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The Pleasures of a Night Out

Life is good. You’re a thousand miles from the office, kicking back in a sunny alpine meadow surrounded by 14,000-foot peaks. While your coworkers back home chew on the day’s second stale doughnut, you flip the perfect blueberry pancake, admiring the perfect morning.

Spending nights out on the trail, you begin to relax and forget about the numbing influences of society. You have time to become part of the natural world, and to study those things around and above you that you can’t see back home.

That’s why the editors at BACKPACKER have pulled together some of their favorite hikes across America. Some you can do easily in 2 or 3 days—a long weekend, say—while others require more of an investment of your time.

We’ve kept each group organized by state so you can find a great backpacking trail reasonably close to your home ground. Or if you’re on the road for vacation or business, you can sneak in a few days away for yourself. You’ll find a description of the spot, plus details on how to get there, getting permits, where to get a good map or guide, and more.

Denali National Park, Alaska

Let rivers and ridgelines be your compass as you hike in the shadow of Alaska’s Mt. McKinley.

By Jeff Rennicke

It is, quite simply, the most spectacular moment in North American hiking. For 3 days, the world has been locked in a gray haze of rain and fog. Mosquitoes buzz incessantly in my rain hood. I trudge along, gazing only at my feet. Then I look up, and there it is.

The clouds had cleared over the highest mountain on the continent: Mt. McKinley. It appears to be the roof of the world. Denali National Park and Preserve (the mountain itself is still officially Mt. McKinley) is classic Alaska—open horizons, grizzlies, wind swirling across the tundra, snow-capped peaks. Even without Mt. McKinley, it would be one of the world’s premier hiking locations. But when the mountain peeks out from behind the clouds, backpacking here is simply sublime.

At 6 million acres, the park is the size of Massachusetts, but features only one maintained backpacking trail. The best routes are along rivers and ridgelines, routes that require good map-reading skills, experience in fording fast, cold streams, and keeping one eye open for grizzlies. You won’t make a lot of miles in Denali, either. The open tundra and long horizons can sometimes seem endless, as if you’re getting nowhere. But then, you can always just sit down and wait for the mountain to show itself.

Expedition Planner

Permits: The park’s backcountry units each have a user quota that fills quickly in high season. Reservations cannot be made in advance, so have second and third route choices in mind. Bear-resistant food containers are required, but are loaned for free with a backcountry permit purchase.

Access: The park entrance is 237 miles north of Anchorage and reachable by car, shuttle, or train (Alaska Railroad, 800/544-0552; www.akrr.com). Private cars are not allowed beyond the park’s entrance. Buses shuttle visitors along the narrow Park Road.

Season: Ideal hiking is in July and August. Early September is prime berry-picking and bear-viewing time, but snow starts around Labor Day.


Contact: Denali National Park and Preserve, 907/683-2294; www.nps.gov/dena.
Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

A mile deep, 71,000 footsteps wide, some 278 miles long—the impressive statistics don’t hit you with the same explosive force as a hike into the heart of this otherworldly natural wonder.

By Annette McGivney

At mere 6 feet tall and 39 years old, I’m akin to a grain of sand on a seashore in this ancient, gargantuan landscape. As I hike 10 miles down from the canyon’s South Rim to the Colorado River via the Tanner Trail, I lose 5,000 feet of elevation and all sense of scale. In the Grand Canyon, landmarks that seem near actually stand 2 or 5 or 20 miles away. Layers of the Earth, not the hands on my watch, mark the passage of time. Light reflects off rock, making every color radiate with a neon glow.

As I thread my way between boulders and sheer bluffs, I follow a faintly marked path called the Escalante Route. Each evening, the route leads me to another lush riverside campsite, where soft sand and abundant water make me forget I’m in the desert. But in between, the route scrambles up scree slopes 1,000 feet above the river, detours around serpentine drainages, and slides down slot canyons. You have to work hard to touch the treasures of the Grand Canyon, but the once-in-a-lifetime rewards are many.

I stop for lunch at the Unkar overlook and peer at rapids 1,500 feet below me, the water of Unkar Creek churning as it tumbles in from the North Rim. Vishnu Temple, The Tabernacle, and other mammoth stone monuments rise like islands in a vast ocean of space. Behind me are the terraced layers of the South Rim. I’m so deep in the heart of the canyon that I can’t see the top, nor can I fathom enjoying any place more than I am relishing this giant hole in the ground. Nowhere else have I felt so insignificant, yet so alive.

Expedition Planner

Permits: Required for all overnight camping; they may be obtained up to 4 months in advance through the mail. You can also apply for a same-day permit at the park’s backcountry office, but demand often exceeds availability. See Contact below for an online permit application and office phone number. Fees are $10 per group, plus $5 per person per night of camping.

Route: The Escalante Route is recommended only for seasoned desert travelers. First-time Grand Canyon hikers may want to stick to more established trails, like Bright Angel, South Kaibab, and Hermit.

Season: Spring and late fall are the most pleasant times to hike. In winter, be prepared for ice and snow at the rim. Do not backpack here from June to early September; temperatures can soar to 115°F at the base of the canyon.

Guides: Grand Canyon National Park #207 map (Trails Illustrated, 800/962-1643; $9.95). USGS 7.5-minute quads for the Escalante Route: Desert View, Cape Royal, and Grandview Point (USGS, 888/ASK-USGS; $4 each). Hiking the Grand Canyon by John Annerino (Sierra Club Books, 415/977-5500; $15).

Contact: Backcountry Information Center, Grand Canyon National Park, 928/638-7875; www.nps.gov/grca.

Wild Nightlife

If you keep your eyes open and your movements quiet, you’ll see all kinds of animals. Whereas hawks and vultures move about during the heat of midday, most animals wait until dusk and dawn. Nighthawks and bats skim fields and streams for insects. Deer and elk eat dew-laden plants in open fields. Keep watching and carnivores will come to feast on the deer. Cover your flashlight with red cellophane for low-impact nighttime spotting.

Wildlife is most active in spring and fall. In spring, hungry snakes and bears are emerging from winter’s sleep and snowmelt-filled vernal pools harbor mating salamanders and frogs. In fall, hawks and songbirds migrate, while foxes and mink hunt all day to fatten up for winter.

Go where the animals go. Riparian areas attract critters galore, especially at twilight; keep a fair distance so that you don’t discourage the thirsty from drinking. Many species prefer transition zones, where fields meld into forests and foothills flatten into plains, since they provide food and shelter close together. Position yourself on the edge of these zones so you can see animals moving in both areas.
Sequoia National Park, California

There’s a soothing magic to the big trees and high trails of Sequoia National Park.

By Jordan Rane

Standing at the Wolverton trailhead in Sequoia National Park, already 7,000 feet higher than most California freeways, my ties to that hazy world below are feeling pretty tenuous. They snap altogether somewhere along the park’s prized Lakes Trail, where a kingdom of yellow pine and ponderosa, Douglas fir, and incense cedar begs me to leave it all behind.

Sequoia, a 604-square-mile tract of canyons, forests, rivers, and looming granite peaks, has its bragging rights—the tallest peak in the Lower 48 (that’s Mt. Whitney, 14,496 feet), the largest living thing on the entire planet (a sequoia tree named General Sherman), and some of the most stunning alpine wilderness anywhere.

John Muir penned volumes about the Sierra, believing it to be the world’s most life-enhancing spot. The conservationist even proved it by climbing a pine tree in a raging lightning storm just to get closer to it all. As I lie wide-eyed under a full moon at 9,000 feet, encased in an amphitheater of looming silver peaks above Emerald Lake, I understand Muir’s addiction.

Expedition Planner

Route: An ideal weekend follows the 13-mile Lakes Trail to Pear Lake and the Tableland area from the Wolverton trailhead on the west side of Sequoia National Park. Keep going on the High Sierra Trail (pick it up just south of the Wolverton trailhead at Crescent Meadow).

Drive Time: Los Angeles: 4 hours; Fresno: 1 hour

The Way: From Los Angeles, head up US 5 to CA 99 and Visalia. Take CA 198 east for 36 miles to the Generals Highway park entrance.

Dayhike: A short trail off Generals Highway will introduce you to General Sherman himself. He’s 50 times your height and 17,000 times your weight, and predates Julius Caesar.

Elevation: Most trails range from 6,000 to 10,000 feet.

Crowd Control: The nicest time (weather, bugs, and crowds) is September and early October.

Guides: Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks map (Tom Harrison Maps, 800/265-9090; backpacker.com/mapstore; $8.95). Also recommended is Day Hiking Sequoia by Steve Sorensen ($12.95).

Walk Softly: Protect black bears and yourself by removing trash from your car and storing all food in bear-proof canisters on the trail.

Contact: Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, 559/565-3134; www.nps.gov/seki.

Myakka River State Park, Florida

Hike the Myakka Trail for a glimpse of the Sunshine State’s wild and grassy past.

By Johnny Molloy

Close your eyes and imagine backpacking in Florida. If your image includes slogging down a waterlogged trail and dodging alligators, you’re in for a pleasant surprise. I had the good fortune to go backpacking in Myakka River State Park last winter, and now my vision of Florida hiking includes a vast dry prairie and far-reaching views.

The 28,875-acre park in central Florida protects one of the largest remaining tracts of Florida’s dry grass prairie, an ecosystem that once covered parts of the state from coast to coast. Add the Wild and Scenic Myakka River, 12 miles of which flow through the park, as well as 7,500 acres of wilderness around Lower Myakka Lake, and you have the makings of a great hike.

The 39-mile, hikers-only Myakka Trail loops through a diverse array of grass/palmetto prairies, dense palm islands, and shady oak hammocks. The park is home to an odd crew of wildlife, including burrowing...
owls, bald eagles, grasshopper sparrows, ospreys, sandhill cranes, and Eastern box turtles. There’s also a good chance of seeing alligators (this is still Florida, after all). Distinctive local plants include the endangered wild pineapple and resurrection ferns, which become brown and shriveled until infrequent winter rains bring them back to life.

The day I set out on the trail, the rich green hues of new growth peeked through the blackened soil of a recent fire. After crossing a sunny, open flat, the sandy, narrow footpath entered a dark palm grove. An armadillo skittered through palm fronds. Willows grew thick alongside an intermittent streambed. That night, I pitched my tent in a stand of longleaf pines overlooking the park’s six backcountry campsites (well water must be treated, and wells sometimes dry up, so check ahead). As I entered a dark palm grove. An armadillo skittered through palm fronds. Willows grew thick alongside an intermittent streambed. That night, I pitched my tent in a stand of longleaf pines overlooking the park’s six backcountry campsites (well water must be treated, and wells sometimes dry up, so check ahead). As I pitched my tent in a stand of longleaf pines overlooking the vast prairie, fog rolled across the landscape and an owl broke the silence of the cool evening.

