Elkhorn Crest Trail, OR



Vicinity Location: The trailhead is about 220 miles east of Portland, Oregon in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and North Fork John Day Wilderness.

Directions:
From Portland Follow I-84 E to for about 280 miles and take exit 285 from I-84 E in North Powder. Take River Ln, Anthony Lakes Hwy and NFD 73 and turn left into the Elkhorn Crest Trailhead parking lot.

There is a vault toilet at the parking lot.

A Northwest Forest Pass or equivalent is required.

Length and Elevation:
Total distance is 60.6 miles. Trailhead elevation is 1,371. Highest point is 9,106 feet. Lowest point is 7,154 feet. Total ascent is 11,200 feet and total descent is 11,200 feet.

Itinerary	Mileage	Camp Elevation	Ascent	Descent	Notes
Day 1 – Elkhorn Crest Trailhead-Summt Lake-Started 11:00 am – Finished at 5:20 pm	10.6	7,270	2,000	1,937	Parked near Anthony Lake at Elkhorn Crest Trailhead
Day 2– Summit Lake-Twin Lakes-Started 8:30 am – Finished at 4:35 pm	13.9	7,730	2,480	2,030	Few campsites with lake views
Day 3 – Twin Lakes-Summit Lake-Started 9:00 am – Finished at 5:10 pm	14.4	7,234	2,479	3,000	Great swimming and diving at camp
Day 4 -Summit Lake-Dutch Flat Lake-Started 8:30 am – Finished at 2:50 pm	14	7,304	2,290	2,251	Large camp at lake. Many sticks, logs, and mud. Sweet little island to swim to
Day 5 – Dutch Flat Lake-Anthony Lake-Started 8:20 am – Finished at 1:40 pm	7.7	7,185	1,939	2,257	East end of Anthony Lake is shallow and has muddy bottom
Totals:	60.6		11,188	11,188	

Trails:

Elkhorn Crest Trail #1611, Summit Lake Trail #1635, Twin Lakes Trail #1633, User Trail to Rock Creek Butte, North Powder River Trail #1632, Lost Lake Trail #1621, Crawfish Basin Trail #1612, Lakes Lookout Trail #1618, Forest Road 7300-187, Hoffer Lakes Trail #1641, Anthony Lakes Shoreline Trail #1605, and National Forest Road 7300-170 with connections to multiple trails.

Trail Maps:
Topo Map, Download Garmin .gpx file, Open Garmin .gpx file

Review: August 12, 2023
Day 1 – Anthony Lakes – Summit Lake

We found plenty of parking at the Elkhorn Crest Trailhead near Anthony Lake. There is some Verizon cell service along the road a little before the trailhead.

No problem parking in the lot and we found the trail about 75 feet to the left of the pit toilet.

The trail starts climbing right away along granite boulders and a stream runs by the trail for about the first quarter mile. After that the trail climbs at a moderate rate through thinning trees as it switchbacks higher and higher.

After a few miles it passes through a saddle and enters the North Fork John Day Wilderness.

From here the grades are fairly gentle as the trail crests the ridge several times. There are mile after mile of valley vistas of forests, meadows, and lakes.

Through some of the gaps you can see the flat plains of Eastern Oregon. There is some Verizon cell service on the ridge crests.

The scattered copses of trees provide patches of shade along the trail.

We continued to the junction for Summit Lake where some jeep trails made a confusing matrix of choices. We followed our GPS and found the correct trail. About 0.7 mile from the junction of the Summit Lake Trail and the Elkhorn Crest Trail are two all year streams where you could get water. We had enough water to get to Summit Lake.

Just when you think you see the lake you realize it is Little Summit Lake and you still have a ways to go and more elevation to gain.

Eventually you see the lake and drop down on switchbacks to a junction where you can go to the left side or right side of the lake. We went to the left and found three vacant campsites. We chose the middle one because it had access to a little peninsula that has a great rocks to sit on, enjoy the scenery, and filter water. There is a great place to get into the lake for a swim too. I thought the water was fairly warm.

