



HELLS CANYON WILDERNESS

Think there are no more unknown places left to explore in the Lower 48? Think again. This remote chasm boasts big views, craggy mountains, abundant wildlife, and staggering solitude.

BY MICHAEL LANZA / MAPS BY INTERNATIONAL MAPPING ASSOCIATES

Final Pass
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JACKIE _____

GENNY _____

MICHELLE _____

JASON _____

SHANNON _____

PETER _____

JON _____

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HELLS HATH NO FURY? NOT ON IDYLIC DAYS LIKE THIS, WHEN THE VIEWS OF THE SNAKE RIVER FROM TK SPOT SEEM TO STRETCH FOR ENDLESS MILES.

Pfft...pfft. The sound barely registers inside the warm cocoon of my sleeping bag. It's different—softer—than the anesthetic patter of rain that lulled me to sleep hours ago. Working slowly, like a cranky old PC, my brain powers up to identify the source: Snow. In April. I crack an eyelid to check for daylight. The tent is intensely dark, like the recesses of a cave. I shut down for a few more hours of deep unconsciousness, the gentle brushing of snowflakes on my nylon roof as effective a narcotic as the rain.

At daylight, I step outside on urgent business and discover a landscape that has changed radically overnight. Visibility is 50 feet, and 3 inches of wet stuff blankets the ground. Perfect fat flakes flutter down from a ceiling so close it's almost claustrophobic. There's no wind, no sound. I've been in many whiteouts, but stepping so abruptly into a space so blank gives me a disorienting rush of vertigo. After a few moments, my eyes and equilibrium adjust, and I begin to relax—and appreciate the emptiness. My little white bubble is as peaceful as the world gets.

When I hit the trail an hour later, the clouds lift enough to reveal the looming cliffs, deep side canyons, and steep, sage- and grass-covered slopes of Hells Canyon, all white-washed by the storm. I chuckle to myself at the fickle notion of seasons. Here in North America's deepest river gorge, weather ignores the calendar. I've seen snow on the 4th of July, and sunbathed the first week of March. The canyon is big enough to make its own weather, but its climate is mostly a function of elevation change, something the canyon has in greater measure than many U.S. mountain ranges.

This is a place defined by extremes—of scale, solitude, grandeur. Perhaps more than any wild land I've known, this canyon fills me with a sense of having dropped out of time, of diving, wide-eyed, into Alice's rabbit-hole. The biggest disconnect? That a place so unblemished and diverse could attract so few visitors.

Which is exactly why I've returned for a 4-day, 56-mile spring hike, during which I'll loop from the top of Hells Canyon down to the Snake River and back up again, sampling every part of the canyon's geography. And what a geography. Hells, as some locals call it, is a 70-mile-long chasm dividing western Idaho from northeastern Oregon. Over eons, the Snake River and its tributaries have carved

a vast, complex topography of side canyons and draws branching from the main gorge like the roots of an old cottonwood.

On the Oregon side, where I started yesterday, the rim rises 5,500 feet above the river. The relief on the Idaho side is even more dramatic. More than 8,000 feet separate the river from the top of the Seven Devils Mountains, making Hells deeper than the Grand Canyon by more than half a mile. The

canyon is arid—nearly a desert—and largely treeless, except at higher elevations, where snowfall nurtures conifer forests. But the conditions don't stop the canyon and its surrounding peaks from being one of the richest wildlife refuges in the Lower 48, home to more than 350 species, including life-listers such as bighorn sheep, black bears, bald eagles, and mountain lions, plus river otters and scads of rattlers. For all of these reasons, Congress in 1975 designated the 652,000-acre Hells Canyon National Recreation Area; today, the area includes 214,000 acres of wilderness.

The loop will lead me on a wild tour of the seasons—sometimes multiple seasons in a single day. I began yesterday afternoon in “summer,” marching nearly 2,000 feet uphill on the Saddle Creek Trail. After 50 switchbacks on a sunbaked slope, I'd sweated through my T-shirt like a 380-pounder at an NFL training camp. At 5,448-foot Freezeout Saddle, I stepped abruptly into autumn—a chill wind and patches of snow. Even the view raised goosebumps. Snowcapped mountains rose in two directions—the Seven Devils to the east, Oregon's Wallowas to the west. The great gash of Hells fell away so far below I couldn't see the bottom. Then it was forward into spring, as I descended 1,500 feet of switchbacks beneath a warm drizzle and a vibrant rainbow.

