

All yours: Denali National Park's quota system means that with a group, you can score an entire unit to yourself (Rule #2, page 80). Head south from the park road into the Alaska Range in units 8 and 9 with a party of six to own this landscape.

# THE *SEVEN RULES* OF

Crowded campsites and lines for the outhouse? Save it for Bonnaroo.

We'll take our wilderness quiet, raw, and lonely, thank you very much.

Find your own patch of paradise when you follow these simple rules for escaping the hordes. **By Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan**





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# SOLITUDE



# Rule #1

## TOUGHEN UP

TACKLE THE STEEP CLIMBS, LONG MILES, AND CHALLENGING TERRAIN THAT SCARE OTHERS AWAY.

### WEST LITTLE OWYHEE CANYON

MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, OR

**IN 2013, 658 PEOPLE** stood on top of Mt. Everest. The National Park Service's least-visited unit, Alaska's Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve, hosted 134 hardy souls that year. And the canyon I'm about to descend into? How many people have hiked it? "Probably fewer than 20," says my companion Chris Hansen, who's part of the exclusive group. He doesn't mean this year. He means, like, in recorded history.

*Maybe nobody could find it*, I think. The West Little Owyhee Canyon is a black-stone scar lined with bright green foliage between two modest, scrubby hills. You could be standing a quarter-mile away and never know it was here. And that would only be after you'd journeyed deep into Oregon's forgotten southeastern pocket, bumping down horrendous dirt "roads" a hundred miles from the nearest Starbucks. We'd made things a little easier for ourselves by catching a ride to the trailhead with Corie Harlan of the nonprofit Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA), who's leading a volunteer trail-mapping trip in the area. "Not just anyone comes all the way out here," Harlan told me on the Jeep ride in. "You need to have a mission."

I have one: find a spectacular trip I don't have to share with day-hikers, weekenders, or even the moderately hardcore. I don't want to see a soul beyond the group I came here with. Don't get me wrong—I'm not a misanthrope. On some trips I even enjoy sharing the trail with strangers. But I've been shut out of permits and joined the rush for campsites all over the Northwest, and all that hubbub just intensifies my occasional craving for real escape. So this time I'm looking for something wilder. More private. A little piece of the universe just for me—well, me and my chosen companions.

And this time, I'm not relying on permits or quotas or an early jump on a first-come, first-serve campsite. I'm prepared to earn my solitude. So if finding it means tackling the Owyhee's arduous approach and braving its many obstacles—icy potholes, tricky scrambling, bushwhacking, and maybe even abundant rattlesnakes—well, so be it.

It took a three-hour drive from Boise to our rendezvous point with Corie at an abandoned highway gas station, then 90 minutes of turtling over 4WD tracks, one hand on the wheel and the other on a GPS, to reach this point where the hiking route plunges from rim to river. But as I start descending, it hits me: *Getting here was the easy part.*

**WE HIT OUR FIRST** river-crossing within 10 minutes. Luckily, the water here is only ankle deep, and the early fall day is sunny and warm. Besides Chris, a former ONDA employee who cheerfully agreed to accompany me down the canyon (he's been here before), I'm hiking with his photographer friend, Blake Everson, and my new friend Honora Englander, a Portland doctor. We start getting to know each other as the canyon walls tighten around us, 125 feet of charred-looking stone between us and the rim. This canyon is officially part of ONDA's brand-new Oregon Desert Trail, an 800-mile route across the central and southeastern parts of the state, but I wouldn't exactly call what we're traveling a "trail." There are no blazes or signs, not even a footpath worn

into the canyon floor. There's nothing but river, rock, and sand for the canyon's full 60 miles.

We splash through a few more easy river crossings, and then the terrain gets serious. Willows gather in tight formations across our path, forcing us to crash through the thickets like clumsy cattle. I remind myself that these bushy barriers are part of why this canyon sees so few footsteps—most casual hikers balk at this kind of thing. I quickly develop a technique of holding my trekking poles outstretched to guard my face from the whiplashing strands, but that doesn't stop my forearms from getting scratched and bloody. Just when we've got the hang of busting through the willows, I stumble into something thorny. "Oh, right," Chris says. "I forgot about the wild roses."

