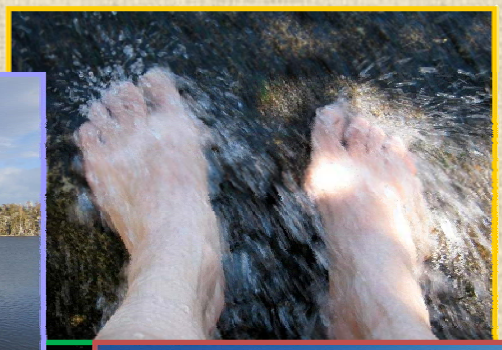
United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Trip Planning Guide to

Desolation Wilderness

Discover



Sense

Explore

Preserve

start your trip here!

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Welcome to Your Wilderness

Desolation Wilderness: *An Enduring Landscape in a Changing World*

The Desolation Wilderness *is located in the Crystal Range of the Sierra Nevada. Covering 63,960 acres west of South Lake Tahoe and north of Highway 50 in El Dorado County, the Wilderness offers stunning alpine lakes, granite peaks, and glacially formed valleys.*

The land which became Desolation Wilderness was part of the Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve, established in 1899. In 1910, when the first tourists were beginning to make their way over the Echo and Donner summits, the area was made part of the newly-formed Eldorado National Forest. The area was named the Desolation Valley Primitive Area in 1931, and in 1969 the Desolation Wilderness was congressionally designated under the Wilderness Act. Today, it's one of the most-visited Wildernesses for its size in the country.

Whether just for the day or overnight, the Desolation Wilderness provides visitors with a way to experience solitude and appreciate the natural beauty of the area. Enjoy your visit and be sure to Leave No Trace so that future generations may return to enjoy its permanent but changing beauty.

Be considerate of others as you discover and explore. Many visitors are seeking solitude or a primitive experience.

Obtain and carry your permit with you at all times.

Select a durable campsite at least 100 feet from lakes, streams and trails.

Keep your dog on a leash 6' or less, or under your direct control. Do this in respect for others and for the protection of wildlife.

Dispose of human and dog waste responsibly. Bury 6-8 inches deep, at least 200 ft from water, trail, or camp.

Campfires are prohibited in Desolation Wilderness.

Group size is limited to 12 people, including adults and children.

Bikes, carts, snowmobiles, and any other motorized or mechanized vehicles are not allowed in the Wilderness.

Respect restoration sites. Walk a different path.

Pack it in, pack it out; yes, toilet paper too!

What is Wilderness?

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states that Wilderness is to be "protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and [is an area] which… has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation."

Because it is a Wilderness, Desolation lacks many of the conveniences of modern civilization. Cell service is rare. Medical and rescue services may not be immediately available in emergencies. Keep these risks in mind when planning your trip.