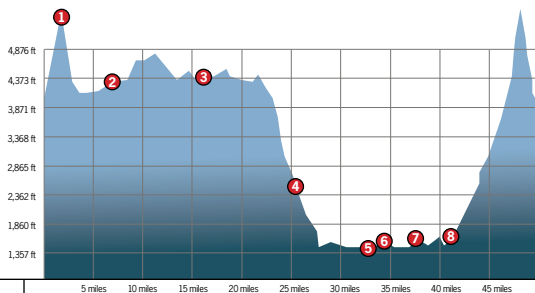
Today, sunrise brought my wintry surprise. The black, pinnacled cliffs of Summit Ridge, towering hundreds of feet overhead, display a thin, new cape of white. A light snow falls as I hike the High Trail, a path set on a broad, miles-long bench at 4,200 feet. It cuts through open groves of trees, past waterfalls, and across broad, grass-covered ridges.

The unpredictable weather hints at the immensity of Hells Canyon, but it doesn't tell the full story. With each passing hour, my eyes adjust to the breadth and depth of scenery in the way a theatergoer's ears tune in to Shakespearean



LAND OF CONTRASTS: THE AUTHOR AND HIS PARTNERS HAVE SEEN IT ALL ON HIS 10 TRIPS TO HELLS CANYON—SOMETIMES ON THE SAME HIKE. ABOVE, A CAMPSITE BENEATH DEVILS THRONE; BELOW, THE SNAKE RIVER

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- 1 11T 0520600E 5025324N Freezeout Saddle; view stretches from Eagle Cap peaks to Seven Devils
- 2 11T 0523794E 5026950N Campsite with big vista on east side of trail north of Big Creek
- 3 11T 0529653E 5036252N Old grave marker
- 4 11T 0532192E 5042028N Campsite and old cabin at Wisnor Place on Temperance Creek
- 5 11T 0534459E 5036615N Eagle's Nest; trail is blasted out of a cliff
- 6 11T 0534412E 5036320N Grassy campsite at Yreka Creek with sandy beach and shade trees
- 7 11T 0532280E 5032572N Broad canyon view from campsite at Sluice Creek
- 8 11T 0529422E 5026550N Big campsite near Saddle Creek, overlooking the Snake

Map datum WGS 84

dialogue. Like a great mountain range turned inside-out, the canyon's contours leap and fall endlessly, from the creek-scoured ravine I step across to the multiple layers of distant ridges and tributary canyons. Land features seem to swell to tremendous size, then fade slowly to relative obscurity against a vast backdrop, a phenomenon of perception I've experienced only here and in the Grand Canyon.

Late in the morning on my second day, five elk dart uphill away from me, moving with an effortless speed that belies the slope's severe angle. Within seconds, they've disappeared into the sparse pine forest. In the canyon's middle elevations, the elk seem as numerous as birds. On previous trips, I've watched as many as 100 of these majestic animals flow uphill in such a dense cluster it gave the illusion of the ground moving.

By midafternoon, the storm passes. My load light, Ilope nearly 2,000 feet down numerous switchbacks to the valley of Temperance Creek...and back into spring. I strip to short sleeves and make camp in an overgrown meadow called Wisnor Place, then poke around a dilapidated cabin and some long-abandoned farm equipment rusting in the tall grass. Tiny, mice-infested shacks like this one are scattered around the canyon, stark reminders of the remote, marginal lives of the settlers who farmed and ranched here from the late 1800s until the Depression.

A mile below Wisnor Place, knee-deep Temperance Creek ducks between 400-foot cliffs on its descent to the Snake River. Except for one spot where it climbs steeply to a great overlook of this side canyon, the Temperance Creek Trail hugs the creek so closely it requires you to ford the creek 21 times in 3 miles. I change to hiking sandals and splash downstream.

When I reach the Snake on my third morning, it feels like July in St. Louis. At 1,300 feet, I'm two seasons and four-fifths of a vertical mile removed from the snowy highlands where I started. Under a desert sun, I follow the Oregon Snake River Trail south. The nonstop views of the meandering river, cliffs, and grassy, nearly treeless ridges leave no doubt why 68 miles of the Snake River are designated as wild and scenic. There are sandy beaches, broad flats covered with bunchgrasses and prickly pear cactus, and a remarkably well-built path clinging to cliffs 400 feet above the roiling whitewater.