But I can handle a few scratches. I'm more concerned about the "swimmers," places where the canyon steepens and narrows just as the river forms pools deep enough to swallow us. Over the first mile or two, we hit potholes that creep up to our knees, then our waists, then one that requires a brief full-body dunk. But all are a wade in the park compared to the swimmer we reach around 4 p.m. The "hole" is more like a channel, 50 feet long and already under shadow; goosebumps rise on my arms just looking at it.

Chris goes first, holding on to a makeshift sleeping-pad raft with both hands and flutter-kicking his legs to get the first two packs across the pond. Then, in an impressive demonstration of guide-style cojones, he jumps back in and does it again for the last two packs. Blake swims it. Then it's my turn.

*Omigoditsocold.* I splash awkwardly, swimming as fast as I can—not that fast at all, really—feeling my muscles squeezing around my lungs. I stumble onto the far beach, chilled to the core and squishing water from my socks with every step. The relief is instant: I never knew that *not* being somewhere could feel so good.


Not that I have much time to savor it. I'm still sopping wet in a rapidly cooling canyon. I jump up and down a few times until Honora drags herself out, then the four of us scurry to a patch just down the canyon where a sheer, charcoal-scribbled rock wall stands in full sun. Without saying a word, we all shimmy out of our packs, strip off our shirts, and plaster ourselves against it like lizards. The basalt has the friendly warmth of clothes fresh from the dryer. Turns out getting tough sometimes creates its own extra rewards.

**ALL THREE DAYS** of our trip, we don't see anyone. We don't even see any sign people were ever here—hard to believe, given how the oh-wow

Detour .5 mile up the main Owyhee canyon to see these rhyolite hoodoos rise above the river.



PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) MARK LISK; JON MUYSKENS



The West Little Owyhee Canyon (right) meets the main Owyhee about 10 miles above your exit at Three Forks.

moments are piling up. There's the perfect campsite we find on the first night—a wide, sandy riverside beach with a killer view of the stars. Or the stretch of narrows we reach on our second morning, where the canyon's wavy sides lean in to only 40 feet across. We round riverbends to discover grand rock amphitheaters and watch the canyon walls rise to 400 feet in spots.

In between admiring the scenery and helping each other down-climb sketchy boulderfields, our little band of explorers moves past the getting-to-know-you pleasantries into the kind of stuff people normally reserve for the friends they first bonded with in the freshmen dorm. We talk politics and personal values, hard times and hopes, confessions of aimlessness and depression. The loneliness of the canyon forces us to rely on and trust each other, sure, but it also strips away all the social weirdness of meeting new people. It's like we're on our own planet, so we get to make our own rules.

When we finally crest the canyon rim again late on day three, there's still nothing and nobody around. As we unlace our boots, I wonder if the Oregon Desert Trail—or, let's be honest, this story—will let this cat out of the bag.

I don't know. But I bet not. The West Little Owyhee Canyon is still too remote, too intense, too well-guarded by tire-popping access roads to attract the crowds. The swimmers and the bloody forearms will still be dealbreakers for most hikers. I think this canyon will remain lonely for the few souls who will put up with all of that in search of a few days of solitude. You know who you are.

### TRIP PLANNER

**Do it** The complete hike runs 46 miles from Anderson Crossing to Three Forks (the author completed a 17-mile subsection from Flag Crossing to near Five Bar). **Season** April to June (expect high water) and September to October. **Trailheads** Anderson Crossing (42.130591, -117.316300; off Pole Creek Rd., about 75 miles from Burns Junction) and Three Forks (42.544694, -117.165694; drive west from Jordan Valley to mile marker 36 and follow signs 30 miles to trail-head). High-clearance mandatory; roads impassable when muddy, and pack a spare tire and boards in case you get stuck. No commercial shuttle available. **Permit** None (but contact ONDA for info on current road conditions and to report route conditions after your trip) **Key gear** Trekking poles, sturdy water shoes, quick-dry clothes **Info** [onda.org](http://onda.org)

