



Hike on the Blue Mountains Trail: Strawberry Wilderness Loop - 2-3 Day Backpack

Departing from **Strawberry Campground**, near **John Day and Prairie City, Oregon**, this hike takes you into the heart of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness. The number of trail users quickly dissipates after the short hike to Strawberry Lake. As the trail gains elevation, you'll experience the changing flora found through the Malheur National Forest, camp at pristine high alpine lakes, and enjoy the solitude of this majestic wilderness, headwaters of the South Fork John Day River.



THE STATS:

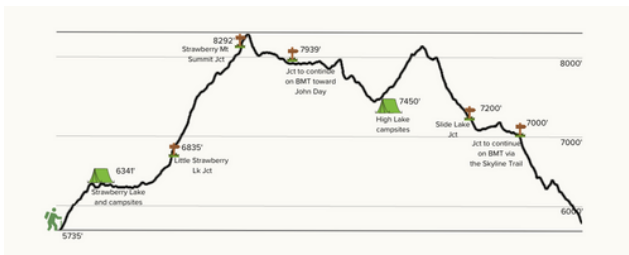
Recreation type: 2-3 day backpack
Route type: Loop via Strawberry Campground
Mileage: 16 miles round trip, with options to extend
Duration: 2-3 days
Elevation gain (gross): 4,159 feet
Active time hiking (estimated): 10 hours round trip
Time of year: Early July to end of September
Physical difficulty: Difficult
Logistical difficulty: Easy access, 4wd recommended
Permits required: Free, self-issued Wilderness permit at the trailhead. Group size limited to 12 people. All other wilderness restrictions apply.

TRIP DESCRIPTION:

The Strawberry Mountain Wilderness spans its namesake mountain range, overlooking the John Day Valley and the small towns of John Day, Canyon City, and Prairie City. Strawberry Mountain, the highest point of the range, reaches just over 9,000 feet. This trip offers a 2-3 day backpacking loop through the heart of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, with an option to extend your hike to the summit of Strawberry Mountain, and visit many of the high alpine lakes with backcountry campsites along the way.

The loop starts and ends at Strawberry Campground, where a short hike leads up to Strawberry Lake. The road to the campground is 10 miles of dusty gravel, washboard and large potholes, so using a vehicle with high clearance is highly recommended. Most campers and hikers do the hike to the lake as a day hike or short overnight backpacking trip. Continuing from the lake, the trail traffic quickly dissipates, and from Strawberry Falls you'll see few people as you continue on the loop. High Lake and Slide Lake have some of the better background campsites in the area. From Slide Lake, you can continue west on the Blue Mountains Trail via the Skyline Trail, which offers more incredible views of the John Day Valley to the north and Bear Valley to the south. With some additional planning, you can set up a shuttle to extend the loop with a hike on the Skyline Trail for an incredible ridge walk to the eastern boundary of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

The Strawberry Mountain Wilderness was designated and protected in by the U.S Congress in 1964. At higher elevations, the area has large stands of threatened whitebark pine, and the area is home to mountain goats, mule deer, black bear, mountain lions and many other species of flora and fauna that rely on the forests, and cold water streams for refuge. Strawberry Campground and Strawberry Lake are experiencing the impacts of overuse, therefore, it is imperative to follow Leave No Track principles, and you can join us in reporting recreation impacts using the Recreation Impacts Monitoring System (RIMS) app (contact us for details and to sign up or download the app and get started).