Expedition Planner

Drive Time: Myakka River State Park is 1 1/2 hours (70 miles) south of Tampa and 2 1/2 hours (130 miles) from Orlando.

The Way: From Tampa, take I-75 south for 60 miles to Sarasota and exit 37 (Clark Road). Head east on Clark Road (FL 72) for 9 miles to Myakka River State Park.

Trails: The Myakka Trail makes a 39-mile circuit, with numerous shorter loop options available. Combine backpacking and paddling by canoeing the Myakka River between the Lower and Upper Myakka Lakes. A backcountry fee of $3 per night for adults and $2 per night for children under 18 is required for camping (see Contact below).

Dayhike: For a good sampling of hammock and prairie ecosystems, start at the main trailhead near Upper Myakka Lake and hike the 6-mile Bee Island Loop around the Mossy Hammock campsite (return on Fox High Road, a dirt track closed to vehicles).

Elevation: The elevation imperceptibly shifts from a high of 40 feet atop the prairie down to about 25 feet near Upper Myakka Lake.

Can’t Miss: Walking the sharp ecological border where the lush Deer Prairie Slough meets the dry, open prairie.

Crowd Control: Winter is the best time to hike here (November to January); you’ll share a backcountry campsite with others only on weekends. Spring is more crowded; secure reservations for backcountry campsites at least a week in advance.


Walk Softly: Campfires are permitted, but should be avoided, as the prairie is usually tinder-dry in winter. The Myakka River is home to the endangered wood stork. Admire wildlife from a distance and don’t disturb nests.

Contact: Myakka River State Park, 941/361-6511; http://www.floridastateparks.org/ma

Mahoosuc Range, Maine/New Hampshire

Mahoosuc Notch is a glacier-carved gash winding through precipitous granite cliffs.

By Michele J. Morris

Every summer, the great wave of northeastern urbanites fleeing for the hills flows first over New York’s Catskills and Adirondacks, then through the Berkshires in Massachusetts, and finally crashes against White’s in New Hampshire, frothing up and over the high peaks of the Presidential Range. But those seeking an oasis far from the maddening crowd find their way to the Mahoosucs.

Guy Waterman, who with his wife, Laura, wrote the definitive history of hiking in the Northeast, called the Mahoosuc Range “a rambling and rugged spine of middling-sized peaks.” Give thanks for such faint praise, for it has helped damn these mountains to blessed obscurity.

The Mahoosucs ramble from the Androscoggin River in northeast New Hampshire to the southwest edge of Maine. The length of the range is traversed by the 31-mile Mahoosuc Trail, a segment of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Its loftiest point is an unimpressive 4,180 feet, but hike the trail from west to east and you’ll climb close to 10,000 feet (total) over 10 peaks. Despite those impressive statistics, only one aspect of the Mahoosuc Range has earned it real notoriety, especially among AT thru-hikers: the mile-long ravine known as Mahoosuc Notch. It’s been dubbed “the hardest mile on the AT,” and many thru-hikers anticipate its challenges all the way from Georgia.

I hiked the Mahoosucs from east to west on Labor Day weekend, when you’d expect any backcountry destination within a day’s drive of Washington and Boston to be completely overrun with urban escapees. Not the Mahoosucs.
The only traffic I encountered was a handful of fast-moving AT thru-hikers and a few weekend enthusiasts.

When I arrived at Speck Pond on Friday night, the tent platforms were nearly full, and a persistent drizzle was falling. I pitched my little hoop tent, then ambled down to the shelter to see what the thru-hikers who’d just tackled The Notch had to say about the so-called hardest mile.

Their answers were as varied as their trail names. “Some parts were kinda scary,” said Three Gaited Mule, “but it’s not the hardest mile.” Diamond Doug added that it was “cool to be airborne several times, jumping from boulder to boulder.” But Split P wanted none of it. She hated The Notch: “I can’t wait to get back to the big mileage days when I can just walk. It took me 4½ hours to get through there. It was awful.”

The one thing they agreed on was Diamond Doug’s summation: “I don’t know that it was the hardest mile, but it sure was the slowest.”

Mahoosuc Notch is filled halfway with immense blocks of schist cleaved from the walls above by countless freeze-and-thaw cycles. Tree roots snake through the clefts and crevices. Water gurgles somewhere beneath the boulders but is seldom seen. Even on blindingly sunny days, it remains a chilly, Gothic place, hiding pockets of snow and ice.

In the best conditions, the route is still so challenging that backpackers consider it a point of honor to keep their packs on while clambering up or shimmying under the gargantuan boulders. Be forewarned: The Notch is a graveyard of Nalgene bottles, trekking poles, and anything else not securely stashed inside a pack. Rain covers, knuckles, and nerves often emerge a bit more ragged on the other side.

The rest of the trail is ample reward for the slow deliberation of The Notch. Even when low-flying clouds obscure the many stunning views, the alpine zones are miraculous, enveloping you in the Christmassy smells of balsam firs, the granite path carving through heath—shrubs and blueberry, low and dense against the wind. Green and orange grasses and auburn and lime moss light up the bog walks. Alongside burbling creeks, pale white Indian pipes and tiny red mushrooms scatter into a lilliputian glade like a fairy trail.

Later in the weekend, having passed another half-handful of thru-hikers heading north, I reached the summit of Goose Eye Mountain and found my first crowd. There, among the rocks and fog, milled a covey of spruce grouse. Clucking nervously, they materialized in and out of the whiteness, then vanished into the thickets, leaving me once again alone with the silence.

**Expedition Planner**

**The Way:** The easiest access from the west is at the Centennial/AT trailhead on US 2, about 2 miles east of Gorham, New Hampshire. The eastern trailhead is in Grafton Notch State Park, Maine, where the AT crosses ME 26. Both locations are about 180 miles from Boston.

**Route:** The 31-mile Mahoosuc Trail travels along the spine of the range from Gorham to Grafton Notch State Park, with a new parallel trail in the works. Numerous side trails allow for several excellent weekend loops of varying difficulty.

**Fees:** A caretaker at the Speck Pond Campsite from June 1 to October 15 collects the $6 per night fee.

**Guides:**

**In the Night Sky:** Finding the Aurora Borealis

The multicolored arches of light that dance across the night sky in northern regions are caused by solar winds that send electrically charged particles into Earth’s upper atmosphere, where they collide with gas atoms. This should be another good year for viewing northern lights. In Alaska and northern Canada, the best time to view aurora is around the equinox, when dark skies and mild weather cooperate.
Isle Royale National Park, Michigan

A trip to this island in Lake Superior is well worth the price of the ferry.

By James Campbell

Backpackers, as a rule, know that the best things in life require a little extra effort. So don’t be daunted when it comes to planning a trip to Isle Royale National Park. Sure, you have to cross Lake Superior to get there, but spending the few extra minutes securing a boat ticket is well worth the effort.

When you get off the ferry, you’ll find an island wilderness little changed since prehistoric visitors first traveled here from the mainland. Isle Royale’s charms include miles of shoreline and ridgetop trails, moose, river otters, raptors, rare orchids, and the soul-stirring eerie howling of the island’s resident wolf packs.

After climbing to Red Oak Ridge, you’ll head back to Windigo via the Greenstone Ridge Trail. The last leg is downhill, leaving you plenty of energy for the ferry ride home.

**Expedition Planner**

**Drive Time:** Duluth: about 2 hours (140 miles); St. Paul: 5 hours (295 miles). Ferry ride to Windigo: 2 hours.

**The Way:** From St. Paul, take I-35 north for 132 miles to Duluth. At Duluth, exit onto MN 61 north. Continue on MN 61 to Grand Portage and follow the signs to the ferry.

**Trails:** With 165 trail miles to choose from, Isle Royale offers trips to fit just about any time frame. The 30-mile Feldtmann Lake–Island Mine Loop makes a good trek for strong hikers with a long weekend. For a shorter option, simply turn around at Feldtmann Lake.

**Dayhike:** The 6.5-mile Huginnin Cove Loop samples the island’s forests and waters and offers opportunities to watch the local wildlife.

**Crowd Control:** Go in late spring or early fall to avoid the summer rush. The park closes from October 31 to April 15.


**Walk Softly:** Keep a safe distance from the island wildlife (see “A Respectful Distance,” page 16, and “Too Close for Comfort,” on page 22). Stay on established trails even if they’re muddy.


Mt. Nebo, Utah

Salt Lake City hikers are 2 hours away from sweeping views atop the Mt. Nebo ridge.

By Eric Hansen

You’ll gasp when you step onto Mt. Nebo’s 10,000-foot-high summit ridge, and it won’t just be due to the thin air. The extensive views take in much of central Utah, and they only get better as you go higher. Ahead, the Mt. Nebo Trail follows the ridge past sculpted snow cornices and a few clumps of krummholz as it tip toes up the serrated crest. A mile later, the path skirts a flat meadow before the final, 500-foot climb to Nebo’s South Summit.

There, views stretch northeast to the Uinta Mountains, south to the 120-miles-distant Tushar Mountains, and west to Notch Peak and the Deep Creek...
Range. To the north, much of the length of the Wasatch Front is visible, but the knife-edge ridge connecting Nebo’s three summits steals the show. That rugged spine’s steep limestone bedrock runs to Nebo’s 11,928-foot highpoint, a mile away. A beautiful pyramid, Mt. Nebo presides over a landscape of rock, lingering early-summer snow, and green swaths of sharply angled alpine meadows.

Early Mormon pioneers gave the lofty summit its name, meaning “Sentinel of God.” Today, that high crest is the central feature of a 27,010-acre wilderness area where elk, moose, cougar, black bear, and mule deer roam. Red-tailed hawks glide on the thermals; in summer, the bright red of Indian paintbrush and purple-blue of lupine accent the meadows.

**Expedition Planner**

**Route:** About 24 miles of hiking trail are within the wilderness, with another 70 nearby. The author’s route followed the Nebo Bench and Mt. Nebo Trails for a 13-mile round-trip hike, gaining and losing 5,400 feet of elevation. Swinging through four broad switchbacks in its first 2 miles, the Nebo Bench Trail reaches a sagebrush flat and views of Mt. Nebo’s skyline 1,500 feet above the trailhead. Several snow gullies near the intersection of the Nebo Bench and Mt. Nebo Trails can be a hazard well into July. Water can be scarce after lingering snow patches melt off. Check conditions with Spanish Fork rangers (see Contact below). Snow returns to the high crest in late September or in October.