Caring for the Land and Serving People

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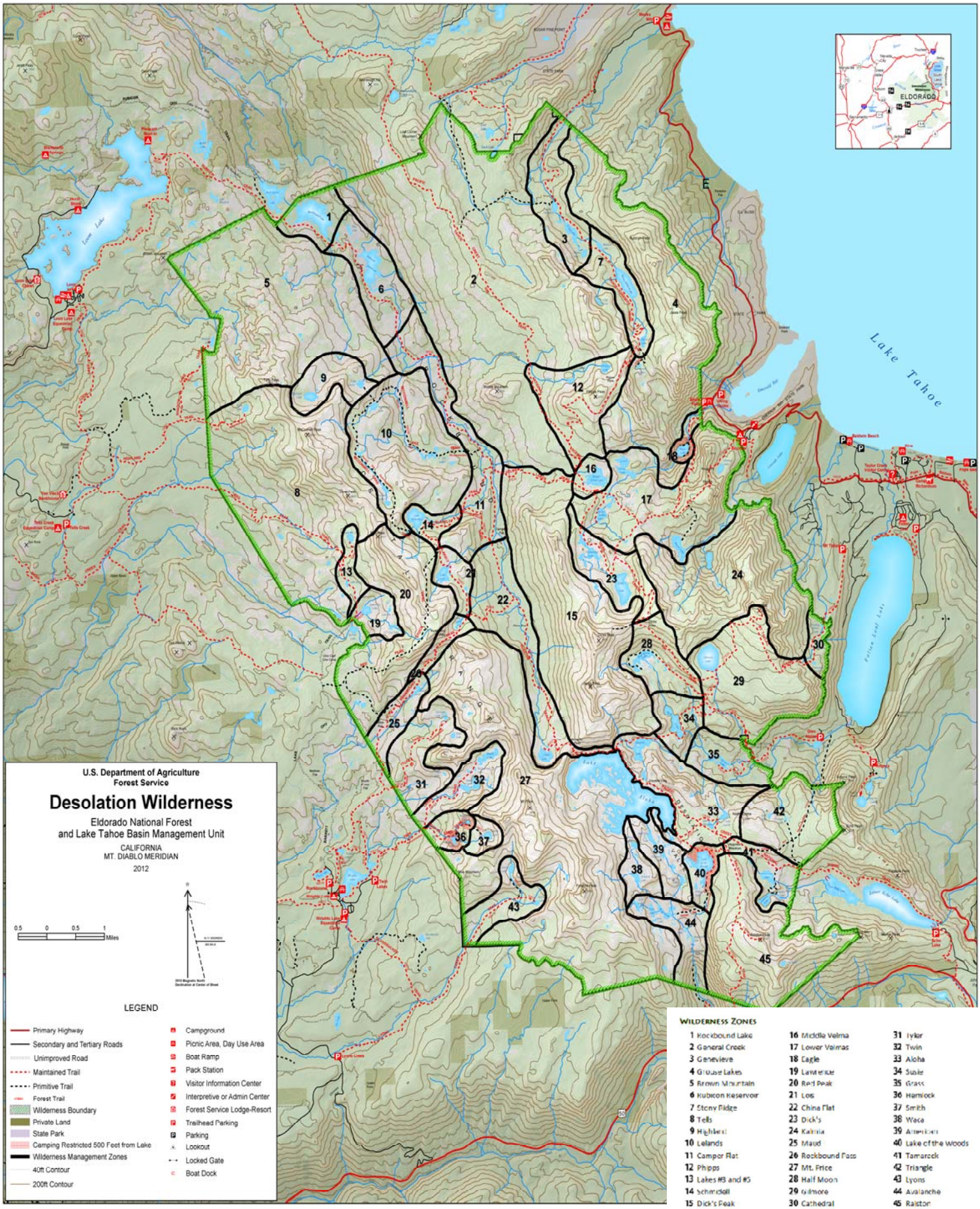
Photo Credits. *Cover:* Jon Erickson: Panorama, visitor at lake. Gary Martin: Hiker on rocks. Ingrid Wynden: Feet, ground squirrel. Protecting tree.
Page 1: Charis Parker: Two hikers in Desolation. Ingrid Wynden: Mariposa lilies.

Desolation Wilderness Zone Map



This map is for reference only and is not intended for navigation purposes. Locations and mileages may vary.

Find your path in Desolation Wilderness . . .

Ready to start your journey?

Let's get you a permit. For **how long** would you like to go?

Need more choices? Check out some **alternatives** to Desolation Wilderness on the next page!

Just a day hike

For more info, pg 5

Stay overnight

For more info, pg 7-8

Just 1 night
$5/adult for permits.

2-13 nights
$10/adult for permits.

Children 12 & under are free!

Permits are free! Self-register at any major trailhead during the summer, or at any Forest Service ranger station. (All are listed on guide's back cover.)

And **when** would you like to go?

Today
A portion of permits are first-come first-served, issued the day of your hike.

For more info, pg 7

Tomorrow, or up to six months ahead
A portion of permits are reservation only. Reservation fees are an additional $6/permit.

Overnight permits are in high demand during the **zone quota period** (Friday before Memorial Day to September 30th). Same-day permits may sell out quickly when stations open at 8 am.

Get your reservation:
WWW.recreation.gov
877-444-6777

For more info:
Pacific RS
530-647-5415
Taylor Creek VC
530-543-2674
LTBMU SO
530-543-2600

Ranger Stations

For more info on stations, pg 11

Highway 50 Corridor

Pacific Ranger Station
Highway 50 near Fresh Pond

Lake Tahoe

Taylor Creek Visitor Center
3 mi north of S Lake Tahoe on Hwy 89

Lake Tahoe Basin Supervisor's Office
2 mi east of Hwy 50 / Hwy 89 junction in S Lake Tahoe

* If using a ranger station, overnight permit must be obtained in person

. . . or new paths nearby!

Discover and explore alternative destinations . . . if you want to:

Sit by a campfire

Fires are prohibited in Desolation Wilderness.

Get a California Campfire Permit

- Required to build a campfire.
- Permits are valid throughout CA for the calendar year.
- Available for free at any Ranger Station.

Bring more than 12 people

Maximum group size in Desolation Wilderness is 12 people. Children are included in the group count.

Go mountain biking

There are no motorized or mechanized vehicles allowed in Desolation Wilderness.

Go when and where you want

Entering Desolation Wilderness requires planning and preparation. Some of the areas have special management zones with designated campsites, and the number of visitors to each area is limited. What's your backup plan?