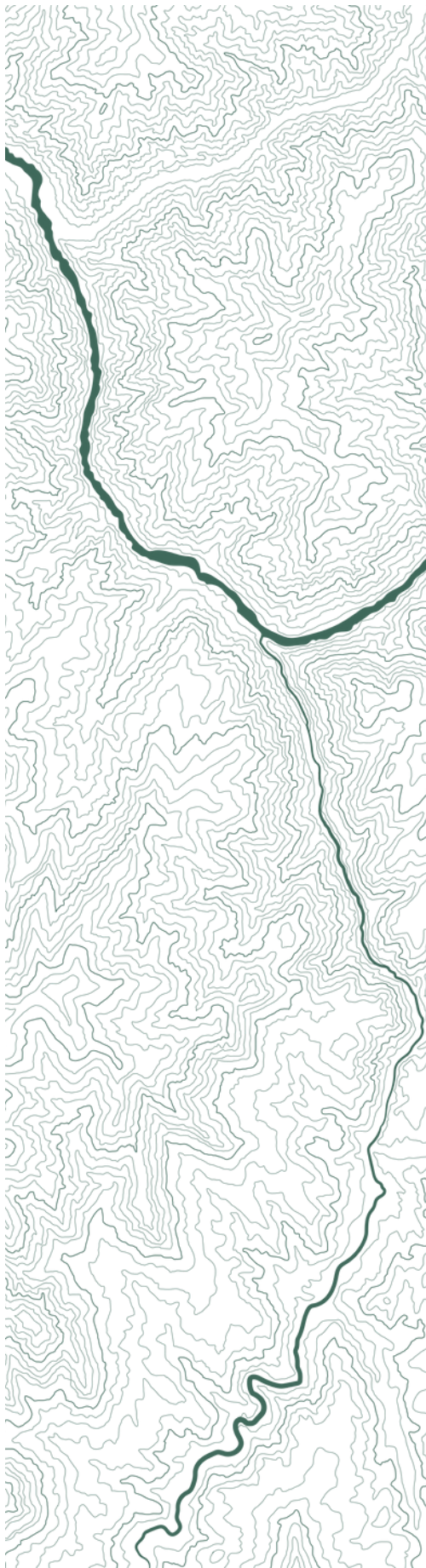


More information about and resources for the Blue Mountains Trail are available online at hells canyon.org/blue-mountains-trail

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The Blue Mountains Trail was developed and is operated by Greater Hells Canyon Council. This trip report was published in 2024.

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BEFORE AND AFTER IN JOSEPH AND ENTERPRISE:

John Day, Oregon is a farming, ranching and logging community at the heart of Grant County in Eastern Oregon, and it is the southern terminus for the Blue Mountains Trail. It is a full-service town with a small grocery, laundromat, restaurants, and lodging. It is compact and all hiker services are easily walkable. It also has attractions celebrating the town's history from the gold mining era.

While in John Day, you can pick up food at one of three grocery stores, eat at one of a few nice restaurant options, including 1188 Brewing, popular with both locals and visitors, and there are three motels and a nearby campground that offer multiple options for an overnight stay. We highly recommend visiting and taking a free tour of the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site operated as an Oregon State Park; it is a pristinely-preserved former medical clinic, general store, community center, and residence that was originally constructed in 1865 when John Day had one of the largest Chinese communities in the United States.

The smaller community of Prairie City lies 13 miles east of John Day along Highway 26, and the road to Strawberry Campground leaves from its downtown. A local U.S. Forest Service office serving the wilderness area is in town. Here you'll find more places to eat, sleep and fill up your gas tank before heading into the mountains.

For a full list of amenities, including grocery stores, where to do your laundry, post offices, public transit options, and more places to eat and stay, check out the Blue Mountains Trail Town Guides for John Day.

TRIP PLANNING INFORMATION AND LINKS:

Trailhead access point: Strawberry Campground

USFS webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/malheur/recarea/?recid=40164>

Google Maps: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/HfXVzkzgef87MA7yh6>

Nearby town guides for John Day:

<https://www.hellscanyon.org/blue-mountains-trail/towns/johnday>

Local US Forest Service Office:

Malheur National Forest Prairie City Office, 541-820-3800

Trail conditions: Strawberry Mountain Wilderness

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/recremain/malheur/recreation>

Weather forecast at trailhead via the National Weather Service:

<https://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?lat=44.306&lon=-118.685>

Credit for photos as follows: Front page: Renee Patrick