Beyond the author’s route, the Nebo Bench Trail continues north 7 miles along Mt. Nebo’s eastern slopes, traversing high meadows and fir and aspen stands to the Monument trailhead. From Nebo’s west side, the 3.5-mile-long Willow Canyon Trail offers a short but steep route to the crest.

**Drive Time:** Salt Lake City: 2 hours

**The Way:** From Salt Lake City, take I-15 south 87 miles. Turn east on UT 132 for 5 miles, then north 3.3 miles on the Mt. Nebo Scenic Loop Road. At that point, turn northwest, as the Loop Road turns northeast, and drive 1.3 miles, past the Ponderosa Campground, to the trailhead. A sign and trail register mark a small parking area on the west side of the road.

**Dayhike:** From the Monument trailhead, walk the North Peak Trail 3.25 miles, gaining 2,000 feet, to arrive at its namesake’s 11,174-foot highpoint.

**Elevation:** The lowest elevation in the wilderness is 5,200 feet, near Little Birch Creek. The highpoint is Mt. Nebo at 11,928 feet.

**Crowd Control:** You may see a few weekend peak-baggers on the Nebo Bench, Willow Canyon, and Mt. Nebo Trails.

**Guides:** Hiking Utah by David Hall ($14.95). Trails Illustrated/National Geographic Uinta National Forest #701 map (backpacker.com/mapstore; $9.95).

**Walk Softly:** Don’t camp on the flat meadow below Nebo’s South Summit. Leave the flowers for others to enjoy.

**Contact:** Spanish Fork Ranger District, Uinta National Forest, 435/623-0952, ext. 461; www.fs.fed.us/r4/uinta.

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**A Respectful Distance**

Getting close to wildlife may not be the best idea because you may scare them, causing them to waste precious energy they need to survive. If you move in for a better view, don’t make a beeline for the animals, but look down and walk slowly in random directions, as if you were looking for lost keys. Freeze whenever the animal looks at you.

While we’re on the subject of respecting wildlife, let’s talk about lures and calls. In some parks, calling tapes and other lures are illegal because they unnecessarily disturb mating animals. Some people suck on the backs of their hands to attract predators (who think it sounds like a hurt rabbit) and birds (who think it’s a bird invading their territory). If you choose to try this, be ready for what may approach you.

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**Olympic National Park, Washington**

A trip along Washington’s Olympic Coast is one whale of a day at the beach.

By Kristin Hostetter

There’s something about the sound of waves hitting a beach that makes you sleep like a baby. But if you haven’t camped on a deserted coastal beach before, you’re missing a whole lot more than just some great shut-eye. Things like a tidepool filled with 10-legged starfish and shimmering sea anemones, and mornings with laughing seagulls and the sun dancing on the waves. You’re missing a climb up a 50-foot cliff to gaze into the ocean’s sapphire water and—if you’re lucky—catch a glimpse of a whale breaking...
I’ve hiked countless beaches, and the Coastal Strip in Washington’s Olympic National Park is the place to go. The 60-mile stretch from Shi Shi Beach to the Hoh River is the longest tract of virgin coastline left in the Lower 48. You’ll hike a section of white-sand beach, picking your way over ocean-slicked cobblestones and massive, algae-covered logs. When that section of the beach ends and a headland juts out into the sea, you’ll claw your way up out of the sun and into the cool cedar forests above. Then it’s back down to the beach, often via handy rope ladders. The wonderful up-and-down pattern continues along the entire coast, creating a hike that’s varied and beautiful. Pay careful attention to the tides, so you don’t get stranded on the wrong side of a headland.

**Expedition Planner**

**Permits:** Permits are free and available at ranger stations, visitor centers, and many trailheads. Call ahead to check on quotas and reservations (see Contact below).

**Route:** Access to Shi Shi Beach is through private property. Contact the Makah Information Center at 360/645-2201 for details. For a shorter hike, start at Third Beach and hike south to the Hoh River (18 miles).

**Season:** High summer brings more stable weather and more hikers. Spring and fall can be wet, but you may have the coast to yourself.

**Guides:** Custom Correct maps North Olympic Coast and South Olympic Coast (www.olypen.com/ire; $3.25 each) are available at park visitor centers, ranger stations, or from the Outdoor Recreation Information Center, 206/470-4060; www.nps.gov/ ccso/oric.htm. 100 Hikes in Washington’s South Cascades and Olympics: Chinook Pass, White Pass, Goat Rocks, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Adams by Ira Spring and Harvey Manning (The Mountaineers, 800/553-4453; $14.95).

**Contact:** Olympic National Park Wilderness Information Center, 360/565-3100; www.nps.gov/olym.

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**Salmo-Priest Wilderness, Washington**

You may glimpse one of the last Selkirk grizzlies.

By Craig Romano

Hiking along Washington’s Shedroof Divide Trail, I kept one hand on my trekking pole and the other on my binoculars. I needed the pole because this high path traverses a 5,000-foot-high ridgeline for 22 miles, offering wide views of the surrounding meadows, forests, and ridges of northeastern Washington. The binoculars? The area is known as the last stronghold for grizzlies in the Pacific Northwest, and my hiking partner and I wanted a glimpse of one.

The grizzly is one of the most endangered mammals in the Lower 48, and here it shares the land with another rare mammal, the woodland caribou. In 1984, Congress helped protect both animals by designating this northeastern corner of the state the Salmo-Priest Wilderness. At more than 41,000 acres, the wilderness consists of two long north-south ridges, with 6,828-foot Salmo Mountain crowning its northern end. About 50 miles of trail cross the damp old-growth forests, resplendent alpine meadows, and 7,000-foot peaks.

Besides being home to bear and caribou, Salmo-Priest is a residence for cougar, bobcat, deer, elk, wolverine, badger, lynx, moose, and bighorn sheep. We kept our eyes peeled from the moment we left the trailhead at Pass Creek Pass.

A mere 2 miles from the road, Round Top Mountain’s view entices you to stay, but the scenery and the solitude only get better the farther you travel along the ridgeline. Before long, something large moving on the trail ahead startled us. Our excitement faded as we saw that the object of our attention was a Salmo-Priest backcountry ranger. He took a reprieve from trailwork to chat with us about his first grizzly sighting.

With new determination, we continued up the divide for 10 more miles. Though we never saw a grizz, fresh scat, tracks, and debarked trees were prevalent and convinced us that just sharing the stunning wilderness with these mountain monarchs was excitement enough.

**Expedition Planner**

**Drive Time:** Spokane: 2 hours (100 miles).

**The Way:** From Spokane, take US 2 northeast for 35 miles to WA 211. Follow WA 211 north to the town of Usk. At the junction of WA 211 and WA 20, take WA 20 north for 30 miles to Tiger. Take WA 31 north for 2 miles. Just before the town of
Ione, turn east on Sullivan Lake Road (County Road 9345), and travel 12 miles to Sullivan Lake Ranger Station. Forest Service Road 22 begins here, leading to many of the trailheads.

**Trails:** About 50 miles of trail are within the wilderness, with another 50 close by. The author’s route followed the 22-mile Shedroof Divide Trail through the heart of the wilderness. A scenic 18-mile circuit (the “Salmo Loop”) combines Shedroof Divide Trail with Trails #535 (Salmo Divide Trail) and #506 (Salmo Basin Trail). The loop spills into Idaho, with the option of hiking to the fire tower at Little Snowy Top (6,829 feet).

**Dayhike:** The 5.3-mile Noisy Creek Trail starts at Noisy Creek Campground and offers views of Sullivan Lake and connections to other wilderness trails.

**Elevation:** The area ranges from about 3,400 feet in the Salmo River Valley to 7,309 feet at Gypsy Mountain.

**Can’t Miss:** The view of Priest Lake, 1 vertical mile below Little Snowy Top.

**Crowd Control:** These trails are lightly visited, but the “Salmo Loop” sees a fair number of backpackers from June until August.

**Guides:** 100 Hikes in the Inland Northwest by Rich Landers and Ida Dolphin (The Mountaineers, 800/553-4453; www.backpacker.com/bookstore; $14.95). The Forest Service publishes a good wilderness map ($3) and offers a free booklet describing trails (see Contact).

**Walk Softly:** This is bear country. Hang food and keep a clean camp.

**Contact:** Sullivan Lake District, Colville National Forest, 509/446-7500; www.fs.fed.us/r6/colville.

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**Encampment River Trail, Wyoming**

When you hike Wyoming’s Encampment River Trail, you won’t want to go home.

By Eric Hansen

Every time I hike the Encampment River Trail, my usually brisk pace slows to a crawl. I linger at rushing streams and muse over the source and travels of the gurgling flow. I stop to examine rocks that catch my eye. In truth, I use any excuse to dawdle, because it would be a terrible mistake to hurry through this remote canyon.

The Encampment River begins in the high country of Colorado’s Mt. Zirkel Wilderness. From there, it sloshes north for 10 miles and meets its namesake 16-mile trail in the meadows of Commissary Park at the Wyoming border. After 2 miles of gentle terrain, the river begins its foaming drop into a rugged gorge where rapids and towering granite walls alternate with deep pools and shady nooks. The trail, as playful as the falling water, dips and rolls by the river, and occasionally climbs hundreds of feet above when sheer cliffs block its rolling way. Along part of the river gorge, the trail passes through Wyoming’s smallest wilderness area, the 10,400-acre Encampment River Wilderness.

Amid the small wonders of the canyon, from potholes on a midstream rock to golden eagles riding the thermals above, one underlying theme endures: the steady change in vegetation as the river rolls out of the mountains. The trail, the river’s constant companion for 16 miles, begins in spruce and fir and ends among streamside cottonwoods and sagebrush-covered foothills. The healthy populations of mule deer and elk depend on the vegetation.

As the trail leaves the last of the forest, be on the lookout for prairie falcons working the open slopes of the lower canyon. Also, watch for the remains of a mining-era dam, a mile before the trail’s lower end and before Miner’s Creek enters from the west. High above this site, secure on the opposite cliff face, is the main lambing area of the canyon’s resident herd of 50 Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

**Expedition Planner**

**Drive Time:** Denver: 3 hours (170 miles); Laramie, WY: 1½ hours (80 miles).

**The Way:** From the town of Encampment, take WY 70 west 5 miles, turn south and travel 15.5 miles on Forest Service Road 550, then turn southeast and drive 3 miles on Forest Service Road 496 to the Commissary Park trailhead, just

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**In the Night Sky:**

**Finding the Milky Way**

The 200 billion stars, planets, and celestial features that share our galaxy are called the Milky Way. Just don’t take the view for granted. As many as two-thirds of the world’s inhabitants can no longer see the Milky Way, due to light pollution. For the best view, choose a summer night with a new moon, and camp far from urban light sources.