We got our tents set up and had dinner. Though we saw a lot of mosquitoes in the sunlight they weren’t biting us. It wasn’t long after dinner that we went to bed.

Day 2 – Summit Lake – Twin Lakes

The lake water was pretty warm so I went for a swim after breakfast. We finished packing up camp and hit the trail about 9 AM.

Climbing up the trail out of the bowl of the lake seemed pretty easy and we turned left at the Trail

Junction.

The trail climbed and dropped throughout the day, just below the crest of the ridge. The trees are pretty thin, so there is some shade, but a lot of sun on the trail, which corresponds to many distant vistas to the south, the north, and the east depending on which side of the road you are on.

The trail switches sides of the ridge a couple of times throughout the day and passes through granite rocks where the trail has been blasted out of the cliffs. The geology changes and perhaps has marble in the southern section.

The terrain on the second day is much more rugged than the previous day. The mountain peaks are more jagged and the slopes of the ridge of the Elkhorn Crest are steeper.

About 2 1/2 miles down the trail there was one stream flowing that appeared to be strong enough to flow all year though, perhaps it dries up and low snow years.

Most of the trail is very good but there are sections of fist size rocks to cross, and places where the tread is very narrow and has a steep outslope.

There is a section of trail a couple of miles before Twin Lakes, where the trail crosses to the left side of the ridge, and it feels very narrow with a sloping tread. We walked carefully through this section and came through another saddle. They gave us our first views of twin Lakes.

We followed the trail along the ridge crest for another couple of miles before finally getting to the switch bags leading down to Twin Lakes.

The views of Twin Lakes are very nice from the Elkhorn crest trail. Once you start down the switchbacks it seems like they are very gentle, maybe too gentle but eventually after about a mile you reach the lake.

Sean and I scouted possible campsites at the upper lake and didn’t find any really nice campsites. At the head of the upper lake is a gravel wash that slopes down to the lake and then a green grassy area that feels like if you sat there for long you would get wet as water seeped up through the vegetation.

A small stream flows between the two lakes, and there were about a dozen mountain goats grazing in the green meadow.

We went back to just about the first campsite that we had found and set up camp overlooking the lake. We found Pamela and brought her stuff over to the campsite.

While we were setting up camp and couple of mountain goats wandered right by our camp. It was about a 500 foot walk from our campsite down to the lake to get water. Pamela went down there to get water and Sean and I walked up to between the lakes to try to see the goats and get some water also. By the time we got water, the area where the goats had been grazing was in shadow and the goats were moving to other areas. We came back to camp and found out that the goats were moving to our area.

As we fixed dinner the goats milled around our camp. We watched them for an hour or so, taking lots of photos and then went to bed.

In the morning, most of the goats were still around our camp. Once the sun came out and was shining on the meadow between the two lakes, many of them migrated back to that spot for more

grazing.

During the night, the wind really gusted, shaking our tents and whistling through the trees.

Day 3 – Twin Lakes – Summit Lake

None of us slept very well through the night so we were kind of tired in the morning while fixing our breakfast. The goats were still sitting in our camp hoping one of us would go pee.

I had to go down to the lake twice to get enough water for the day because I wanted 3 liters of water to make it to Summit Lake.

The sun shone in the camp fairly early, so by the time we were all ready, we were warm from the sunshine and could start backpacking in shorts and short sleeve shirts.

We climbed up the switchbacks which seemed so gentle the day before but seemed just about right for a switch back now.

It felt like it didn't take too long to do the mile of switchbacks up to the main trail. We climbed up out of the valley and stopped for a break at the last place where you can look back down on the lake. It was really nice to sit in the sun for a while before climbing up to the next section of the Trail.

Today that scary section that seemed so hard was easier. The cliffs weren't quite so frightening, and the slope of the trail didn't seem quite so steep. I guess that is the difference between doing a section of trail late in the day when you're tired and doing the same section early when you are feeling fresh.