### FLORIDA TRAIL

*BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL  
PRESERVE, FL*

Mosquitoes. Mud. Blink-and-you're-lost terrain. Waist-deep wading through a swamp with alligators and water moccasins. But brave all of this on the 30-mile segment of the Florida Trail from Oasis Visitor Center to I-75, and you'll be richly rewarded with silent cypress stands, orchids and bromeliads, secluded campsites on blessed bits of dry land, and some of the East's darkest night skies. **Info** [nps.gov/bicy](http://nps.gov/bicy); [floridatrail.org](http://floridatrail.org)

### BIG CREEK TO BEAR CREEK TRAVERSE

*SELWAY-BITTERROOT, MT*

The Bitterroots' granite-framed lakes draw plenty of dayhikers—but connect the ponds by piling on the miles and steep elevation gain, and you'll leave everyone else in the dust. For private views over tarns and stony summits, climb 7,195-foot Packbox Pass behind Big Creek Lakes, trace an untracked ridge south on the Montana-Idaho border, skirt Sky Pilot peak, and drop into the Middle Fork Bear Creek Valley beside Bryan Lake, crossing the Bitterroot Divide twice, for a four-day, 27.2-mile horseshoe. **Info** [fs.usda.gov/bitterroot](http://fs.usda.gov/bitterroot)









# #2

## RESERVE THE WHOLE THING

WORK THE QUOTA SYSTEM FOR GUARANTEED SINGLE-PARTY CAMPING.

### CAT, HERMIT, OR DEVILS ISLANDS

APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE, WI

One surefire strategy for solitude: Book the place for yourself. Anywhere rangers regulate where and when you can camp (most national parks, some state parks and national forests) may have a few single-party campsites sprinkled along its trails. Wilderness trip planning brochures sometimes list the site quota at each camp; if not, call the backcountry office and ask for your ticket to a night (or more) all alone.

Nowhere does this trick work better than in the Apostle Islands, where almost half of the chain's sculpted-rock islands have a single campsite. That means strong paddlers with the skills to navigate Lake Superior's challenging waters can access their own island, complete with sandy beaches, guaranteed tent-door water views, and shady hemlock and pine forests where black bears and red foxes roam. Many islands are also accessible by private, if pricey, water taxi. Top trip: From Bayfield, hop in a kayak and make your way 18 miles to Cat Island's lone tent site; this outlier near the archipelago's northeastern tip lacks a dock, so you won't even have to share with the occasional boater (overnight at Oak or Manitou Islands en route). Or steer your vessel 15 miles to Devils Island (more popular due to its lighthouse and dock, but even prettier; layover on York and Bear Islands). The next day, you can paddle to the extensive sandstone sea caves on the island's north side. For a shorter trip, reserve the cross-country camping zone on Hermit Island, an easier 8-mile paddle (and also no dock).

**Season** June to September **Launch** 46.807888, -90.818530 in Bayfield (Cat or Hermit Island); 46.946992, -90.889469 at Little Sand Bay (Devils Island) **Permit** Required; available up to 30 days before your trip (\$10/night; 715-779-3397) **Water taxi** [bit.do/ApostleTaxi](https://bit.do/ApostleTaxi) **Info** [nps.gov/apis](https://nps.gov/apis)

### NEVER-NEVER LAND CAMPSITE

DESOTO STATE PARK, AL

Finally, a backcountry shelter where you don't need to fight for sleeping-pad space. Only one party at a time can book this three-sided hut tucked into northeastern Alabama's rolling hardwood forest. Stroll .8 mile on the Lost Falls Trail to claim it, then dayhike (or mountain bike) the 3.8-mile Never-Never Land Loop across two creeks and through a wildflower-dotted understory. **Info** [alapark.com/](https://alapark.com/) **Desoto-state-park**