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before a bridge over the river and the Colorado border. **Trails:** For a 16-mile point-to-point hike, take the well-maintained Encampment River Trail north from the Colorado border (Commissary Park) to the Encampment River Campground 2 miles south of the town of Encampment. Snow melts off the lower portion of the river's canyon well before it leaves the higher parts, allowing early-season in-and-out trips from the north. A stone’s throw south of Commissary Park, a network of 150 miles of trail (including the Continental Divide Trail) in the Mt. Zirkel Wilderness begins. **Dayhike:** The Hog Park Creek and Purgatory Gulch Trails offer short (2 miles each) alternatives at either end of the main trail. **Elevation:** The Encampment River Trail drops from 8,400 feet at Commissary Park to 7,200 feet at its northern end. **Can’t Miss:** The spectacular upper gorge with its truck-size midstream boulders. **Crowd Control:** The Encampment River is a blue-ribbon trout stream, and the lower portion sees some use from dayhiking anglers. Traffic on the trail is light. **Guides:** Hiking Wyoming by Bill Hunger (Falcon Publishing, 800/582-2665; www.backpacker.com/bookstore; $15.95). A free Forest Service map (see Contact) for the wilderness provides plenty of detail for those sticking to the trail. **Walk Softly:** Always give bighorn sheep a wide berth. **Contact:** Medicine Bow National Forest, 307/327-5481; www.fs.fed.us/r2/mbr.

## Too Close for Comfort

Don’t feed or pet wildlife—getting too close can be just as dangerous for you as it is for animals. If an animal points its ears toward you, gets visibly nervous, stamps its feet, or acts aggressively, back off. Scientists have found that animals tend to flee when humans get within a certain distance. Use these numbers as a guide.

- Mountain sheep 165 feet
- American kestrel 250 feet
- Great blue heron 330 feet
- Prairie falcon 525 feet
- Mule deer 630 feet
- Elk 650 feet
- Rough-legged hawk 690 feet
- Bald eagle 820 feet
- Golden eagle 985 feet

**Blue Range, Arizona**

Hike out where the wolves still howl.

**By Annette McGivney**

I had a different kind of campsite in mind for tonight, one smack in the middle of a sunny alpine meadow, encircled by golden-leafed aspen, bustling with elk in rut and within earshot of the howling wolves that roam these mountains. There are plenty of places like that here in Arizona’s Blue Range. Instead, I find myself setting down my pack in a dark, forested boneyard at the bottom of Grant Creek Canyon, the only flat spot for miles. All manner of gnawed ungulate body parts from at least half a dozen elk or deer are strewn about. Not only am I within likely earshot of wolves, it appears I am also in the middle of their mess hall. (I would find out later that the boneyard was a “rendezvous site” for the Cienega pack last spring. The alpha male and female dragged fresh kills to this spot to feed their pups.)

Even though most hikers head to the picture-postcard-perfect White Mountains next door, I have always been drawn to the Blue Range. After nearly a decade of backpacking trips in the 174,000-acre wilderness on the Arizona/New Mexico border—hiking from the 9,000-foot-high aspen and fir-forested peaks soggy with snow-melt down to the oak-covered foothills and cactus-studded canyon bottoms—I thought I knew these mountains. But I had no idea how much the endangered Mexican gray wolf (reintroduced in 1998) had reclaimed this land.

If Aldo Leopold were here today, he’d be pleased to see how well the 30-plus wolves are doing and how “primitive” the Blue Range Primitive Area (a wilderness he helped establish) remains. In 1908, while patrolling the Blue Range during the early years of his Forest Service career, Leopold had a wolf encounter that planted the seed for a conservation ethic that helped inspire our nation’s environmental movement.

In Leopold’s famous environmental treatise, A Sand County Almanac, he recalls the day when he and his coworkers were sitting on a canyon bluff and spotted a pack of wolves. Exterminating wolves, grizzly, and other “vermin” was part of their job, so they proceeded to pull out their rifles and fill the pack with lead. Leopold shot the alpha female.

“We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes,” he wrote. “I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to
me in those eyes—something known only to her and the mountain. I was young then and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, then no wolves would mean a hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.” It took decades—and thousands of deer starved through overpopulation—for the federal government to agree with Leopold’s assertion that wolves were essential to maintaining the ecology of wildlands.

There have been rumors of reintroduced wolves killed by area ranchers, but it would be hard for any animal not to thrive in these mountains. There is a force of nature here that emanates from the gurgling of every stream, every canyon bottom, every forested peak, every pile of bones. As Leopold found when he looked into the wolf’s eyes, there’s a wild energy hereabouts that’s more powerful than anything human. I feel it as I crouch over my stove boiling water for dinner. Or is it the presence of wolves that is sending a chill down my spine?

A sound unlike any I’ve ever heard rises from the bluff behind me. It’s not the hoot of an owl, but neither does it sound like a classic wolf howl. Then again, perhaps it is the “deep, chesty bawl...of wild defiant sorrow” that Leopold heard in the Blue Range. There is still much I have to learn from these mountains. As Leopold said, “Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.”

**Expedition Planner**

**The Way:** The Blue Range Primitive Area is located on the Arizona–New Mexico border, approximately 15 miles south of Alpine, Arizona, via AZ 191.

**Trails:** An extensive network of trails offers a variety of loop routes with reliable water throughout much of the wilderness (uncommon in Arizona). Wolves are most often heard (occasionally seen) at higher elevations. Starting from the Hannagan Meadow trailhead off AZ 191, you can create a loop route from 10 to 40 miles long using the Grant Creek, Upper Grant Creek, and Steeple Trails.

**Guides:** Exploring Arizona’s Wild Areas by Scott Warren (The Mountaineers, 800/553-4453; $14.95). A map of the Blue Range Primitive Area can be purchased from the national forest (see Contact below) for $7.

**Contact:** Alpine Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, 928/339-4384; www.fs.fed.us/r3/asnf.

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**San Pedro River Trail, Arizona**

Shady hiking and cool waters make the San Pedro River an oasis for desert trekkers.

By Paul Bogard

If you think that finding water in the Arizona desert is rare, you’ll think the San Pedro River is a bona fide miracle. What’s miraculous about it? For starters, the San Pedro is the Southwest’s last remaining free-flowing river, and it serves up 40-odd miles of lush streamside hiking in the heart of a hot, sandy desert.

The San Pedro River starts in northern Mexico and flows north through Arizona, where it’s protected within the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA). The river is perennial, but its flow is sometimes only a trickle.

From my first steps along the River Trail on a quiet winter morning, I had the trail—indeed, it seemed, the whole NCA—to myself. In theory, the River Trail runs parallel to the stream as it winds its way along the San Pedro Valley floor, between the Huachuca Mountains to the west and the Mule Mountains to the east. But in some places, the stream covers the trail and you’re bound to get your feet wet. You can follow the trail in and along the San Pedro except at times of extremely high water, following heavy rainfall. The best hiking is in winter, with steady water levels and comfortable temperatures, or in spring, with the arrival of hundreds of migratory birds.

The area along the river is one of the last remnants of an environment that once existed near free-flowing streams throughout the Southwest. Goodding’s willows and Fremont cottonwoods grow here in green profusion, and more than 350 bird species—I spied green kingfishers, Mississippi kites, and gray hawks, to name a few—either visit or inhabit the conservation area. Local residents like ringtail cats, coatimundis, and javelinas also make regular appearances.

This hike is best undertaken without concern for speed or distance. My plan was to hike 30 miles, through the Narrows, all the way to the northern end of the conservation area. But after a stop-and-go day watching for wildlife and petroglyphs (the river region contains more than 250 recorded prehistoric and historic sites), I realized it takes more than a weekend to see this desert miracle.

**Expedition Planner**

**Drive Time:** The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area is 1½ hours (75 miles) southeast of Tucson.
The Way: From Tucson, take I-10 east and then AZ 90 south to Sierra Vista. From Sierra Vista, take either Charleston Road or AZ 90 east about 15 miles to trailheads on the river, or go south on AZ 92 and east on Hereford Road to the Hereford Bridge trailhead.

Trails: The most popular section of the River Trail is the 8-mile segment between Charleston Road and Fairbank Townsite. For a longer hike with more solitude, start at the Hereford Bridge trailhead (8 miles from the Mexican border) and hike north for up to 32 miles one way. A $2 backcountry fee is required (see Contact below).

Dayhike: For an easy out-and-back trip to The Narrows, where the San Pedro squeezes between two hills, hike downstream from the Charleston Road trailhead (3 miles roundtrip). Continue through The Narrows to extend the route up to 8 miles one way.

Elevation: At the Mexican border, the elevation is 4,300 feet. It drops to 4,000 feet at Fairbank Townsite, and bottoms out at 3,600 feet at the northern border.

Can’t Miss: Taking off your shoes and splashing through the creek on a warm winter day.

Crowd Control: Spring weekends (the end of April and beginning of May) draw the most crowds, as birders come from all over the country. Go in fall or winter, or midweek, to avoid the crowds. Also avoid the busy trails near the San Pedro House (a nonprofit visitor center on AZ 90).


Walk Softly: There are numerous historic and prehistoric archaeological sites in the area. Look, but don’t touch.


Furnace Creek, Death Valley, California

Time spent in California’s Death Valley can be a life-enhancing experience.

By Jordan Rane

Never mind the park’s name, the desolate surroundings, or the fact that it holds the record for the continent’s hottest temperature (134°F on June 10, 1913). Just filing a backcountry permit at Death Valley’s Furnace Creek headquarters can be its own mildly intimidating rite of passage.

“I’m not sure where [the permits] are,” the ranger at the desk confessed. “Uh, there haven’t been too many people needing them. Most folks here stay pretty close to their cars.”

But persistence paid off, and I soon learned this truth: Head into the park with a reliable vehicle, good maps, plenty of water, and lots of respect for the forbidding Mojave Desert and you’ll experience a wild landscape most visitors don’t get to see. Death Valley includes more than 3 million acres of lonely mountain ranges, salt flats, sand dunes, desiccated lakebeds, and ancient canyons autographed with the odd petroglyph. It contains the lowest spot in the Western Hemisphere, a snowy peak topping 11,000 feet, and boundless desert hiking possibilities—temperature permitting.

A hike to put at the top of your list is the Cottonwood-Marble Canyon Loop in the Panamint Range, near Stovepipe Wells. Don’t go anywhere near this 26-mile, three-canyon route after April or before October, when temperatures are dangerously high. But in winter, you’ll have your own vast, temperate planet. Crumbling brown peaks, jagged chasms, and sheer cliffsides spiked with horizontal-growing cacti accompany you through this utterly deserted, natural trail.