You can still enjoy the great outdoors! Try these areas instead:

- **Meiss Country**—Hike along the Pacific Crest Trail and Tahoe Rim Trail to see forest meadows with summer wildflowers, picturesque mountain lakes, as well as diverse forested, granite, and brush landscapes. Plan a trip of any length and difficulty. Accessible only by non-motorized transport, this area provides much of the appeal of a Wilderness.
- **Caples Creek/Silver Fork** —Red fir forest with wet meadows with wildflowers, old growth trees, interesting birds, and views of cascading Caples Creek and the Silver Fork of the American River. Various moderate trails and advanced orienteering options. Backcountry camp or day hike from Silver Fork Campground. Provides Wilderness appeal.
- **Loon Lake**—Large reservoir, with established Loon Lake Campground and dispersed camping nearby. South Shore Trail has hiking, backpacking, mountain biking, equestrian, and fishing opportunities, all outside of the Wilderness.
- **Van Vleck/Bassi Creek**—Popular equestrian area, as well as opportunities for mountain biking. Lodge pole pine forests and meadows. Trailhead hub for access to Loon Lake, Shadow Lake, Highland, Red Peak, and Two Peaks trails.
- **Sayles Canyon/Bryant Meadow** — Hike through thick timbered stands of mixed conifer to open rocky areas and meadows, crossing Sayles Creek several times along the way. Can be used to access Pacific Crest Trail, Tahoe Rim Trail, Meiss Country, and Little Round Top.
- **Hunter Trail**—Parallels Rubicon River for 10 miles, ending in a series of switchbacks that lead to Hell Hole Reservoir. This is a popular trail and scenic overlook with many fishing and swimming holes.

See Forest map for locations on pg. 11. For more info on Wilderness, see pg. 1

Visit for the Day

<u>Just 4 easy steps</u> . . . ***P**lan, **P**repare, **P**ack, and get your free **P**ermit; now you're ready for your day's adventure in Desolation Wilderness!*

Step 1. Plan

- Plan to arrive at the trailhead early enough to secure a parking place. Space is limited.
- Pyramid Creek & Eagle Falls trailheads require a day use fee for parking.
- Set a departure and turn-around time to ensure a safe return to the trailhead before dark.

Step 2. Be prepared

- Plan your trip from start to finish at home.
- Tell someone where you are going, when you'll return, and who to call in case of an emergency.
- **Check the weather forecast and be prepared for sudden weather changes.**

Step 3. Pack

- ❑ Water, or water filter (check route for water sources before departure)
- ❑ Map & compass or navigation device (not all trails are well -marked in Wilderness)
- ❑ First aid kit
- ❑ Extra clothing layers for weather changes
- ❑ Knife
- ❑ Sunscreen
- ❑ Hat
- ❑ Headlamp
- ❑ Bug spray
- ❑ In case of emergency: nylon cord, whistle, matches
- ❑ Food