We went for a couple of miles then Sean and I went on a side trip to scramble up Rock Creek Butte and Pamela went on ahead to set up camp at Summit Lake.

Rock Creek Butte is the highest point in the Elkhorn range and was actually a fairly easy scramble. We were able to find traces of where other people had gone up the ridge line to the top. At the top there is a summit register and a cairn. There are great views down into Rock Creek Lake and 360 degree vows all around.

After enjoying the magnificent view for a while, we scrambled back down to the trail to retrieve our packs. We still had a long day to go.

We headed back towards Summit Lake over the trail we had done just the day before. It felt like it was more downhill than uphill and there were sections where we cruised at a pretty good rate. I was out of water by the time we reached the little stream so I got one more bottle of water and we continued our way.

It seemed we reached the Junction down to Summit Lake pretty quickly, but it is a long way from the junction to the lake. The trail goes up and down before finally crossing the ridgeline and dropping down to Summit Lake.

Pamela had found a nice campsite on the right side of the lake and so after we went back to the left side of the lake we saw that Pamela was across the lake. We retraced our route back to the trail to the right side of the lake and found Pamela a few minutes later.

This campsite has enough space for three pretty level campsites, and one or two somewhat sloped campsites. They are very large rocks for sitting on that slope in the lake. You can wade into the lake

on a couple of the rocks and then dive into the lake.

We cooked dinner on the rocks by the lake. It is the first time I've really cooked right at the Lakeshore. The winds were pretty calm and the views were splendid.

Day 4 – Summit Lake to Dutch Flat Lake.

It was another good day For a morning swim. I scoped out the rocks along the lake and found a place with a shop drop off. I dove in a couple of times, and then was able to do a cannonball off the rocks into the water. It was a glorious way to start the day.

We headed up to switch bags to the Elkhorn crest trail. After 0.2 miles we reached a junction where we turned right and followed the North Powder River Trail which is really a jeep trail, down through a lovely Forest and Mountain Meadows.

After 1.3 miles, we turned left at the Trail Junction on to the Lost Lake Trail, which is another jeep trail. This trail had some fairly steep ups and downs, and we found a couple of places where there is a little bit of Trail left. It hadn't been driven over and turned into a jeep road.

We were not able to find a trail to Meadow Lake and started climbing steeply with the lake so we took a break and had our morning snack.

The trail went up so deeply and then dropped down deeply, and then climbed even more deeply. It felt like we were climbing up a mountain. It was hard to understand how four-wheel-drive vehicles could get up this road. Eventually the road just stops and the trail resumes. At this point, the trail rises less deeply, and we were only about 0.2 miles from Lost Lake. We dropped down in Lost Lake and stopped at the trail where it reaches the lake. I walked up and down the lake, looking for other campsites, and better places to go, but found none. Once you get past the rocks near the shore, the mud is OK to walk through in bare feet, but be careful in case there are some buried sticks. Once you get out a ways from shore it is great swimming. We had the lake to ourselves. We lingered here for lunch, swimming and soaking our feet.

Leaving the lake, the trail climbs steep Lee, and there were several dead fall trees to cross. None of them were big enough to really present a problem, and after about 0.3 miles Trail begins to level out again and the trees thin out.

We continued up towards the junction with the Elkhorn Trail. The last 0.2 mile is a steep climb up to the junction. From there we turned right and headed to the junction for Dutch Flat Lake. We enjoyed the mountain views, and the scenery seemed different walking back the other way.

We went back through Nip and Tuck Pass, and continued along the mostly level trail, to the Junction to Dutch flat plate. At the junction, we drop steeply down switch bags blasted out of the granite mountain side. It is about a mile down to the lake with switchbacks almost until the lake. You don't really see the lake until you are almost there. Once we got to the lake, we again seemed to have the lake to ourselves. We picked the big campsites just near the head of the lake and set up camp.

it was hard to find a good place to get in for a swim. Sean and I explored around the area to the left and right of camp and the best place to get in is right by our campsite. You have to be very careful getting in and out because of all the old logs and sticks buried in the mud.