### TOM KING CAMP

AUSTIN CREEK STATE RECREATION AREA, CA

Show up early for a crack at one of the three backcountry sites tucked among the grassy meadows and oak forests at the southern end of redwood country: Each lucky party gets a first-come, first-serve site to itself. Tom King Camp, a 3.5-mile hike from the Austin Creek Fire Road trailhead, is the most secluded, but Mannings Flat #1 (4.8 miles) has the best access to the Austin Creek swimming holes. **Info** [bit.do/AustinCreek](https://bit.do/AustinCreek)

Lake Superior licks Devils Island's distinctive, thinly bedded sandstone, which forms caves on the island's north side.





Score this view across  
Cherry Pond on the  
Cohos Trail just south  
of Starr King trailhead.

# #3

## AIM LOWER

BYPASS THE BIGGEST PEAKS FOR OVERLOOKED TRAILS  
TO SECONDARY SUMMITS.

### COHOS TRAIL

*WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST, NH*

It's human nature to seek out the extremes. Use that urge to your advantage: The views and climbs are often just as rewarding on less-tall mountains, with none of the bustle.

Such is the case on the Cohos (Co-AHSS) Trail, a 165-mile path spanning the wild northern third of New Hampshire. "The big peaks of the White Mountains are where most of the hiking pressure gets siphoned off," says trail founder Kim Nilsen. Left for you: The Cohos's 4,000-foot summits, glacial tarns, quiet beaver ponds, and abundant wildlife. Sample it on the 25-mile chunk from the Starr King to South Pond, where you'll top out on 10 summits. Take Starr King Trail to Kilkenny Ridge Trail to the Mt. Cabot shelter at mile 14.5. Next day, scramble up 3,905-foot The Horn, pass Unknown Pond (also good camping), skirt the cliffs of Roger's Ledge, and descend in a mossy forest to South Pond.

**Season** Late June to October **Trailheads** 44.418428, -71.467600 (Starr King); 44.597355, -71.367285 (Kilkenny Ridge) **Permit** None **Shuttle** \$150 for up to 6 passengers; trailangelshikerservices.com **Info** fs.usda.gov/whitemountain

### MT. MEEKER

*ROCKY MOUNTAIN  
NATIONAL PARK, CO*

Hike 13,868-foot Mt. Meeker instead of neighboring Longs Peak, and you'll miss out on Fourteener bragging rights. What you'll also miss: conga lines up the tundra and crowds spilling into your summit selfie. The off-trail ascent up Meeker remains wonderfully lonely and offers plenty of high-altitude adventure in its own right: Choose the 7-mile, class 3 approach from the Sandbeach Lake Trail or the 5.7-mile, class 3 scramble via The Loft. **Info** nps.gov/romo

### BUSH MOUNTAIN

*GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS  
NATIONAL PARK, TX*

Thank goodness for 8,740-foot Guadalupe Peak: Hikers flock to the state high point, leaving nearby 8,615-foot Bush Mountain's see-forever slopes much quieter. Nab a free permit for the Bush Mountain campsite, then take the Tejas and Bush Mountain Trails 5.9 miles to the peak's western escarpment. With its wide-open views over the Salt Flats, Patterson Hills, and Dog Canyon, you won't even miss those 125 feet. **Info** nps.gov/gumo





# #4

## GET WET

EMBRACE SOAKED CLOTHES TO ACCESS PRIME LONELY TERRAIN.

### QUEETS RIVER TRAIL

OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK, WA

Big river crossings work like OFF! for many backpackers: Even the stalwart sometimes balk on trips that require high-water wading. But if you can perfect your crossing skills and get past a few minutes of numb legs, you can often access miles of private paradise where tenderfeet fear to tread (provided water levels are below dangerous).

