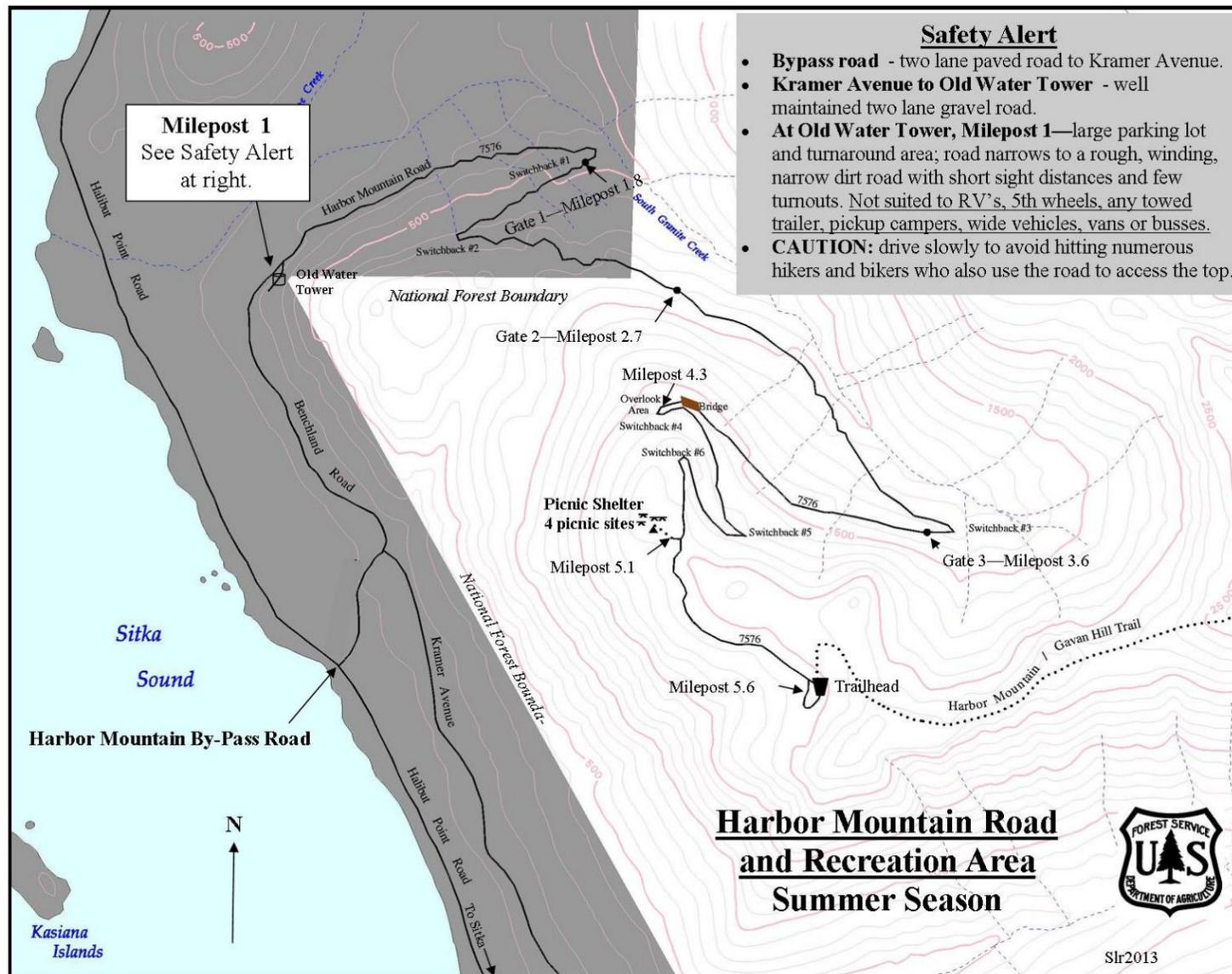
drops steeply into the granite Creek watershed.

the ridge toward the summit of a knob where World War II remains are located. However, the main trail turns east (or left) before reaching the knob and runs along the north face of the meadow which

During the summer, the songs of various thrushes and other birds can be heard rising from the forest below. It is likely one might see the tracks of Sitka black-tail deer along the trail. Be sure to keep your eye open for ravens and eagles; the ease with which they soar on the high air currents is truly a pleasure to watch. The trail continues along another ridge, through meadowlands, rocky outcroppings, and dwarf forests toward the peaks of Harbor Mountain. Once the snow melts, watch this section of the trail for purple patches of blooming shooting stars and the delicate pink and white bell-shaped blossoms of Cassiopeia in the evergreen heaths along the way.

Before reaching the peaks, the trail forks off to the right and skirts the hillside, following a cirque around to once again join the original Gavan Hill Trail which still climbs up the adjacent ridge. The left fork of the trail continues up the steep shoulder of Harbor Mountain and stops in a steep rocky alpine at about 2500 feet. A small emergency hut is located in the saddle that connects Harbor Mountain Ridge to Gavan Hill Ridge. This hut provides a snug place to overnight on a cold, blustery evening even though no wood stove is available. Harsh conditions in this sub alpine environment leave little time for vegetation to grow and recover from disturbance. Spending time there gives one a change to appreciate the persistence with which these plants live.

**NOTE: Harbor Mountain is managed as a day use area. Camping is not allowed along the road or within the recreation area (which is a ¼ mile either side of the road from the national forest boundary to the end of the road). Trees in this environment grow very slowly. To prevent resource damage to the fragile subalpine vegetation, campfires are allowed only in designated fire rings in the picnic area and the wood must be brought from town or charcoal may be used.**



## Harbor Mountain Road and Recreation Area

### Summer Recreation Opportunity Guide