Most of the route is easy to follow, but I had to get out the topos to cross from Cottonwood to Marble Canyon via Deadhorse Canyon. Highlights of the journey include the narrow slots of Marble Canyon, the wildflower- and tree-lined springs of Cottonwood Creek (where you can refill water stores and spot bighorn sheep), and the sepia-tone landscape fading to a silent black under blinding stars.

Death Valley’s biggest commodity remains its immeasurable silence and stillness. Just knowing there’s a place in the world this huge, quiet, and uninhabited is a life-affirming experience.

Expedition Planner

Drive Time: Death Valley is in eastern California, about 5 hours (280 miles) northeast of Los Angeles and 2 hours (125 miles) west of Las Vegas.

The Way: From Las Vegas, take US 95 north for 90 miles to Lathrop Wells, and head south on NV 373/CA 127 for 25 miles to the park junction at CA 190. In southern California, take US 15 north to Baker and drive north on CA 127. Proceed 80 miles to CA 190 and head west to the Furnace Creek Visitor Center. Continue 24 miles on CA 190 to the Stovepipe Wells ranger station and the 12-mile access road to the Marble Canyon trailhead (four-wheel-drive required for access road).

Trails: The park’s few maintained trails are mostly designed
for short dayhikes. Longer treks, such as the Cottonwood–Marble Canyon Loop, combine cross-country hiking with unmarked use trails and four-wheel-drive roads. If you aren’t confident about your navigational skills, do an out-and-back hike up Cottonwood Canyon (where water is available).

**Dayhike:** For the best 1-day adventure, hike up Marble Canyon’s narrow ravine and turn around at Deadhorse Canyon (10 miles round-trip). Bring your own drinking water.

**Elevation:** Badwater Basin is the lowest point in the park (and Western Hemisphere) at 282 feet below sea level. Telescope Peak’s 11,049-foot summit is the high point.

**Can’t Miss:** Stargazing in an empty Marble Canyon amphitheater.

**Crowd Control:** Most visitors don’t stray far from the park roads, leaving miles of expansive desert backcountry empty.


**Walk Softly:** The desert is vulnerable and the trails are few. Reduce impact by avoiding fragile soil crusts, vegetation, and animal burrows. Consider traveling only in small groups.

**Contact:** Death Valley National Park, 760/786-2331; [www.nps.gov/deva](http://www.nps.gov/deva).

## Trinity Alps Wilderness, California

Wildflower meadows and a remote mountain lake await hikers off the beaten track in the Trinity Alps.

**By Dennis Lewon**

If there’s an afterlife, then somewhere up above a miner named Bob is laughing. In the 19th century, Bob staked a claim to a small gold mine deep in the backcountry of what’s now the Trinity Alps Wilderness in northern California. The outpost became known as Bob’s Farm, which surely represents a bit of frontier humor: Bob had squeezed his cabin into a steep, narrow ravine completely unsuitable for farming. The rudimentary path carved by the prospector became known as Bob’s Farm Trail. And that’s why he’s laughing.

The pastoral, gentle-sounding name fooled me the first time I saw it on a map. If I’d looked more closely at the contour lines, I would have appreciated the joke. Though less than 5 miles long, the steep, manzanita-choked Bob’s Farm Trail is one of the most difficult routes in the Trinity Alps. But there’s one very compelling reason to hike it (besides bragging rights): Bob’s Farm Trail is the crucial link in a weeklong loop that culminates in Grizzly Lake, quite possibly the crown jewel of this overlooked range.

Perched on a glacier-gouged shelf below the granite ramparts of 9,002-foot Thompson Peak, with a 100-foot waterfall pouring from its sheer outlet and dizzying vistas reflected in its smooth surface, Grizzly Lake is as good as it gets in the mountains. You have two choices when it comes to reaching Grizzly. The first is a sneak route via the China Spring Trail. It’s a steep grind, but the path will land you at the base of that sublime waterfall in about 7 miles.

But it’s the other route that deserves a week of your time. From Hobo Gulch, the North Fork Trail hugs the North Fork Trinity River on an 18-mile journey that unfolds slowly, like a good book you don’t want to end. The first few chapters roll along under a shady forest of fir, pine, and incense cedar, dipping over lush streamside benches and passing through a wild and lonely wilderness. The first time I hiked the North Fork Trail, I nearly walked headlong into a mountain lion lounging on the path.

You could easily spend a

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**Walk Like a Fox**

Ideally, to spot wildlife, plan your hike after a heavy rain so soggy leaves and twigs won’t crackle beneath your feet. Or learn to walk like a fox:

1. **Lower the outside edge of your foot to the ground. Before putting weight on it, feel for sticks or stones, and either brush them aside or step in a clear spot.**
2. **Weight the edge, then roll onto the ball. Next, slowly weight the entire sole of your foot so you compress sticks and leaves quietly.**
3. **Place your full weight on your foot.**
4. **Repeat with your other foot.**
week exploring the North Fork Trail and Grizzly Lake, but to hike the longer loop (about 46 miles) and pay your respects to Bob’s Farm, hang a right on the Rattlesnake Creek Trail and first visit Papoose Lake. You’ll pass a museum’s worth of mining relics before topping out in a secluded cirque below 8,933-foot Mt. Hilton.

Whichever route you choose, you’ll end up on the path to Grizzly Lake. Over the last few miles, the trail climbs steeply out of the ferny canyon bottom and abruptly dead-ends in a series of flower-filled meadows where you can put your feet up and contemplate the waterfall that is pouring from the sky. Grizzly Lake is up there, out of sight above the basin’s headwall, and to get there all you have to do is claw your way up the Grizzly Scramble (it’s not technical, but the last half mile is so precipitous the Forest Service won’t actually call it a trail). Be sure to explore the upper cirque, where a small remnant of the Trinity Alps’s last glacier hangs above the lake.

In the evening, find a seat near the lip of the waterfall and watch the sun go down on a wild swath of mountains little-changed since old Bob first set foot here. You might just hear his chuckle in the roaring cascade, though by now you’ll realize he’s laughing with you, not at you.

**Drive Time:** San Francisco: 5½ hours  
**The Way:** From Redding on I-5, drive west 61 miles on CA 299 to the turn-off for Old Helena (a largely abandoned mining town) and turn right (north) on County Road 421. Follow signs to Hobo Gulch trailhead, 16 miles away on unpaved Forest Service Road 34N07Y.  
**Trails:** The author’s loop combines the Rattlesnake Creek Trail (13 miles), the Bob’s Farm Trail (5 miles), and the North Fork Trail (18.5 miles), with a minimum amount of backtracking. Total distance is about 46 miles.  
**Elevation:** The trailhead is at 2,600 feet, while Grizzly Lake is at 7,100 feet.  
**Guides:** Hiking California’s Trinity Alps Wilderness by Dennis Lewon (Falcon Guides, $18.95). USFS Trinity Alps Wilderness map ($6.44; see Contact).  
**Contact:** Weaverville Ranger District, Shasta-Trinity National Forest, 530/623-2121; [www.r5.fs.fed.us/shastatrinity](http://www.r5.fs.fed.us/shastatrinity).  

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**Trap Hills, Michigan**

This charming, craggy land is so little known that you won’t find descriptions in guidebooks.

By Eric Hansen

Imagine a ridgeline hike with vistas stretching 50 miles and more, providing some of the grandest views in the Upper Midwest. Now imagine enjoying such splendor, or maybe a sunset, from rock balconies so quiet and deserted the moss doesn’t show any boot scuff marks.

Welcome to the Trap Hills, one of the hidden gems of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula backcountry. Scan the Internet, and clues to this treasure emerge: rare plant surveys, a wilderness-preservation group championing the Trap Hills, and cliff-top photos taken by members of the local North Country Trail chapter.

To Upper-Midwest hikers familiar with the region’s paths and topography, the Trap Hills ridge might remind you of the Escarpment Trail in Michigan’s Porcupine Mountains or Minnesota’s Oberg Mountain on the Superior Hiking Trail. But to equal the Trap Hills I experienced one October, you’d have to make those other ridges 20 stunning miles long, scatter view points all along their length, and make the large parking lots disappear. You’d also have to remove all the hikers, because I spent 4 days hiking the Traps without seeing another’s footprints.

Halfway through a 28-mile traverse of this remote ridgeline, I paused on a high ledge, looked west, and spotted a massive granite face in the distance—one from which I’d watched the sunrise the day before. By this point in the hike, I was used to broad views from the parade of rock outcrops. But this one transcended the visual, bringing together the best moments of the trip into one glorious panorama. Lake Superior, a full eighth of Earth’s fresh water, glistened a perfect blue to the north, its waters nudging up against the broad-shouldered Porcupine Mountains. Deep-blue skies wispied with thin clouds stretched to the southwest, past Lake Gogebic to Wolf Mountain. Golden aspen lined the streams on the valley floor below. To the south, the endless forests of the Upper Peninsula, with their amber and bronze hardwoods and evergreen pines, swept to the horizon.

Huge views are only part of the Trap Hills story, however. Grouse, sometimes 20 or more, exploded out of pineries as I passed. Toads the size of my
pinkly fingernail hopped along the trail, celebrating a warm afternoon. A bald eagle soared overhead, riding thermals rising from south-facing cliffs. Magnificent stands of mature maple lined the trail on the tall bluffs above Cascade Creek. In the evenings, owls hooted and coyotes yelped.

There’s a mystique about the Trap Hills, a whiff of the unknown and a feeling that exploration reaps rich rewards. The open, older forests invite off-trail rambling and discovery, as do the moist nooks and crannies of the Gleason Creek and Whiskey Hollow Creek gorges. Rock ledges abound, providing sun-splashed perches to those willing to climb. I saw a dozen overlooks I’d gladly spend the night on, each a private veranda with perfect sunrise and sunset views.

A few years back, I commented on the stunning views to a fire-tower ranger. He swept his arm across the horizon and replied, “Yep, after this, anything else will seem like a basement apartment.”

I had a similar feeling after sleeping on the high ledges in Trap Hills, finding the space to ponder broad questions like, “Aren’t those bumps on the eastern horizon the (60-mile distant) Huron Mountains?” Or, “How did fairy bells (a rare plant) become isolated here in the Porksies, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and in the Cascades of Oregon and Washington?” Great questions demand answers, so I’ll have to return, with binoculars, topos, and lots of time.

**Expedition Planner**

**The Way:** From Bergland, Michigan, at the north end of Lake Gogebic, drive 10 miles north on M-64, then 4.5 miles south on old M-64 to the Gogebic Ridge Trail.