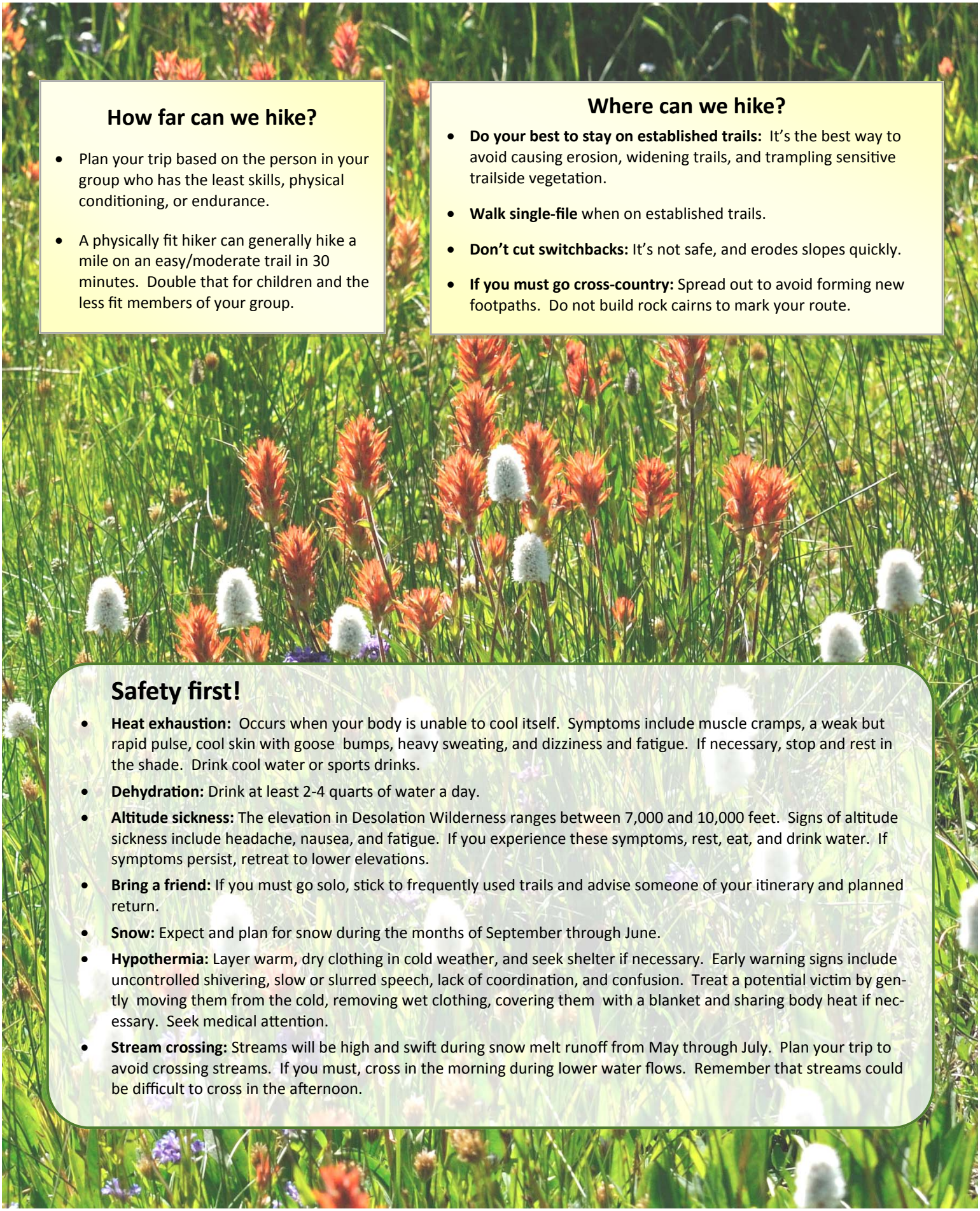
Step 4. Get your permit

Day visit permits for the Desolation Wilderness are free!

1. Obtain a permit from the green box located at the trailhead or at one of the ranger stations on pg. 11.
2. Read all regulations listed on permit.
3. Sign top portion and display prominently on pack.
4. Fill out bottom portion, tear off and deposit in box at trailhead.

Photo Credits. Dustin Bell: Hiker at Lake of the Woods. Ingrid Wynden: Water bottle.

Tips for Travel



How far can we hike?

- Plan your trip based on the person in your group who has the least skills, physical conditioning, or endurance.
- A physically fit hiker can generally hike a mile on an easy/moderate trail in 30 minutes. Double that for children and the less fit members of your group.

Where can we hike?

- **Do your best to stay on established trails:** It's the best way to avoid causing erosion, widening trails, and trampling sensitive trailside vegetation.
- **Walk single-file** when on established trails.
- **Don't cut switchbacks:** It's not safe, and erodes slopes quickly.
- **If you must go cross-country:** Spread out to avoid forming new footpaths. Do not build rock cairns to mark your route.

Safety first!

- **Heat exhaustion:** Occurs when your body is unable to cool itself. Symptoms include muscle cramps, a weak but rapid pulse, cool skin with goose bumps, heavy sweating, and dizziness and fatigue. If necessary, stop and rest in the shade. Drink cool water or sports drinks.
- **Dehydration:** Drink at least 2-4 quarts of water a day.
- **Altitude sickness:** The elevation in Desolation Wilderness ranges between 7,000 and 10,000 feet. Signs of altitude sickness include headache, nausea, and fatigue. If you experience these symptoms, rest, eat, and drink water. If symptoms persist, retreat to lower elevations.
- **Bring a friend:** If you must go solo, stick to frequently used trails and advise someone of your itinerary and planned return.
- **Snow:** Expect and plan for snow during the months of September through June.
- **Hypothermia:** Layer warm, dry clothing in cold weather, and seek shelter if necessary. Early warning signs include uncontrolled shivering, slow or slurred speech, lack of coordination, and confusion. Treat a potential victim by gently moving them from the cold, removing wet clothing, covering them with a blanket and sharing body heat if necessary. Seek medical attention.
- **Stream crossing:** Streams will be high and swift during snow melt runoff from May through July. Plan your trip to avoid crossing streams. If you must, cross in the morning during lower water flows. Remember that streams could be difficult to cross in the afternoon.

Photo Credit. Bill Gratiot: Meadow.

Camp Overnight: Plan

Step 1. Choose your destination - - - - - - - - *See map on pg.2 for specific zone quotas.*

To preserve the primitive Wilderness character and provide opportunities for solitude, Desolation Wilderness is divided into 45 zones. Each zone is unique and offers different opportunities. Based on these qualities, each zone has been assigned a maximum number of overnight campers per day during the quota season.