Like a moat around a castle, the 50-foot-wide, often-roiling Queets River guards one of Olympic's most spectacular old-growth rainforests. And because the nearby Hoh Rainforest offers similarly looming trees without the river crossing, it draws the neck-craners, saving the primordial Queets Valley for those willing to brave the trailhead ford. And what a ford it can be: Most of the time, rain and snowmelt feed an impassable torrent. But by late summer, levels usually dip to knee or waist height. If the flow is 800 cfs or below and there's no rain in the forecast, on the far bank you'll find 16 mellow miles (one-way) of silent strolling under ancient Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, and hemlock of Jurassic proportions. "It's as remote as you can get," says ranger Michael Strunk. "And you see more and bigger trees than in the Hoh." Bonus: bushes bursting with salmon- and huckleberries (ripe June to August) and plentiful Roosevelt elk and black bears. Note: At press time, a 950-acre fire was burning in this area. Call rangers for updates.

**Season** Late July to September **Trailhead** 47.624500, -124.014300, end of Upper Queets Valley Rd. **Permit** Required; closest pickup at Quinault Wilderness Information Center (\$5/person per night) **Key gear** Sturdy sandals or old sneakers, shorts, and trekking poles for the ford; extra food in case rising water strands you **Info** nps.gov/olymp

### EMERY CREEK TRAIL

CHATTAHOOCHEE-OCONEE  
NATIONAL FOREST, GA

Why isn't this deep-woods hike to five lacy waterfalls overrun with hikers? Most people don't get past the tricky, hip-deep ford where Emery and Holly Creeks meet just .3 mile in. But splash across it (and 9 more creek crossings in the trail's 3.2 miles) and you'll have the series of cascades, plus excellent swimming holes and creekside campsites, to yourself. **Info** fs.usda.gov/conf

### MULIWAI TRAIL

WAIMANU VALLEY, HI

Want a piece of this waterfall-streaked, gecko-green valley on a private, black-sand beach on Hawaii's Big Island? You'll have to hoof it 7.6 miles up a punishingly steep bluff (gaining 1,200 feet in less than a mile) and across 12 moderate gulches before the big test: crossing the sometimes chest-high Waimanu Stream (it's even deeper after big rains). A rope lets hikers move hand-over-hand through the deepest sections. **Info** camping.ehawaii.gov

This steep, 1,600-foot descent to Waimanu Valley is just the warm-up for the major stream crossing you'll hit at the valley floor.







The Blue Range Primitive Area's lush creeks and cascades aren't what you—or the crowds—would expect in Arizona.





# #5

## COUNTERPROGRAM

IF THE AREA IS FAMOUS FOR ONE TYPE OF LANDSCAPE OR ACTIVITY, GO FIND YOURSELF A DIFFERENT ONE.

### LANPHIER CANYON-BLUE RIVER LOOP

*BLUE RANGE PRIMITIVE AREA, APACHE & SITGREAVES  
NATIONAL FORESTS, AZ/NM*

Quick word association: “backpacking in Arizona.” Did you say “Grand Canyon” or “desert”? So did everyone else. Zig where others zag: canyons near peaks, hiking trails in paddling meccas, and thick forests in sand-and-saguaro territory are often deserted simply because nobody thought to look for them.

So it is with this lush oasis in the Grand Canyon state. The Blue River anchors a unique riparian zone in the dry country spanning the Arizona-New Mexico border, complete with swimming holes, aspens, and waterfalls and home to black bears, coyotes, mountain lions, wolves, and elk. And because it’s designated as a “primitive area” rather than the better-known wilderness title, the Blue Range is even further under the radar. “When you Google ‘wilderness,’ you don’t get the Primitive Area,” says ranger Myron Burnett. Savor the solitude on the 30.6-mile, four-day loop winding up, down, and through the forests and canyons of the remote eastern side of the reserve.