**Route:** The author’s 28-mile hike started at the Gogebic Ridge Trail on old M-64, turned a half-mile east to the North Country Trail (NCT), and followed that path east to Old Victoria (a restored historic mining village that features an Adirondack-style trail shelter). Some of the western segments of this section of the NCT are faint, but navigable thanks to blue diamond markers. Shuttle rides: Ontran, 906/884-2006; check for availability.

**Guides:** The best source around is the Web site of the Peter Wolfe Chapter of the North Country Trail Association ([www.northcountrytrail.org](http://www.northcountrytrail.org/)). It features topographical trail maps, elevation profiles, trail notes, conditions, water sources, and phenology. USGS quads include Bergland NE, Matchwood NW, Oak Bluff, and Rockland ($4.95).

**Contact:** Ottawa National Forest, 906/932-1330; [www.fs.fed.us/r9/ottawa/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/ottawa/).

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**Black Creek National Recreation Trail, Mississippi**

You'll have a hard time keeping track of all the critters along this wild pathway.

**By Marty Tessmer**

When the votes were tallied in Backpacker Reader Ratings, the outcome included a happy coincidence. You picked the Black Creek National Recreation Trail as Mississippi’s best hiking destination, a place I’d just visited.

For those who have yet to discover this southern gem, take my word for it: The Black Creek Trail is worth your time. The 41-mile path can be as wild as a feral hog, yet it’s only a stone’s throw from New Orleans, Biloxi, and Mobile.

The hikers-only trail follows Black Creek, a Wild and Scenic canoeing mecca (best paddled in fall and spring), through the coastal plains of DeSoto National Forest. The low-country hiking won’t tax you with any serious ups and downs, but there are other challenges. Just try to track all the wildlife in the creek bottoms, piney uplands, oxbow lakes, and swamps. Each zone has unique plants and critters, including longleaf pines, lish hardwoods, beavers, blue herons, red foxes, and wood ducks.

The best section of trail is the 10-mile segment that snakes through the 5,000-acre Black Creek Wilderness. From the segment’s start at MS 29, I hiked through a sun-dappled canopy of lodgepole pines, magnolias, oaks, and dogwoods (good fall colors and great spring flowers), then rambled for several miles across shallow drainages and modest ridges. Good backcountry campsites abound. Choose between hardwood stands and piney uplands.

After crossing Beaverdam Creek via the MS 29 bridge, I descended into the Black Creek floodplain. Here, the trail follows a Native American travel corridor used for thousands of years. Ascending from the floodplain to the top of multi-colored bluffs, I watched the creek morph from wide placid stream to narrow frenetic chute and back again.

Creekside hiking provides a great opportunity to keep an eye out for wildlife, or just to find a cozy sandbar, close your eyes, and listen to all the critters around you.

**Expedition Planner**

**Drive Time:** The Black Creek Wilderness is about 1 hour (50 miles) from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The trail is less than
3 hours from Jackson, New Orleans, and Mobile.

**The Way:** From Hattiesburg, take US 98 east for 20 miles to New Augusta and turn south onto MS 29. Proceed 19 miles to the Black Creek Wilderness trailhead and parking area.

**Trails:** The main artery is the Black Creek National Recreation Trail, with 10 of its 41 miles in the Black Creek Wilderness. Do an end-to-end hike with a car shuttle, or a 20-mile out-and-back trek through the wilderness area (go south from the wilderness trailhead).

**Dayhike:** For the best creek-side hiking, start at the trailhead on MS 29 and trek south-east into the wilderness. Go 5 miles and turn around, or use a car shuttle to hike 10 miles one way.

**Elevation:** The creek bottoms out near 100 feet, and the upland ridges rise to 270 feet.

**Can’t Miss:** An afternoon siesta on a quiet sandbar, listening to the Black Creek slip by and watching a blue heron wing overhead.

**Crowd Control:** The trail is rarely crowded. October through April is cool, sunny, and relatively insect-free. Wear blaze orange clothing during deer-hunting season (November to January).

**Guides:** USGS topos Brooklyn, Janice, and Bond Pond. A Black Creek Trail map is also available from the DeSoto National Forest (see Contact below; $5). Hiking Mississippi: A Guide to Trails and Natural Areas by Helen McGinnis (University Press of Mississippi, 800/737-7788; www.backpacker.com/bookstore; $15.95).

**Walk Softly:** Be sure to camp at least 200 feet from the stream so you don’t contaminate the water.

**Contact:** DeSoto Ranger District, DeSoto National Forest, 601/928-4422; www.fs.fed.us/r8/miss.

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**In the Night Sky:**

**Finding Comets**

These “dirty snowballs” are ice cores falling toward the sun, leaving behind a tail of dust particles that can reach 6,000 miles long. A comet visible to the naked eye shows up every 5 years or so; still, comets that astronomers don’t know about can be out there, lurking on the far side of the sun and ready to streak across the sky.

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**Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, Montana**

This primitive wilderness has changed little since Lewis and Clark came through 200 years ago.

By Michael Lanza

“I think the trail must be just up ahead.” My wife Penny’s voice flutters past me like an errant scrap of paper. Below me, she and our friend Kris Karlson clamber over deadfall and through brush up a steep slope toward the saddle where I’m scouring our map, which suddenly seems less detailed than I’d like. We’ve spent 30 minutes bushwhacking through sub-alpine forest trying to relocate the Continental Divide Trail (CDT), which we lost amid a maze of rogue camper foot-paths beside Warren Lake.

Penny’s sense of direction proves true as a compass needle. After a bit of scouting, we’re back on the CDT. But our diversionary romp begins to solidify my impression that the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness remains true to its historical reputation. The mountains here in southwestern Montana, near the Idaho border, have been losing people for centuries.

Two hundred years ago, even Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had difficulty crossing the Continental Divide. They believed the Missouri River would lead them to the continent’s spine at a place where a mere half-day portage would deposit them in the Columbia River drainage. But on August 12, 1805, when Lewis crested the divide just south of here, he saw “immense ranges of high mountains still to the West of us with their tops partially covered with snow.”

The land today looks little different. In 1937, the U.S. Forest Service declared it a primitive area, citing the “almost complete absence of man’s influence.” In 1964, Anaconda-Pintler was deemed sufficiently wild to merit inclusion in the inaugural class of 54 federal wilderness areas created by the Wilderness Act.

Named for the Anaconda Mountains and Charles Ellsworth Pintler, a 19th-century settler in the Big Hole Valley, the wilderness comprises 159,086 acres of the Beaverhead, Bitterroot, and Deerlodge National Forests. Half a dozen peaks top 10,000 feet and numerous others rise above 9,000, their slopes and valleys home to mountain goat and lion, elk, moose, deer, wolverine, and black bear.
Not many people find their way here. On this Labor Day weekend, we find just three vehicles at the trailhead. Two sunrises into our 4-day loop, we’ve hiked through cool pine forests, strolled beside creeks coursing with ice water, traversed an exposed talus ridge overlooking sweeping glacial cirques, and slept beneath a cold sky liberally salted with stars. Yet we’ve passed only four backpackers.

“It’s easy to see why Lewis and Clark had trouble getting over the Bitterroots,” Penny muses, gazing west at the daunting wall of mountains. We’re straddling the divide at an unnamed pass beside an unnamed 9,800-foot summit. Pikas chirp at us from the talus. Moments earlier, five mule deer bounded away.

To our right, the ground peels away through cliff bands and meadows of wind-blown grasses to Rainbow Lake, where waters spill into Fishtrap Creek to begin a long journey to the Atlantic Ocean. To our left, Martin Lake tumbles into the Falls Fork of Rock Creek to begin an impressive trek to the Pacific.

We stop for lunch beside Johnson Lake. A few hikers pass by, the first in 2 days. Lounging on sun-splashed rocks, I ponder the anomaly of backpacking over a Labor Day weekend amid 10,000-foot peaks along the Continental Divide and encountering virtually no one.

Perhaps some higher hiking power long ago ordained that this majestic stretch of North America’s backbone should remain forever anonymous, largely beyond view of paved roads, guarded like a valued secret. Maybe this convolution of skyscraping peaks and maze-like valleys in the northern Rockies suffers only the most intrepid explorers. I can’t completely explain it. But I can enjoy it.

Lewis and Clark bemoaned their tribulations in crossing these mountains 200 years ago, but I firmly believe that if they were around today, they’d appreciate the fact that a few places like the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness remain.

Expedition Planner

The Way: Drive 90 minutes south from Missoula or an hour west from Anaconda. Access trailheads via US 93 from the west, MT 43 from the east and south, and MT 38 and MT 1 from the north.

Trails: The wilderness area has 280 miles of trail, including a 45-mile stretch of the Continental Divide Trail. The author’s 4-day loop from the Carpp Creek trailhead followed the Carpp Creek and Hiline Trails to the CDT and returned via the Hiline and Carpp Lake Trails.

Guides: Both the USFS Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness map (1:50,000 scale; $6) and Hiking the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness by Mort Arkava (self-published, Corvallis, MT; $14.95) are available from local USFS offices (see Contact below).

Contact: Phillipsburg Ranger District, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, 406/859-3211; www.fs.fed.us/r1/bdnf/.

Ruby Mountains, Nevada

The Ruby Crest Trail offers mountain goats, bighorns, bluebells—and cowboys.

By Steve Howe

From a narrow slot in the ridgetop, I can see the emerald oasis of Overland Lake shimmering in its steep-sided bowl far below. To the north, shattered ridgelines swoop between polished granite cirques. The view is like a calendar scene from Switzerland, only the arid plains encircling the distant horizon remind me that this is the heart of the Great Basin Desert.

These are the Ruby Mountains, an 11,000-foot range that juts like a skyscraping mirage from the sagebrush flats of Nevada. The Rubies were named by early miners, who misidentified the area’s reddish garnets; but for all the beauty of those rocks, it’s the glaciated alpine landscape that’s the true gem here.

Jen and I are 3 days into the Ruby Crest Trail, a 43-mile trek along the gabled ridge of this craggy range. We’ve hiked through meadows smeared purple with bluebells and lupine, seen bighorn sheep and mountain goats peer down on us from the heights, jumped across crystal-clear streams, and skirted lakes so blue they seemed like mirrors into heaven.

Our trailhead was Lamoille Canyon, the Rubies’ major gateway, so we encountered plenty of anglers and horseback riders in the first few miles. Central Nevada is also Sagebrush Rebellion country, a land where cowboys rule and backpackers are cultural curiosities. We caught a few searching looks, but for the most part, even grizzled cowpokes nodded a hospitable “howdy” from atop their quarter horses, with wrinkled eyes that looked right through us, and smiles that belied the six-guns on their hips.