- About half of the permits designated for each zone are reservation only. The other half of the permits are same-day, first-come first-served.
- **Enter on the date specified** in your permit.
- **Stay the first night in the zone you have chosen**. **Choose a zone that is attainable for your group by your first night**. After the first night, you're free to roam.
- Zones closest to trailheads fill up quickly, especially on weekends. Have a back up plan.
- The most primitive zones may have quotas of less than 12 people. Larger groups of up to 12 may need to stay in larger or more appropriate zones.

Buy an annual pass!

For $20, the pass covers the overnight fee for the person who is issued the pass, for a full year. You can obtain it at any of the Forest Service ranger stations listed on back.

Step 2. Get your permit

There are two ways to get your permit.

Recreation.gov
EXPLORE YOUR AMERICA

Online

Here are some tips for using *Recreation.gov* to book online permits for overnight camping.

- Log in or create your account first.
- When asked *Where?* on Recreation.gov homepage, make sure to search for *Desolation Wilderness Permit.* If you leave off the "Permit" and just search for Desolation Wilderness, you won't be able to access the Permit reservation site.
- *Destination Zone* is the place where you will spend the first night of your trip. After the first night, you're free to roam.
- Remember, not all available permits are listed online. Some are reserved for first-come, first-served permits, to be issued at a ranger station the same day of first night stay. See back cover for ranger station locations and info.
- When preparing to book your permit, be sure to read the helpful *Know Before You Go* info.
- When you're 14 days or less from the start of your trip, log back into your account to print your permit.
- **You must have a signed and printed copy** of your permit with you for it to be valid. Accessing your permit through a mobile device does not replace having a printed permit.
- Be sure to **read and sign** your printed permit. An unsigned permit is not valid.
- Be sure to review cancellation policies. There are no refunds within 14 days of entry.

In person at Ranger Station

See back cover on page 11 for Ranger Station locations, hours, and contact info.

Step 3. Be prepared

- Plan your trip from start to finish at home.
- Tell someone where you are going, when you'll return, and who to call in case of an emergency.
- Check weather forecast and prepare for sudden weather changes.

Continue to next page

Photo Credits. Bill Gratiot: Granite watermark. Amelia Rhodewalt: Ranger station desk.

Camp Overnight: Take Your Trip

Step 4. Pack

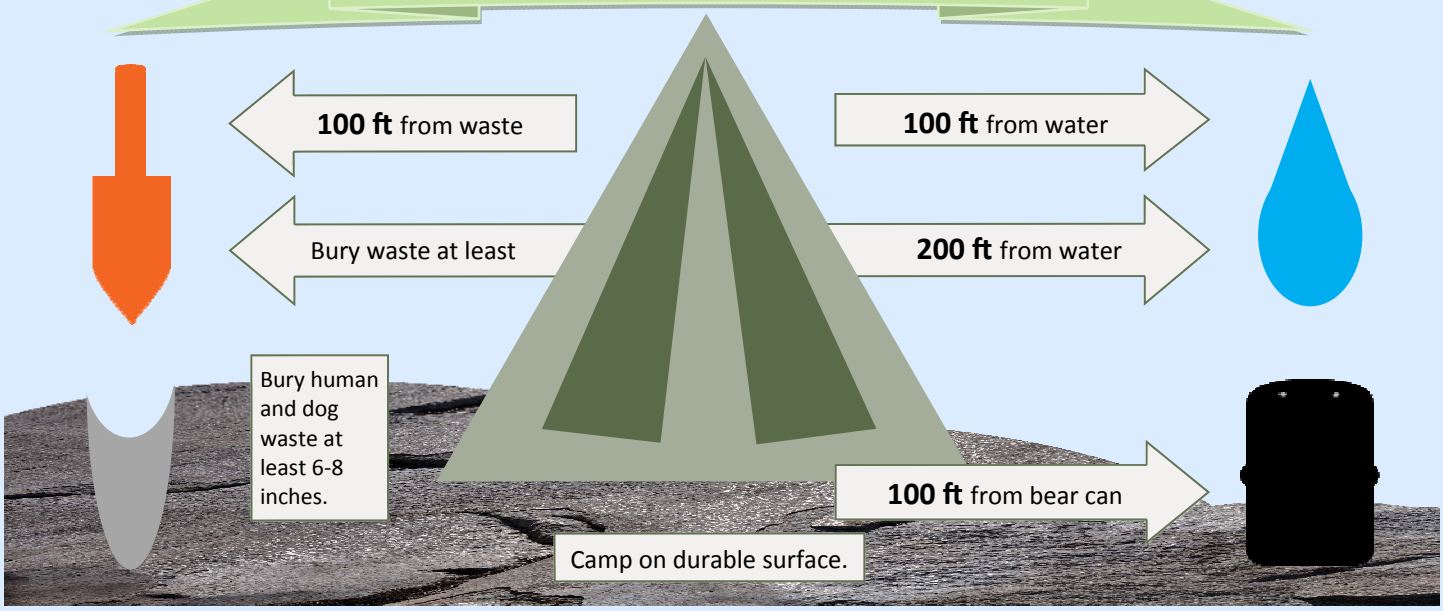
All items listed for Day Visit (see pg 5), plus:

- ❑ Sleeping bag
- ❑ Sleeping pad
- ❑ Tent, hammock, or tarp
- ❑ Stove
- ❑ Bear canister (available to rent for free at any ranger station) or hang
- ❑ Additional warm clothing for nights
- ❑ Trowel

Step 5. Hike

- Get some tips for smart, safe travel on pg 6.
- Hiking Pacific Crest Trail or Tahoe Rim Trail? See these sites for info:
  PCT - www.pcta.org
  TRT - www.tahoerimtrail.org

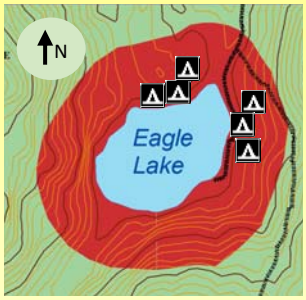
Step 6. Select a proper campsite



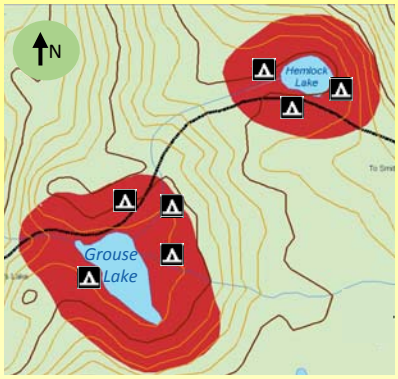
] Going to Eagle, Grouse, Hemlock, or Lake of the Woods? Choose your site in these Special Management Areas

We need your help to protect these fragile areas! The popularity of some Wilderness destinations results in damage to the delicate vegetation around shorelines. Special management areas (marked in red on maps below) with designated campsites (marked in black) have been established to reduce impact as these areas are being restored.

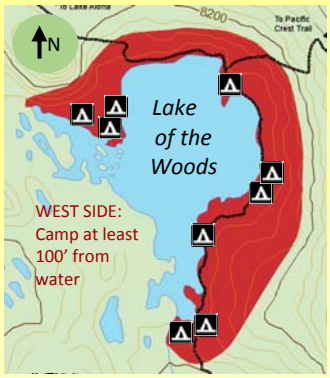
- Designated campsites are marked in the Wilderness with a tent symbol on a 4 x 4 post as depicted at left.
- Camp within 25' of post.
- One permitted group per site.
- One site per permit.
- Sites are first-come, first-served.
- If all designated sites are occupied, camp 500' or more from the lake shore.



Eagle Lake



Grouse and Hemlock Lakes



Lake of the Woods

Photo Credits. Tim Excell: Backpacker hiking.

Preserve Wilderness

Consider, adopt, and practice these ethics in the Wilderness.

Stock

- If you encounter stock when hiking, yield to stock by safely moving to downhill side. Make your presence known. Don't make any loud noises that may spook the animal.
- Recreational livestock is limited to 2 stock per person, with a maximum of 12 per party.
- Stock must be held or confined more than 100' from other campsites and more than 200' from water.
- Scatter manure at least 100' from campsites and water.
- Do not tie stock to trees, highline instead.
- Please use weed -free feed.

- Some trails are not recommended for stock use. Plan your trip carefully.

Bears and food storage

- The most efficient and worry-free way to store your food and personal items is in a bear canister.

- Bear canisters are available for free rental at ranger stations. See pg 11 for station info. Canisters are barrel-shaped, 8" diameter by 12 " height, or about 1/3 cubic foot. They weigh 2 lb 12 oz, with a storage capacity of 10 liters, or about 600 cubic inches.
- Store food when you aren't preparing or eating it. The scent can attract bears and other animals.
- In addition to food and cooking items, store garbage and scented toiletries in your bear canister or hang.
- Store bear canister or hang your food and personal items at least 100 ft away from your sleeping area.

Leave No Trace

Please become familiar with and practice LNT skills, such as:

1. Plan ahead and prepare
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
3. Dispose of waste properly
4. Leave what you find
5. Respect wildlife
6. Be considerate of other visitors

Fish

- Fishing is permitted in Desolation Wilderness.
- California fishing licenses are required year round, and the normal rules and regulations apply within the Wilderness.
- Check Department of Fish and Game website for regulations and stocking info.

Shooting

- Recreational shooting is legal if done safely, and following all federal and state regulations.
- Must be open carry.