We swam out to the little island, and the shoreline is much easier to get in and out of at the island. There are some nice rocks to sit on and enjoy the lake and the sunshine. We returned back to camp once we thought we were starting to get sunburned. It was a glorious day to sit on the lake.

At our campsite there are nice rocks to lean on in camp but beware of sap on the ground. We had dinner and talked for a while in the beautiful evening air. There were hardly any bugs and I think I got one mosquito bite. The blackflies bothered me for a few minutes, but most of the time was very peaceful. I didn't need any mosquito repellent or a bug net. We explored across the marsh and found another very nice campsite kind of hidden behind some granite rocks. The campsite is flat but a little narrow and has granite benches and tables to cook on.

Day 5 – Dutch Flat Lake to Anthony Lakes

I went for a swim just before we left to climb the mile up the switchbacks to Dutch Flat Pass. We enjoyed the views from the trail junction, had some water, and headed down on the other side of the ridge on the Crawfish Basin Trail. This very pleasant trail has great views and long sections of fairly level tread. We made good time and passed a flowing stream about 1 mile from the junction with the Elkhorn Crest Trail though the stream was small and looked likely to be dry some years. There was some Verizon cell service so I texted home that all was well.

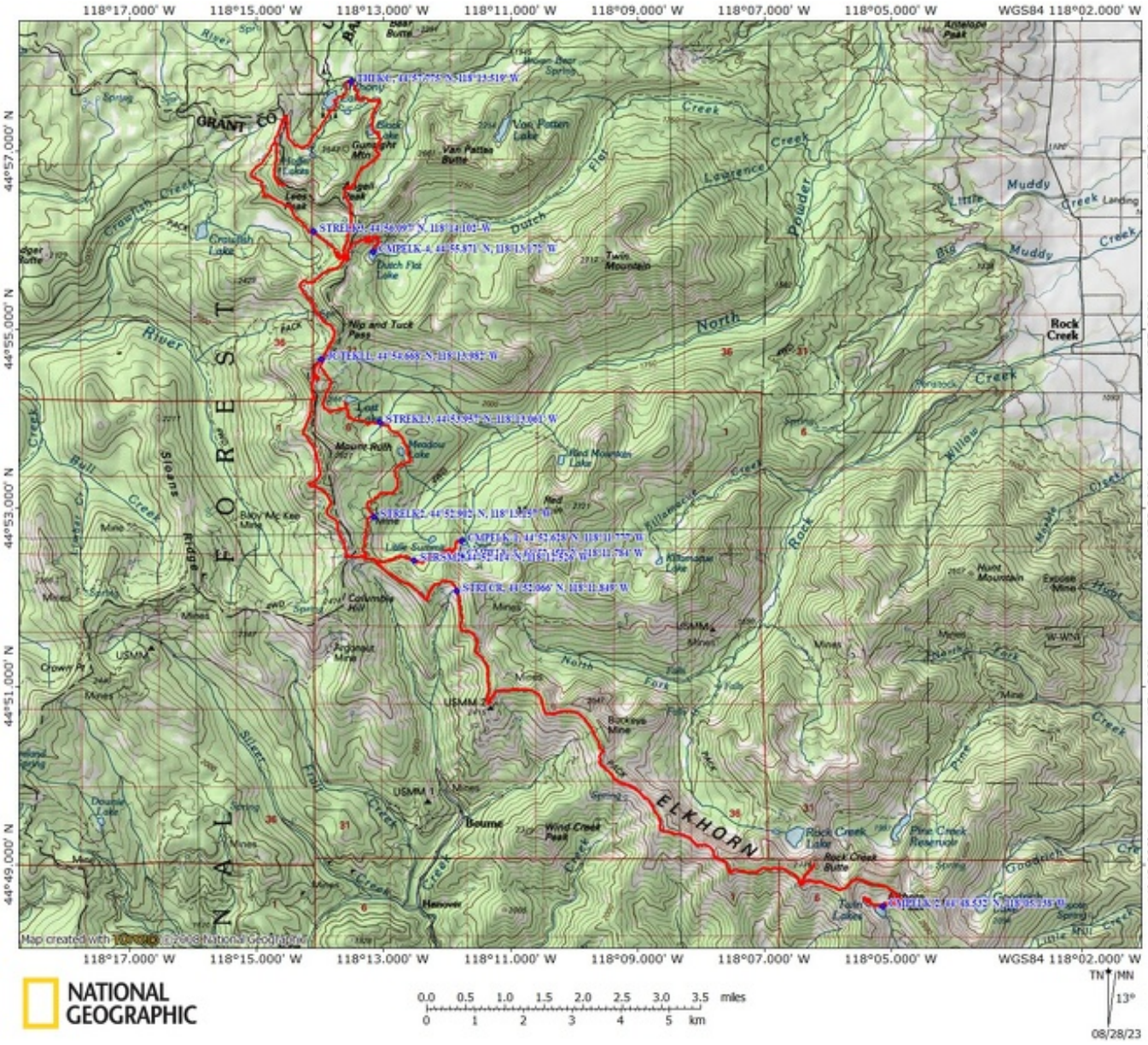
After a couple of miles the trail starts climbing through a forest of whitebark pines and near the junction are a few short sections of pavement left from the past when there was more money for trails. Soon after the trail turns into a dirt road and comes to the junction for the side trail to The Lakes Lookout. We stashed our packs under some trees off the trail and hiked up the steep, rocky trail to a jumble of boulders that is the peak with a metal pole. The views were great and there was room for the three of us to sit at the summit.Dozens of little flying ants were landing on us so we climbed back down to the trail and sent some text messages.