On my last night, I pitch my tent near the mouth of Saddle Creek on a perfect, flat lawn at the edge of an abandoned orchard. A ranching family tended cherry, apricot, apple, pear, and peach trees here from about 1915 to 1938, I'll later learn from an 87-year-old woman who remembers playing among the neat rows. My only neighbors now are wagon wheels and a plow slowly sinking into the earth (though a group of wild turkeys will awaken me at dawn with their boisterous foraging). Evening paints the rock bands and grassy hillsides across the river in a warm, golden light.

Looking at the old farm equipment, I think about what life must have been like here a century ago—and conjure an image at once daunting and appealing. Then I realize that this spot almost certainly feels lonelier and more remote today than it did then. In 4 days, I've seen just one other person, a woman running a rustic lodge at Temperance Creek. On other visits, I've seen no one at all. For a back-packer, that kind of solitude is always a glorious thing, but it's truly rare when you find it in a landscape so transcendent. That's the story of Hells Canyon, the rare American wilderness whose beauty far eclipses its renown. 🍌

HIKE IT

Oregon Rim-to-River Loop

Enjoy the author's Hells Canyon experience on this top-to-bottom tour.

This 56-mile, 4- to 6-day route entails 6,000-plus feet of hard elevation gain and loss. But it may be the finest multiday hike in Hells Canyon. And the payoff is constant views, excellent campsites, and near-complete solitude (if you don't count the elk).

From the Freezeout parking area, follow Saddle Creek Trail's arduous, nearly 2,000-foot

climb to Freezeout Saddle; start this 2-hour stretch by 9 a.m. to avoid the afternoon heat. Then descend 1,500 feet to the High Trail junction at 5.3 miles. From here, you'll hike a 45.5-mile loop on the High, Temperance Creek, Oregon Snake River, and Saddle Creek Trails, then return over Freezeout Saddle to your car. Side trails allow options for shorter or longer hikes.

The top campsites for the first night or two are along the High Trail, on the grassy, open ridges between the creeks; there's an especially scenic spot just north of Big Creek. From these sites, you'll walk several minutes for water. Farther along,

Wisnor Place has good tent space in the meadow between the historic cabin and Temperance Creek. There are a few sites on the Snake River between Temperance and Saddle Creeks, but not all have a stream nearby (don't drink from the polluted Snake). One of this loop's best sites is a grassy area where the Saddle Creek Trail meets the Oregon Snake River Trail, with the canyon rising skyward all around. To break up the 4,000-foot, 11.3-mile hump from the Snake River back over Freezeout Saddle, look for a small campsite midway up, near the junction of the High and Saddle Creek Trails. Except for those cited

above, you won't find sites on the Saddle Creek or Temperance Creek Trails.

Navigation is straightforward, with two exceptions. In a grassy saddle where the High and Dry Gulch Trails meet, a sign incorrectly points north for Temperance Creek; instead, turn west and walk 50 feet to pick up a good trail. (Note: The Dry Gulch Trail is a better route to the Snake if, before your trip, the Wallowa Mountains Visitor Center warns of many blowdowns on the Temperance Creek Trail.) Also, the lower 6 miles of the Saddle Creek Trail include sections that are faint, overgrown, or obscured by blowdowns;

the trail is passable, but the going is slow and requires careful attention.

THE WAY From OR 82 in Joseph, turn north on OR 350/Imnaha Highway and follow it 30 miles to the little town of Imnaha. Across from the post office, turn right onto Upper Imnaha River Road, continue 12.4 miles, and turn left onto Road 4230, which forks almost immediately (bear left). Follow to its end at the Freezeout trailhead.

TURN THE PAGE FOR MORE HIKES IN HELLS CANYON >>>

Idaho Snake River National Recreation Trail

One of the canyon's easiest hikes, this 3- to 4-day outing also offers some of its best scenery and history.