Dogs

- El Dorado County's leash law states your dog must be on a leash 6 ft or less and under control. This helps avoid disturbing wildlife, for your dog's safety as well as the animal's. Dogs impact wildlife and barking intrudes on the experiences of others.
- Desolation Wilderness has large expanses of exposed granite. Protect your pet's paws from this sharp surface with dog boots. Check your dog's paws often.
- The same rules apply to dog waste as to human's—bury 6-8 inches deep, at least 200 feet from water, or pack it out.
- Give your dog water whenever you stop to drink.
- Animals get injured too—bring a first aid kit for your dog.

Photo Credits. Bill Gratiot: Butterfly, trout. Ken Green: Dalai with boots. Amelia Rhodewalt: Bear canister. Laura Sheffield: Pack stock.

Explore - Mileages

The Wilderness is a place where we are just visitors. Navigating without roads, signs, and clearly marked paths can be difficult. Use these tips to help you find your way.

Trail Mileages All mileages are one-way.

Lake Tahoe Basin Mgmt Unit (East Side)

Trailhead	Destination	Miles	Level
Echo Lake	Upper Echo Lake	2.5	E
	Tamarack Lake	3.8	E/M
	Haypress Meadow	4.2	M
	Lake of the Woods	5.3	M
	Lake Lucille	5.2	M
	Lake Aloha	7.5	M
	Clyde Lake	9.3	M/D
Glen Alpine	Grass Lake	2.3	E/M
	Susie Lake	3.8	M
	Heather Lake	4.6	M
	Half Moon Lake	5.5	M
	Gilmore Lake	3.9	M
	Lake Aloha	5.8	D
	Dicks Pass	5.4	D
	Dicks Lake	7.3	D
	Mt. Tallac Peak	5.7	D
Mt. Tallac	Floating Island Lake	1.7	E/M
	Cathedral Lake	2.5	E/M
	Tallac Summit	4.6	D
	Gilmore Lake	6.4	M/D
Bayview	Granite Lake	1.3	M/D
	Dicks Lake	5.3	D
	Upper Velma Lake	5.5	D
	Middle Velma Lake	6.5	D
Eagle Falls	Eagle Lake	1.0	M
	Middle Velma Lake	4.4	D
	Dicks Lake	4.3	D
	Dicks Pass	5.3	D
	Fontanillis Lake	4.9	D
Meeks Bay	Lake Genevieve	4.6	M
	Crag Lake	4.9	M
	Hidden Lake	5.7	M
	Stony Ridge Lake	6.3	M
	Rubicon Lake	8.1	M/D
	Phipps Lake	9.4	M/D

Eldorado Natl Forest Unit (West Side)

Trailhead	Destination	Miles	Level
Twin Lakes	Grouse Lake	2.1	M/D
	Hemlock Lake	2.6	D
	Smith Lake	3.0	D
	Twin Lake	3.0	M
	Island Lake	3.5	M
Rock-bound	Gertrude Lake	4.2	M/D
	Maude Lake	4.7	M
	Rockbound Pass	6.4	M/D
	Doris Lake	6.6	M/D
	Lake Lois	7.6	M/D
	Lake Schmidell	8.4	M/D
Lyons Creek	Sylvia Lake	4.6	E/M
	Lyons Lake	5.0	M/D
Twin Bridges	Avalanche Lake	1.8	D
	Ropi Lake	2.0	D
	Lake of the Woods	3.6	D
	Lake Aloha	4.3	D
Ralston	Ralston Peak	4.1	D
	Lake of the Woods	5.3	D
	Lake Aloha	6.1	D
Tells Creek	Forni Lake	4.9	M/D
	Lake #3	6.3	M/D
	Lake #5	6.8	M/D
Loon Lake	Pleasant CG	4.1	E/M
	Spider Lake	4.5	M
	Buck Island Lake	6.1	M
	Rockbound Lake	6.7	M
	Rubicon Res-ervoir	8.3	M
	Camper Flat	13.7	M/D

Get a map and compass. Learn how to use them.

Don't follow the ducks!