Trail traffic vanished once we crossed 10,450-foot Liberty Pass and hiked beyond Liberty Lake. Standing atop Liberty Pass, looking southward at the endless stony overlap of ridge and valley, you know you’re at a jumping-off point. When you
step forward, committing to parts rarely traveled, the decision feels like the separation stage of a rocket. Your excess payload—the workaday stress that fueled your first miles—drops away like an empty booster, and you surge out of civilization’s orbit, entering the 90,000-acre Ruby Mountain Wilderness.

Aside from wildlife, scenery, big solitude, and cowboy culture, the Rubies also offer a lot of wind. These mountains rend the sky, cutting into the jet stream like a stone arrowhead. We tasted the full force of the wind yesterday, as we climbed over Wines Peak on the airy, waterless stretch to Overland Lake. All day long, gales thundered in our ears and fluttered our windshirts to a high-pitched hum, but the payoff was spectacular, with views from California to Utah.

The rough-legged hawks loved the bluster. They were everywhere, big as eagles, surfing motionless above the summits and spiraling into talus-brushing dives. Marching tortoiselike beneath my pack, I wished I were a hawk, but was equally glad I wasn’t born a jackrabbit.

It was a long day of ups and downs, so today is for rest and wandering unladen. We spotted bighorn sheep here yesterday, on the ridges above Overland Lake. Sure enough, their scraped-out daybeds are everywhere. We sneak quietly through the timberline groves, but our quarry has moved on, following the faint game trails that twist through the high outcrops of King Peak.

Now evening, we enjoy an early dinner made tastier by the day’s exercise. By 7, my spouse is snoring like a drunken sailor, so I wander the shoreline of Overland Lake as sunset plays on the cliffs above. Beneath gnarled pines, I discover a granite promontory that tapers to a flat bench, just above water level.

I lean back and kick my feet up on nature’s own lounge chair. The drifting clouds above turn slowly from fiery orange to leaden gray. The lake water sloshes rhythmically at my feet, letting my imagination wash likewise to dreams of adventurers who plied these mountains before us.

In my mind’s eye, I look down to see Shoshone hunting bighorn, the Donner Party’s ill-fated wagon train struggling across the distant salt flats, miners panning gold in the icy streams, and John C. Fremont’s 1844 expedition scouting passes to the north and south.

Since their early prominence among explorers and pioneers, the Rubies have virtually disappeared from the radar screen. Tucked between the wastelands of Utah’s Bonneville salt flats and the endless valleys of the Great Basin, this rugged range remains largely unknown to hikers.

My thighs throb pleasantly, reminding me of yesterday’s efforts and whetting my appetite for the journey ahead. The Ruby Crest Trail will lead us on a twisting traverse around Tipton Peak, before descending the drier, gentler limestone country of the Rubies’ southern flanks to Harrison Pass. These mountains are an oasis of wildlife, scenery, and history, one I’ll leave regretfully. But soon it will be dark, and Nevada’s Ruby Mountains will again become the kingdom of granite, stars, and wind.

**Expedition Planner**

**The Way:** Elko lies 230 miles from Salt Lake City, 295 miles from Reno, and 486 miles from Las Vegas. To reach Lamoille Canyon trailhead from Elko, take NV 227 south to County Road 660 (Lamoille Canyon Road) and drive 12 miles to Road’s End. To reach Harrison Pass, go 5 miles east of downtown Elko, then turn south on NV 228, which leads to Harrison Pass.

**Route:** The Ruby Crest Trail (FT 043) runs from Lamoille Canyon to graveled NV 228 at Harrison Pass. Best campsites are at Castle Lake, the north fork of Overland Creek, Overland Lake, McCutcheon Creek, and springs 1.5 miles south of McCutcheon Creek. In dry months, water is unavailable for 13 miles between North Furlong Lake and the north fork of Overland Creek. The southern 6 miles to Harrison Pass are also dry.

Echo Canyon provides access to Ruby Dome, the range’s highest peak at 11,387 feet. The Soldier Basin (031) and Soldier-Griswold Trails (032) begin 20 miles north of the town of Lamoille, climbing 5 miles to lakes in Soldier Basin and

**In the Night Sky:**

Finding Meteors

Any particle of dust entering Earth’s atmosphere can cause a meteor, but when Earth passes through the debris left by comets, the result is a meteor shower. The best viewing is between midnight and dawn. Climb a rocky crag, or plan a trip to the desert or beach to maximize your peripheral vision.
Roanoke River Paddling Trail, North Carolina

A new water trail takes paddlers deep into one of the South’s last untouched ecosystems.

By Todd Wilkinson

I’m floating through a grove of giant cypress trees with trunks half a millennium old, alongside bearded veils of Spanish moss, and watching the courtship dance of two Great egrets. As sunset falls on the backwater sloughs of North Carolina’s lower Roanoke River, where I’ve cruised for hours in a sea kayak, the snow-white plumage of these heavenly birds seems to glow with its own incandescence. I interpret their presence as an auspicious sign from the gods of the southern swamp. In the native tongue of the Tuscara Native Americans, after all, Roanoke means “river of death,” an expression of mortal fear bestowed on a river that would swell to bursting during intense rainfall, then roar across miles of wooded bottomlands. The floods swallowed anything unfortunate enough to be caught in their path. But this land was too fertile to forsake, because the waters also gave life to one of the lushest ecosystems in North America.

Local canoeists have long cherished this dense, wildlife-rich corridor, but their secret getaway is on the verge of discovery, thanks to the newly established Roanoke River Paddling Trail. Modeled after water trails in Okefenokee Swamp and the Everglades, this partially finished 200-mile route has five elevated camping platforms already in place and several more in the works.

Tonight, I’m perched with conservationist Jeff Horton and several friends on a remote platform dubbed “Barred Owl Roost,” situated half a day’s journey downstream from our put-in at Gardner’s Creek. Over the past 50 years, hydropower dams built upstream have tamed the river’s floodwaters but not the wildness of the lower section, which leaves Virginia and fish tails back and forth across the northern tier of The Tarheel State before emptying into Albemarle Sound and the Atlantic Ocean.

The Roanoke, in appearance, fits the profile of a classic Deep South river, but it’s positioned along the northern limit for warm-weather tree species like cypress and tupelo. The nearly impenetrable tangle of half-submerged forest has kept civilization at bay, but the maze of murky tributaries and twisting oxbows, and the surprising bounty of fish and fowl, make the swamp a flatwater paddler’s dream.

Our attention is soon drawn to a raucous outbreak of hooting that helps explain the campsite’s name. Sounding artificial raptor calls into the shadowy understory, Horton’s colleague, J. Merrill Lynch, is communicating with half a dozen wild barred owls that call the area home and aren’t afraid to let us know it.

No harm done to the curious owls, our primal exchange is just one example of the wildlife interactions you might expect. Alligators occasionally appear in these waters. On shore, past the mud beaches and acres of primordial ooze, red wolves prowl the forests, as do black bears, white-tailed deer, beaver, and otter. There’s also an impressive avian assemblage, with more than 200 bird species. Permanent denizens include barred owls, osprey, bald eagles, wild turkeys, and black vultures; the Roanoke is also home to seven of the most productive Great Blue heronries in the East, with thousands of mating pairs. In addition, a huge diversity of neotropical flyers pass through on their migratory flights.

Horton oversees a river-based conservation project for The Nature Conservancy, which has protected more than 60,000 acres of riparian forest. He also has been a catalyst in helping a grassroots group called Roanoke River Partners design the paddling trail. This group’s goal is to establish camping platforms along the Roanoke and its tributaries from Barred Owl Roost to Albemarle Sound. When their work is finished, an intrepid boater will be able to spend weeks on the Roanoke.

On our third night out, we glide to Cypress Cathedral platform after covering a dozen miles of secondary channels that merge with the Roanoke’s main stem. In almost 40 miles, we’ve encountered only a few bass anglers. As we drift off to sleep, we revel in the swamp’s solitude, listening for owls, counting stars, and dreaming of alligators.
**Make Yourself Invisible**

Animals use ultrasensitive eyes, ears, and noses to detect hikers bumbling down the trail. Become part of the sights and smells of the wilds, and you’ll see more wild animals.

- Mask human aroma on your hiking gear. Hang it outdoors or near a smoky fire, dust it with baking soda, or wipe it with a fragrant plant (spicebush, winterberry, or pine).
- Wear muted, patterned, long-sleeved clothes. Birds will notice a bright red jacket among brown trees, but will be less startled by colors that blend in. A pattern similar to the terrain, such as camouflage clothing in leaf, weed, or rock patterns, will hide you from animals that see gray tones, such as bobcats and caribou.
- Move slowly and quietly without sneaking. Body language that resembles a creeping predator—slinking among brush and moving in the animal’s direction—frightens wildlife.
- Avoid eye contact. Staring at animals frightens them. Wear a brimmed hat to hide your eyes, or avert your gaze when approaching wildlife.

**Drive Time:** Raleigh/Durham, NC: 2 hours; Washington, DC: 4 hours

**The Way:** Drive I-95 north from Raleigh/Durham, then take US 64 east to Williamston.

**Trail:** The Roanoke River Paddling Trail is ideal for 3- or 4-day paddling adventures. Reservations for the camping platforms are required, with costs ranging from $20 to $50 per night.

**Guide:** Roanoke River Partners provides a map that will direct you along the trail, beginning at Roberson’s Marina on Gardner’s Creek. For those who prefer the company of a backcountry guide and naturalist, Rock Rest Adventures provides 2-day trips for $160 per person (866/418-7677; rockrest.com).

**Beware:** This is cottonmouth (as in the venomous, water-swimming snake), mosquito, and biting fly country. Snakes bask in tree branches overhanging the river, so be watchful.

**Contact:** Roanoke River Partners; roanokeriverpartners.org.

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**Paria River Canyon, Utah/Arizona**

Here, adventure and breathtaking views await around every narrow bend.

*By Steve Howe*

Rays of sunlight decorate the varnished sandstone cliffs along the deep narrows. The liquid trills of canyon wrens add melodic accompaniment to the sounds of water trickling through hanging gardens of fern and monkey flower. No hiker’s life is complete without experiencing such desert wonders, and the 38-mile Paria River trek from southern Utah to Lees Ferry in Arizona’s Grand Canyon is one of the world’s best places to get it all in one gulp.

Most backpackers follow the Paria River for the entire hike, descending from sagebrush flats into the canyon’s winding corridors. Slowly, over the course of a few days, the narrow slot of sky overhead widens like a parting curtain, and the canyon takes on its Grand cousin’s flavor as the trail climbs to benches high above the river for the last 11 miles. Save time for exploring hidden side canyons, prehistoric art panels, abandoned homesteads, lush seep springs, and soaring arches.