Hells Canyon didn't get its name for nothing. The exceedingly rugged topography means most hikes here demand serious aerobic output. But not this one. Paralleling its namesake river, this well-constructed trail's two biggest uphill are measured in hundreds of feet, not thousands. But that's not the best reason for hiking the 30 miles from Butler Bar to the Idaho Snake River trailhead at Upper Pittsburgh Landing. The real payoff is the every-step-of-the-way eye candy. Tracing the broad, arid canyon's

meanderings, you'll enjoy constant views of slopes of golden grass, prickly-pear cactus, sagebrush, and spring-blooming wildflowers rising thousands of feet overhead, plus tall cliffs of ancient brown, gold, and orange rock. You'll wander from the river's edge to aeries like Suicide Point, a cliff-top overlook where you could drop a stone straight down 300 feet into the Snake. You'll probably run into rattlers, and in spring you might see bighorn sheep.

The trail is also rich in history. The McGaffee Cabin on Bernard Creek has walls papered with old photos and newspaper clippings. The rustic Sheep Creek Ranch, near the midpoint, is available for rent. And Kirkwood Ranch is maintained by the Forest Service as a museum; 5.5 miles from the trailhead, it has free camping and bathrooms.

Logistics present this hike's biggest challenge. The easiest option is to hire a jet boat to go upriver, then hike back down. Or you can hike out and back from the trailhead. A third option is to shuttle vehicles between the trailhead and Hells Canyon Dam (a 4-hour drive one way) and get a 20-minute jet boat ride from the dam to Butler Bar. During spring runoff, jet boats may not be able to come upriver beyond Johnson Bar. In that case, you'll have to either arrange the vehicle shuttle, or take a jet boat from Pittsburgh Landing to Sheep Creek (good campsites), hike south out and back from there, then hike north to the trailhead. Plan 3 to 4 days to hike the entire trail one way.

THE WAY From US 95 just south of White Bird, ID, turn left at a sign for Pittsburgh Landing. Go .8 mile, turn left over the bridge, then take a quick left onto FR 493 and drive 15 miles. Just before FR 493 ends at the Snake River, turn left at a sign for Upper Pittsburgh Landing and drive to the end of that road to the trailhead.

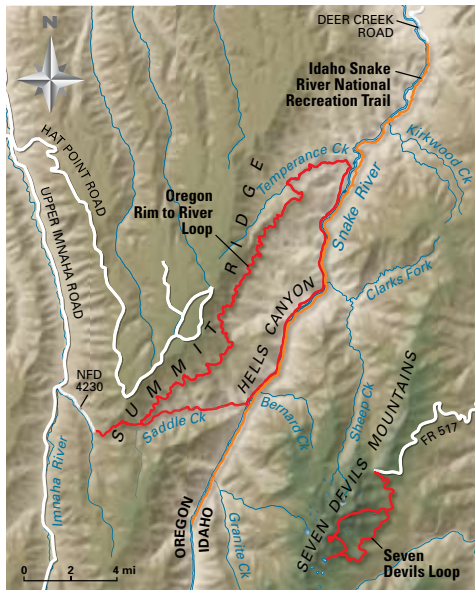
Seven Devils Loop

Hard off-trail scrambling and routefinding reward you with stunning alpine scenery amid little-known 9,000-foot peaks.



The Seven Devils may be the most beautiful mountain range you've never heard of. Like a slice of the Rockies relocated to the Northwest, these craggy peaks rise high above conifer forest, their dark rock inspiring sinister names like He Devil, the Goblin, and Devils Throne. Despite this drama—and plenty of pristine alpine lakes—you'll see more mule deer, elk, and mountain goats than people. This 18-mile route (not including side summits such as Devils Throne and She Devil) infiltrates the alpine heart of the range, where you'll camp beside lonely ponds below pinnacled ridgelines, and scramble to summits with views of the entire range. The off-trail sections are very difficult and slow; plan 3 to 5 days if you want to tag some summits.

From the trailhead, hike south on Boise Trail 101, catching views of the peaks and the Rapid River valley. At 7.4 miles, just past Dog Creek, pick up a faint cross-country route heading west to Dog Lake. There are good campsites at the creek, but better ones await in 1.3 miles at the cliff-ringed lake. The next morning, backtrack to 7,400 feet, then scramble northeast up a grass ramp to the ridge above at 7,700 feet. Descend a steep gully into the next drainage to the north.