From the Blue Camp trailhead, head south on Lanphier Trail #52 along a brown trout-rich stream shaded by maple and walnut trees, climbing to views of 8,550-foot Bear Mountain to the west. Turn south to join the Cow Flat Trail #55 and follow it southwest to tiny Campbell Flat Lake and down into Bear Valley to camp near a historic cabin site. Trail #55 fades a bit as it crosses the wide scrubland of Government Mesa (keep an eye out for cairns and tree blazes), then drops into Ladrone Canyon, a leafy gorge where gushing Ladrone Spring feeds a few small cascades. Swing north on the Blue River Trail #101 and prepare to get wet: Stream crossings and swimming holes await for the next 14 miles back to your car (after 6 miles, you’ll just be following the canyon, no trail). As for tent sites: “Any place named on the map is a good place to camp,” says Burnett. Think Cashier Spring (5 miles in), Campbell Flat (7.8), Bear Valley (8.9), Ladrone Canyon, and anywhere in the Blue River Canyon.

**Season** March to May or September to November **Trailhead** 33.595924, -109.129566; Blue Camp trailhead, 26 miles from Alpine on FR 281/Blue River Rd. **Permit** None **Info** [fs.usda.gov/asnf](http://fs.usda.gov/asnf)

### RAYMER HOLLOW

*MAMMOTH CAVE  
NATIONAL PARK, KY*

Put “cave” in your name, and most visitors head straight underground—leaving the trails lacing the bumpy karst landscape above blissfully quiet. Explore the park’s old-growth cedar stands and riverside bluffs on the 16.5-mile, two- or three-day loop connecting the Raymer Hollow, Blair Spring Hollow, Wet Prong of the Buffalo, and Buffalo Creek Trails, camping at Raymer Hollow, Ferguson, or Collie Ridge. **Info** [nps.gov/maca](http://nps.gov/maca)

### SIoux-HUSTLER LOOP

*BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE  
AREA WILDERNESS, MN*

The canoeing here is so good, everyone forgets that the Northwoods hold plenty of charm on dry land, too. Wind through ultraremote terrain dotted with beaver ponds, sunny rock ledges, the 75-foot-tall Devil’s Cascade waterfall in a granite gorge, and shoreline campsites every night on the 30-mile, three- to four-day Sioux-Hustler Loop—no portages required. **Info** [fs.usda.gov/superior](http://fs.usda.gov/superior)



Only 0.2 percent of visitors to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison camp below the rim.





Hit the Smokies' less-used northwest corner for flowing creeks all to yourself.



# #6

**HESSE CREEK**  
*GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS  
NATIONAL PARK, TN/NC*

Rangers issue hundreds of permits a month for popular backcountry sites in the bustling Smokies. But for Hesse Creek (site 003) in the northwest corner, it's three or four. How do we know? We called the backcountry office and asked about use statistics. Follow the numbers to this peaceful spot, tucked under a hemlock canopy and habitat for grouse, black bears, and deer, via the 5.6-mile Ace Gap Trail. **Info** [nps.gov/grsm](https://nps.gov/grsm)

**LONG DRAW**  
*BLACK CANYON OF THE GUN-  
NISON NATIONAL PARK, CO*

In 2014, fewer than 400 backpackers ventured below this deep, narrow canyon's rim. Any of the park's steep routes will deliver you to riverside solitude, but we like how Long Draw's single site guarantees you'll be alone with the plentiful trout and rushing river (after descending 1,800 feet in a mile). **Info** [nps.gov/blca](https://nps.gov/blca)

## DIG UP THE DATA

PARKS KNOW WHERE BACKPACKERS GO—AND WHERE THEY DON'T. CHECK THE STATS, AND YOU WILL TOO.

**BERRY-WEBB CANYON LOOP**  
*GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK, WY*

"Park use statistics": Where others imagine boring spreadsheets, you should see a golden opportunity for peace and quiet. Head to [irma.nps.gov/stats](https://irma.nps.gov/stats) and click on "National Reports," then "Annual Park Ranking Report." From here, you can sort all the parks by number of backcountry campers—and figure out where you'll be fighting for sites and where you can waltz away with a walk-in permit. (For national forests, state parks, and other agencies, you'll have to do a little original research: Call the nearest ranger station and ask which districts, trails, and campsites attract the fewest people.)

