



Lava Beds Trails



Hiking at Lava Beds

Lava Beds has thirteen hiking trails. The most popular trails are short, but lead to interesting historic sites and geological features. Due to resource concerns, pets and bicycles are not permitted on any park trails, in non-developed areas, or caves. All trails cross or enter the non-developed backcountry, while the long trails are primarily in designated wilderness areas. The trails in this bulletin are arranged by their distance from the visitor center. Carry plenty of water regardless of trail length—no surface water exists at Lava Beds. Watch for rattlesnakes and wear sunscreen and a hat in summer. Be prepared for sudden weather changes any time of year.

The Short Trails

Bunchgrass Trail

Start across from Site B-7 in the campground. Follow along the northeast side of Crescent Butte to the park road. Approximately 1 mile (1.6 km) long.

Missing Link Trail

This trail links the Three Sisters Trail to the Bunchgrass Trail, creating a 10-mile (16 km) loop. Missing Link begins on the Bunchgrass Trail about 0.5 miles (0.8 km) from B-Loop in the campground. Hike on the Missing Link Trail for 0.7 mile (1.1 km) to reach the Skull Cave road. The trail ends across from the trailhead for Symbol Bridge. Hike another 0.1 mile (0.16 km) on the road to Skull Cave to reach the trailhead for Lyons/Three Sisters Trail.

Heppe Cave Trail

Heppe Cave Trail can be found on the road to Mammoth Crater. This 0.4-mile (0.6 km) trail begins under tall Ponderosa pines. As you reach the end of the trail, you will view an enormous collapse. Follow the trail into Heppe Ice Cave that has a large opening at both ends.

Big Nasty Trail

Big Nasty is 2 miles (3.2 km) loop trail. Named after a brush-covered rough lava area just to the north—“it is big and it is nasty!” From the Mammoth Crater/Hidden Valley pullout, the trail starts along the crater rim. The trailhead is to the left off the Mammoth Crater trail.

Schonchin Butte Trail

This trail climbs 0.7 miles (1.4 km) to the fire lookout and a panoramic view. Trail has a 500-foot elevation gain. You can be a guest of the lookout on duty in summer. Please stay on the designated trail and do not shortcut switchbacks.

Symbol Bridge Trail

Winding 0.8 miles (1.3 km) past interesting lava tube collapses and other features, this trail leads to many fine pictographs at the bridge and cave. Take the Skull Cave road to the first parking area and trailhead. Across the road from the Symbol Bridge Trail, you will find the Missing Link Trail.

Thomas-Wright Battlefield Trail

Volcanism and history are featured here. The hike onto Black Crater is less than 0.3 miles (0.5 km) by bearing right. The battlefield is 1.1 miles (1.8 km) one way. View fine wildflower displays in season.

Gillem Bluff Trail

This trail climbs 550 feet in elevation over 0.7 miles (1.1 km) to the top of Gillem Bluff (Sheepy Ridge), for a view of Gillem's Camp and the surrounding landscape.

Captain Jacks Stronghold Trail

Two self-guiding interpretive trails wind through the heart of the Modoc's wartime defenses. The inner loop is 0.5 miles (0.8 km), and the outer loop 1.5 miles (2.4 km). Be prepared for rough terrain.

Petroglyph Point Trail

This very short trail begins on the east side of Petroglyph Point just beyond the bulletin board on the dirt road. The trailhead parking lot is on top of a short rise across from the trail entrance. Hike to the top to enjoy an impressive view of the basin and the Medicine Lake volcano.

Please do not hike to the edge of the cliff to avoid disturbing nesting birds such as prairie falcons, red-tailed hawks, and owls. Please do not attempt to hike to the top from the west side of Petroglyph Point. A social trail there has caused severe erosion and passes too close to nesting sites.

The Long Trails

Three Sisters Trail

Entered at the campground from A-Loop, this 8.7 mile (14.0 km) long trail loops out into the wilderness and returns to the Skull Cave Road.

Lyons Trail

A former monument road, this trail crosses park wilderness from south to north between the Skull Cave parking area and Hospital Rock. It is 9.4 miles (15.2 km) long.

Whitney Butte Trail

From the Merrill Cave parking area to the western boundary of the monument, this trail crosses the wilderness in an east-west direction, curving around Whitney Butte. Enjoy an impressive view of Mount Shasta and the Callahan Lava Flow. This trail is 3.3 miles (5.3 km) one way.

Special Concerns in the Wilderness



On October 13, 1972, 27,970 acres (11,319 hectares) of the Lava Beds backcountry were designated as wilderness. **Pets, bicycles, hunting, and motorized vehicles are not permitted in wilderness areas.**

No person may camp in a nondeveloped or wilderness area with a group size of more than twelve, including horses and pack animals.

Due to the dry nature of Lava Beds, especially in summer, **open fires are not allowed at any time in the backcountry.** Gas stoves are permitted. Other restrictions may apply during extreme fire conditions: please check with a ranger.

Camping in or within 50 yards (46 km) of caves or in the vicinity of chimneys is not permitted. Camping within 0.25 miles (0.4 km) of roads, trailheads, and parking areas is also prohibited.

Check at the visitor center for current weather information. Carry first aid supplies and let someone know where you are going and when you plan to return. Off-trail hiking is not recommended, as lava terrain is very rough.

Please remember to leave no trace. If you pack it in, pack it out. Leave what you find. All historic and prehistoric objects, plants, animals, and rocks are protected. Please store your food securely and do not share your lunch with any wild animals.

Horse Regulations

Horses and pack animals are only permitted on the Three Sisters, Lyons and Whitney Butte trails. **All wilderness rules apply to horse and rider.**

Ride at a slow pace; the terrain is rough.

Horse riders should carry plenty of water. Summer days are hot and there is no surface water for animals to drink from.

Leg protectors are recommended for horses and riders. Be alert for rattlesnakes on the trail.

Horses should be sprayed completely, especially on the legs, with a fly and tick spray.