More adventurous hikers should consider beginning their trek at the tributary gorge of Utah’s Buckskin Gulch, which stretches the trip to 43 miles. Traversing the incredible, 12-mile narrows of the gulch usually involves swimming or wading through several cold-water pools and lowering packs down a 20-foot cliff. The reward is an otherworldly journey on the longest, narrowest slot canyon hike in existence.

**Expedition Planner**

**Permits:** Reserve permits up to 7 months in advance. The cost is $5 per day per person (see Contact below).

**Route:** Start at the Paria Information Station on UT 89 in southern Utah, between the towns of Kanab, Utah, and Page, Arizona. You’ll need at least 4 or 5 days to reach Lees Ferry on the Colorado River, but you could easily stay busy for a week or two. If permits aren’t available, try the 20-mile hike through the equally spectacular upper Paria River canyon.

**Season:** Late March through May and late September through November are the best times to travel in this hot country. The flash-flood risk is high from late July through August.

**Guides:** The Paria BLM Hiker’s Guide ($8, plus $2 postage), a flip-map containing mile-by-mile descriptions of the canyon, is available from the Arizona Strip Interpretive Association.
Pacific Crest Trail, Washington

Discover the high life in Washington's volcano country.

By Dan A. Nelson

Imagine a wondrous place where you could, in the course of a single day and on a single trail, wander through lush old-growth rainforest, cross gin-clear salmon streams, gorge yourself on plump huckleberries in open pine forests, stride through flower-stitched alpine meadows, and scramble up steep snowfields on the side of an active volcano.

There's only one place I know of that offers such wild treasures, and that's Washington's Cascade Range along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT).

For a lifetime's worth of scenery, follow the PCT as it rambles through the heart of the Cascades. Begin in the deep-green forests and meadows of the Indian Heaven and William O. Douglas Wildernesses. Then the trail rushes skyward to the lofty peaks of the Mt. Adams, Goat Rocks, and Glacier Peak Wildernesses. Along the way, you'll dip your toes in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, where sections of the trail unroll along rivers, past vast valley-bottom lakes, through wildlife-rich forests, around tiny, ice-rimmed alpine tarns, and finally, up the snowy flanks of sun-splashed mountains. The journey can claim two climaxes, because the glacier-crowned volcanoes Mt. Adams and Glacier Peak serve as bookends for this 500-mile section of the PCT.

You don't have to hike it all at once, but beware: Once you head up into these hills, you'll never want to come back down.

**Expedition Planner**

**Permits:** Pick up a free, self-issued permit at the trailhead or boundary of each wilderness area. For trailhead parking, you need a Northwest Forest Pass ($5 per day or $30 annually; see Contact).

**The Way:** Via any of the numerous passes hosting east-to-west highways.

**Season:** Snowmelt is nearly complete by late August. For fewer bugs and more ripe huckleberries, hike in September.


**Contact:** Pacific Northwest Region, Forest Service, 503/808-2971; [www.fs.fed.us/r6](http://www.fs.fed.us/r6).

Blue Mountains, Washington

This remote mountain range is home to deer, elk, bighorn, and black bear.

By Dan A. Nelson

In the upper left corner of the country, the soggy Olympic Mountains are famous for their old-growth rainforests. The Cascades are celebrated for their craggy summits and volcanic peaks. The Rockies form a famous border between the Northwest and Mountain West. Even the jagged Wallowa Mountains are well known. But mention the Blue Mountains to a backpacker from Seattle, Spokane, or Portland, and you'll almost certainly get a blank stare, because the Blues are the Pacific Northwest's unknown range. Ranging in elevation from 1,600 to 6,500 feet, these mountains rise out of the plains of southeastern Washington, their southern edge spilling over into Oregon to form a gentle rampart just west of Idaho's Hells Canyon. Blanketed by forests of dark-green pine and spruce, the Blues boast superb scenery and empty campsites just 5 hours from the region's major metropolises.

Having hiked all the great Northwestern ranges, I'm still drawn back to these remote mountains, primarily because of the abundant wildlife. During my last trek down the Slick Ear Trail, I saw great gaggles of wild turkeys dodging and sprinting through the pine forests. I saw mule deer as big as elk, and plenty of elk to help me make the comparison. After reaching the Wenaha River Trail, which heads down into Oregon, I watched small herds of bighorn sheep tiptoe across sun-drenched rimrock bluffs high above the river.

In the evening, I pulled plump rainbow and brown trout from the gin-clear waters of the Wenaha, but released them quickly. Fresh scat and tree scrapes suggested black bears were in the area. Indeed, I soon spied a cinnamon-colored bear; its colorful coat reminding me that not all black bears are black (reddish-brown
The Blues are a small, young range dominated by deep river valleys and modest peaks. The Umatilla National Forest encompasses much of the range, with the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness Area protecting the heart of the backcountry. Scores of trails bisect the Wenaha-Tucannon (named for the pair of pristine rivers that flow through the heart of the wilderness), but the Wenaha River Trail is my favorite.

During a recent midsummer visit, I hiked through old-growth pine forest along the upper portion of the Grizzly Bear Trail, listening to the resonant “whomp, whomp, whomp” of nervous spruce grouse. Dropping to the valley bottom, I walked through lodgepole and fir forests that opened into airy ponderosa pine groves littered with broad, open meadows—perfect country for wildlife spotting.

Come late afternoon, I pitched camp in one of the countless quiet sites lining the Wenaha, and waited for darkness and the mournful cries of resident coyotes. In decades of hiking here, I’ve rarely encountered more than one or two parties of hikers or horsepackers in these camps. The only two-legged beasts I saw during my last outing were turkeys, by the hundreds. Add the steady stream of four-legged travelers—deer, elk, bighorn, and black bears—and you’ll understand why even a solo hiker will never get lonesome in the isolated Blues.

**Expedition Planner**

**The Way:** From Walla Walla, follow US 12 northeast 30 miles to Dayton, Washington, which offers easy access to Tucannon Valley and Wenaha trailheads. To get to the Wenaha trails, drive south from Dayton along the North Touchet Road for about 25 miles, passing the Bluewood Ski Area. Stay on the main road (now Forest Service Road 46) for another 20 miles, and turn right onto Forest Service Road 46-300. Continue to the end of this road at Twin Buttes. For access to trails on the northern side of the Tucannon Valley, continue on US 12 from Dayton about 30 miles to Pomeroy. Turn south onto Benjamin Gulch Road (Road 128) to a junction with Forest Service Road 40. Turn left and continue to the Diamond trailhead at the road end for multiple access trails leading into the wilderness.

**Trails:** The wilderness area has more than 200 miles of trail, including a 45-mile loop from Twin Buttes described by the author. To access this route, descend from Twin Buttes on the Slick Ear Trail to the Wenaha River; hike downstream to the Sawtooth/Smooth Ridge Trail and then north to Oregon Butte. Turn west and hike around the East Butte Trail back to Twin Buttes. Two road miles close the loop.

**Guides:** *Pacific Northwest Hiking: The Complete Guide,* by Ron C. Judd and Dan A. Nelson (Foghorn Press; $20.95), offers numerous route descriptions in the area. The Umatilla National Forest map ($8) is available from Nature of the Northwest Information Center; 503/872-2750; www.naturenw.org.

**Contact:** Pomeroy Ranger District, Umatilla National Forest, 509/843-1891; www.fs.fed.us/r6/uma/.

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**Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Wisconsin**

A trip to Apostle islands traces the line between solitude and hiding.

By Jeff Rennicke

A t dawn, Lake Superior gleams as red as the coals in last night’s campfire. No humans in sight. No sound but the slow lapping of waves and the far-off cry of gulls. In the distance, islands appear and disappear in the morning mist. There are 22 islands in all, and 21 are part of Wisconsin’s Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, a place where you can disappear as easily as an island in the mist. I turn my kayak toward the fog and paddle.

The Apostles spangle the waters off Wisconsin’s northern tip like stars in a lake-blue sky. On this trip, I’ll string a constellation of islands together—Sand, York, Oak, Hermit, and Basswood.

At the northeast tip of Sand Island, I slide my kayak into the shadows of a sandstone cliff where the waves have carved deep fluted holes. Inside, water dripping reminds me of a lighthouse keeper who claimed that if you spend enough time alone here, “you’ll be seeing mermaids—hear them singing on the rocks.”

On York Island, I walk a trackless beach watching a merlin carve the air. On Oak Island, I step in bear tracks as big as my fist.

But the solitude sinks deepest on Hermit Island. In the mid-1800s, a man known only as “Wilson” lived alone here with a few chickens, a dog, an old shack, and a copy of The Whole Duty of Man.

What would a man alone on such a small island for years on end think about?

We all need places where we can explore our own sense of being alone. But sitting in a clearing, dappled in shadows, I wonder: What do I hold too dear to throw off for a solitary
life like Wilson?
A strong breeze bends the birch trees into question marks but no answers are whispered to me. The next morning, my fifth, first light finds me far out on the lake and paddling hard for home.

**Drive Time:** Minneapolis: 4 hours (220 miles); Chicago: 8 hours (490 miles)

**The Way:** From Minneapolis, take I-35 north to Duluth. Exit onto US 53 south toward Wisconsin. Follow US 53 to US 2. Drive east on US 2 to WI 13, then follow WI 13 north about 20 miles to Bayfield, WI. From Bayfield, follow the signs to the Apostle Islands visitor center, where you can obtain maps of the various launching spots.

**Gear:** Lake Superior can have the temperament of an inland ocean. Cold water, high winds, rocky shores, and sudden storms are all possible. Be sure your skills and safety gear are up to Superior standards.

**Trails:** More than 50 miles of trail are scattered throughout the lakeshore. Try the 11.3-mile network on Oak Island (includes a nice overlook) or the 14.5 miles on Stockton Island that lead through rich bogs to a beautiful beach at Julian Bay.

**Route:** The author’s 5-day route combines hiking with cross-country travel and paddling. He launched from Little Sand Bay and explored Sand, York, Oak, Hermit, and Basswood Islands on foot, taking out in Bayfield.

**Can’t Miss:** The view from the Lakeshore Trail above Squaw Bay.

**Crowd Control:** You’ll find the most solitude at islands with no boat service or National Park facilities (Hermit, York, Cat, and others). Excursion boats run June through September. The best paddling is from May to October.

**Guides: Apostle Islands Handbook** is the National Lakeshore’s official guide ($5.50), available at the visitor center.

**Apostle Islands #235 map** (Trails Illustrated, 800/962-1643; [www.backpacker.com/mapstore](http://www.backpacker.com/mapstore); $9.95).

**Walk Softly:** Backcountry campsites are limited to groups of five.

**Contact:** Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, 715/779-3397; [www.nps.gov/apis](http://www.nps.gov/apis).