That's how we found this gem on the north side of the Tetons: The stats show John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway, on the park's northern border, issues a fraction of the backcountry permits that Grand Teton does. And the parkway's lone trail, the Glade Creek Trail, connects to a network of under-the-radar canyons inside the Tetons' boundaries. "I've worked here for 25 years, and those canyons have never filled," says Backcountry Supervisor Sara Petsch. Head 5.3 miles south on the Glade Creek Trail, then turn west on the Berry Creek Trail and hike through a lodgepole forest dotted with meadows (flush with lupine and columbine in midsummer) where your chances of spotting grizzly bears, wolves, and elk are excellent. Connect to Owl Canyon via the 1.6-mile cutoff trail, then follow it counterclockwise to crest 9,718-foot Moose Basin Divide for big views of Mt. Moran. Exit via the steeper, rockier Webb Canyon and swing north at Jackson Lake for a three- to four-day, 34.2-mile loop.

**Season** Mid-July to September **Trailhead** 44.089844, -110.724330; Glade Creek trailhead off Grassy Lake Rd. **Permit** Required; \$25 for a walk-in permit **Info** [nps.gov/grte](https://nps.gov/grte)





You'll earn your sunsets at 10,469-foot Grouse Lake, which is 5,400 feet above the trailhead.



# #7 LEAVE THE TRAIL BEHIND

THE SHORTEST TRAIL TO BACKCOUNTRY PEACE AND QUIET IS NO TRAIL AT ALL.

## GROUSE LAKE

*KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK, CA*

Can you read a topo map?\* Then you can find your way to deserted lakes, forgotten valleys, and solo summits. And you don't need to tackle an epic bushwhack: "Even on something as busy as the John Muir Trail, if I hike a half-mile off trail I'll see no one for days," says Kings Canyon Backcountry Ranger Dena Paolilli. For some of the easiest cross-country travel and navigation, follow an established trail to near or above treeline, then peel off toward a high-elevation lake for (practically guaranteed) solitude with (definitely guaranteed) excellent camping.

The Sierras' bountiful lakes and miles of alpine terrain are a perfect canvas for off-trail exploration. For a straightforward three-day, 14-mile escape, point your compass to Grouse Lake, a tarn tucked among classic Sierra granite ridges at 10,500 feet. From the Copper Creek trailhead, gain 5,000 feet in 6 miles (option: camp partway at Lower or Upper Tent Meadows) to the last switchback before the pass into Granite Basin. Ditch the trail here and hike north, following the stream draining Grouse Lake, for a mile to lakeside campsites on rocky slabs.

**Season** July to September **Trailhead** 36.796174, -118.583612, at Road's End off CA 180 **Permit** Required; pick up a walk-in permit at Road's End Permit Station (\$15) **Info** [nps.gov/seki](https://nps.gov/seki)

## RIVER TRAIL

*CONGAREE NATIONAL PARK, SC*

Disappearing among the bald cypress and tupelo trees of this jungly park is as easy as following the Congaree River. Take the maintained River Trail 3.9 miles through the floodplain forest to the river (hang a left when you hit the south side of the River Trail loop), then bushwhack east along its banks. You won't have to go far—a hundred feet or so—to find dry riverside sites where your only neighbors will be bobcats, osprey, and eagles. **Info** [nps.gov/cong](https://nps.gov/cong)

## RUTH LAKE AREA

*UINTA-WASATCH-CACHE NATIONAL FOREST, UT*

The 1.5-mile maintained trail to Ruth Lake sees plenty of traffic—the string of high-elevation tarns sprinkled above it, not so much. Ditch the crowds and strike out to the northwest to wander through a boulder-strewn playground at 10,000 feet. Choose a campsite at Hayden, Naomi, Fir, Jewel, Cutthroat, or Teal Lakes, or connect them all for a quick-escape 5-mile cross-country loop. **Info** [fs.usda.gov/uwcnf](https://fs.usda.gov/uwcnf)