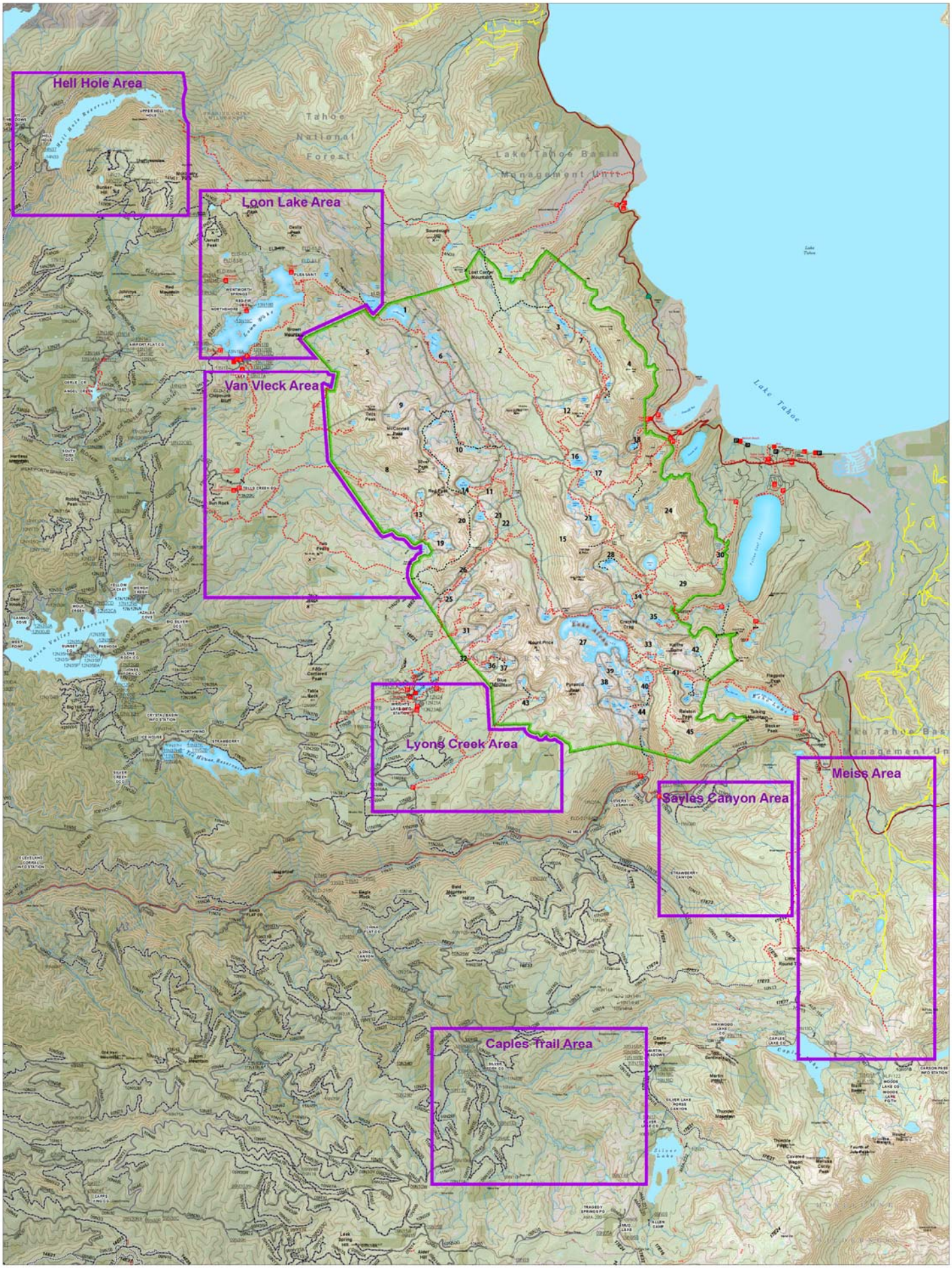
Piles of rocks are supposed to indicate that you're on the right path—but cairns, also called ducks, can be misleading in Wilderness. They've been placed by hikers—not Forest Service staff. Use your map instead! Avoid leaving any mark of your passing through the Wilderness.

Bring a naturalist book if you'd like to identify the things you see on your trip.

Trail Conditions http://desowv.org/component/trailconditions/

Photo Credits. Dustin Bell: Butterfly (top center). Ken Green: Butterfly (bottom). Janice Le Pouvoir: Cairn. Laura Sheffield: Butterfly (top right). Ingrid Wynden: Hikers w/map, naturalist book.

Alternative Destinations Map



Contact Info

Ranger stations

Pacific Ranger Station
530-647-5415
7887 Highway 50, 3 miles east of Pollock Pines
Summer: 8:00am to 4:30pm 7 days/wk
Winter: 8:00am to 4:30pm M-F

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit Supervisor's Office
530-543-2600
35 College Dr, South Lake Tahoe
8:00am to 4:30pm M-F

Taylor Creek Visitor Center
530-543-2674
Highway 89 3 miles north of Highway 50 intersection on South Shore of Lake Tahoe
Summer: 8:00am to 4:30pm 7 days/wk; extended hours Memorial to Labor Day

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit North Shore Office
775-831-0914
855 Alder Ave, Incline Village, NV
8:00am to 4:30pm Th-Sun

Online info

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit
www.fs.usda.gov/ltbmu

Eldorado National Forest
www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado

Desolation Wilderness Volunteer
www.desowv.org

Overnight Permit reservations
www.recreation.gov

Weather: www.weather.gov

In case of emergency: 911 or 530-626-4911