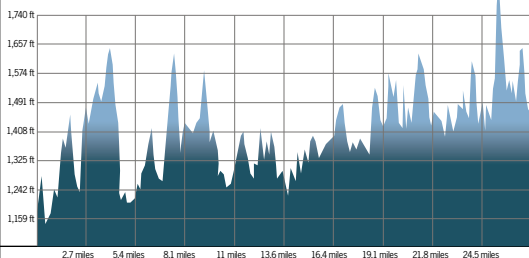


Hike up this next talus-choked valley toward the peak at its head, 9,280-foot Devils Throne. To reach the summit, climb southwest from the small tarn below the mountain's east face and scramble up one of three gullies on the southeast ridge. To continue the main hike, return to the tarn and climb north to an 8,500-foot pass into the valley of Hanson Lakes. When there's snow for stomping out a flat spot, you'll find a campsite with killer views on the south

side of the pass. Contour around the head of the Hanson valley, below the cliffs of Mt. Belial, to another broad pass at 8,700 feet between She Devil and The Ogre. Mountain goats frequently hang out on the upper slopes of 9,400-foot She Devil, which has some of the best views in the range. Continue cross-country to Lower Cannon Lake, then follow Cannon Lakes Trail 126 to Trail 101 and your car.

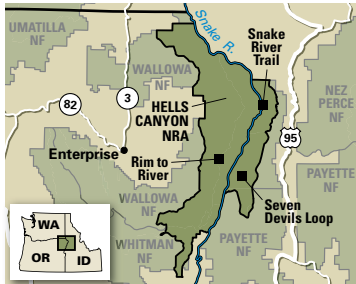
THE WAY From US 95, one mile south of Riggins, ID, turn west at a sign for Seven Devils Campground onto Squaw Creek Road 517. Follow it 16.5 miles to Windy Saddle trailhead.

Follow it 16.5 miles to Windy Saddle trailhead.



Trip Planner

HELLS CANYON WILDERNESS



TRAILS Far from any city and accessed by few roads, the 900 miles of trail in Hells Canyon NRA see little human traffic. The least-traveled paths—especially those connecting the river to high-country footpaths within the 214,000-acre wilderness—can be hard

to follow. Tackle these only if you have top navigation skills. Floods and blowdowns occasionally destroy trails, so call ahead for info.

SEASON With 8,000 feet of relief and several microclimates, Hells Canyon is a year-round destination. Spring and fall are best for lower-canyon hikes like the Idaho Snake River National Recreation Trail. Elevations above 5,000 feet see snow from October to June. The best times for the Rim-to-River Loop are spring and fall. Seven Devils trails and peaks are typically snow-free by mid-July.

ACCESS

Oregon Rim-to-River The Freezeout trailhead, at about 3,600 feet, can be reached by car unless there's snow.

Idaho Snake River National Recreation Trail FR 493 to Pittsburgh Landing is maintained year-round, though parts can be icy or snow-covered; snow tires and chains are advised in winter.

Seven Devils Mountains Road 517 to Windy Saddle is typically closed from October until July. Call the Riggins office to check status.

JET-BOAT SHUTTLES

- » Hells Canyon Adventures, (800) 422-3568, hellscanyonadventures.com
- » Killgore Adventures, (800) 469-8757, hellscanyonidaho.com
- » Snake River Adventures (also manages the Sheep Creek Ranch rental cabin), (800) 262-8874, snakeriveradventures.com

PERMITS Backcountry permits are not required, but a Northwest Forest Pass (\$30/year, \$5/day) is for some Oregon trailhead lots.

CAUTIONS Watch for rattlers, especially at lower elevations, and poison ivy along the creeks. In spring, dam releases can flood river trails; call the Riggins office for info. Choose swimming spots carefully; the Snake is deep, powerful, and cold. Avoid drinking or cooking with water from the Snake, which carries farm-chemical runoff.

USGS QUADS

Oregon Rim-to-River *Sheep Creek Divide, Hat Point, Old Timer Mountain, Kirkwood Creek, Temperance Creek*

Idaho Snake River National Recreation Trail *Squirrel Prairie, Hat Point, Old Timer Mountain, Kirkwood Creek, Temperance Creek*

Seven Devils Mountains *He Devil, Heavens Gate*

GUIDEBOOK *Hiking Hells Canyon and Idaho's Seven Devils Mountains*, by Fred Barstad, \$19.

CONTACT See fs.fed.us/hellscanyon for general beta, plus section maps showing river campsites and side trails. For Idaho info, call the Riggins office: (208) 628-3916. For Oregon info, call (541) 426-5546.