Back to the road we climbed a bit more before dropping down into a basin with several lakes. After about 0.4 mile we found the sign for the Hoffer Lakes Trail and dropped down, crossing a lovely alpine meadow, entering a nice forest, and passing along the shore of Hoffer Lake.

We dropped down a rutted, boulder strewn trail along the outlet stream and in about 0.6 mile saw Anthony Lake through the trees. We turned right and walked through a little campground and got to a pit toilet and the lake about 0.25 miles farther. We found some shade and I went for a swim but the east side of the lake is very shallow and even after swimming out a couple hundred feet, I could still stand up on the muddy lake bottom. If you want better swimming you have to go to the west side of the lake.

I swam back and we headed the short distance back to the car to complete our epic trip.

Enjoy the photos!!
Gallery Pics
Switchback Steve


118°17.000' W
118°15.000' W
118°13.000' W
118°11.000' W
118°09.000' W
118°07.000' W
118°05.000' W
WGS84 118°02.000' W
44°57.000' N
44°55.000' N
44°53.000' N
44°51.000' N
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GRANT CO
NATIONAL FOREST
ELKHORN
Rock Creek
Muddy Creek
Little Muddy Creek
Big Muddy Creek
Dutch Flat Creek
Lawrence Creek
Powder River
North Fork Rock Creek
Crawfish Lake
Dutch Flat Lake
Van Patten Lake
Van Patten Butte
Twin Mountain
Nip and Tuck Pass
Lost Lake
Mount Ruth
Meadow Lake
Red Mountain
Little Summit
Columbia Hill
Argonaut Mine
Buckeye Mine
Boulder
Wind Creek Peak
Rock Creek Lake
Rock Creek Butte
Pine Creek Reservoir
Hunt Mountain
Rock Creek
Stearns Ridge
Bull Creek
Silver Creek
Pine Creek
Goodrich Creek
Little Willow Creek
Hanover
Mines
USMM 1
USMM 2
Map created with TOPO! © 2003 National Geographic
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
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