



West Fork Wimpsey Creek Beaverhead Mountains

Other Nearby Excursions: Sacajawea Interpretive Center
Lewis & Clark Back Country Byway • Bighorn Crags

When We Were There

In mid-July we inch our way up to the Continental Divide. It is hotter than blazes in other parts of Idaho, and I mean that literally. We can see smoke from forest fires to the northwest. Around 9,000 feet, everything changes. Alpine flowers hunker down in the wind. We put on our jackets, gloves and hats. A north-facing shelf near Highup Lakes still holds snow. Meadows and alpine lakes below us are intensely saturated with color. The ridgeline itself is sinuously artistic, running between Goldstone Mountain to the south and Pyramid Peak to the north, and is easy to walk in both directions.

We backtrack on the road to find a campsite out of the wind. The next day we put our backpacking gear together and hike to Highup Lakes. This country is as wild as it gets. The Continental Divide Trail cuts below the ridge, on the Montana side. As expected, we see no other humans at Highup and Skytop lakes. We're joined by mountain goats, eagles, pika and elk.

Skytop Lake is decorated with a small glacier, complete with blue crevasses and a dangerous, unstable section where it meets the water. Highup is actually two small lakes with a thin peninsula separating them. The setting is jewel-like, with prongs of stone holding the lakes.

On the road to the Divide, we saw signs of man in the form of old cabins. A few "modern" cabins sit near the road (still old, but

renovated for use by hunters). As is usually the case, miners are the ones who pioneered the area. Remnants of their mule trails add another historical element for those that know how to spot them. Water pipes that feed cattle ranches below run alongside and above the road in West Fork Wimpsey Creek Canyon. The pipes have been in use so long that they are marred by old welds and leaks.

I always remember our trips up West Fork Wimpsey Creek as being quite long, but it's not far, about 14.5 miles, maybe 20 miles if you explore a couple of side roads. West Fork Wimpsey Creek Road is the roughest route featured in this book. It has all of the elements of a 4WD-EXPERIENCE-REQUIRED road (see "Road Ratings" on p. 195). Add navigational challenges and stops to view the historical sites and "slow" becomes "really slow." Allow about two hours from Lemhi Valley to the Continental Divide.

Approach Routes

- **From Salmon:** Southeast on Highway 28 about 7.8 miles to N. Barracks Lane.
- **From Leadore:** Northwest on Highway 28 to N. Barracks Lane (north of Tendoy).

Highup Lakes at sunrise, just a short hike from the Continental Divide.

Know Before You Go...

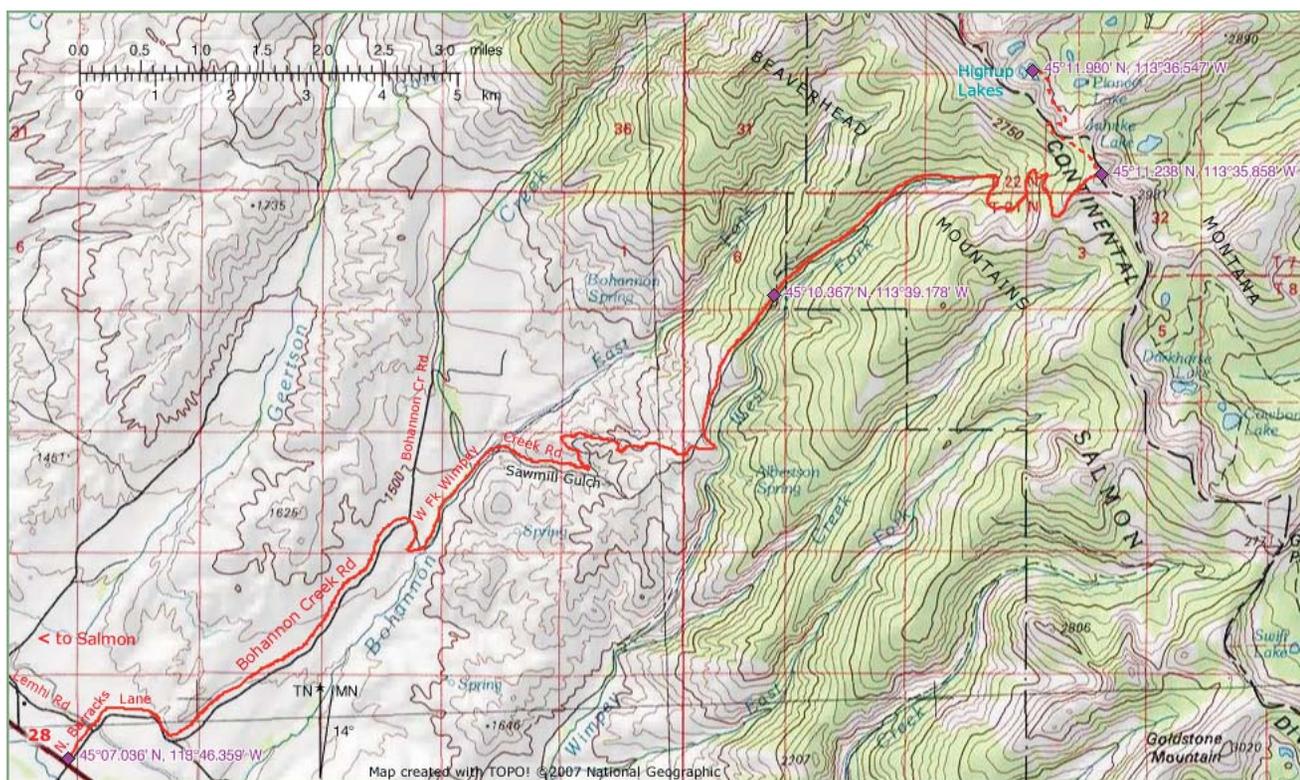
Unless you plan only a day trip here, be prepared for Leave-No-Trace camping. There are no facilities of any kind. Be ready for cold nights. Check wildfire conditions. This is black bear country. Cellphone coverage is available only in the town of Salmon. The best time to visit is July–September. The short hike to Highup and Skytop lakes is best in August, when you can be certain that the snow has melted.

Maps (See map sources in Appendix B)

Salmon-Challis National Forest (Salmon National Forest); **BLM Salmon Recreation Area North**; USGS 1:24,000 topographical maps: **Bohannon Spring ID-MT**, **Goldstone Pass MT-ID**, and **Baker**.

Map Alert! Navigation is difficult, and roads are not signed. We recommend you carry both USGS topographical maps and Forest Service maps. For this expedition the printed map is from the 100K

series, map level 4 of National Geographic software (see the 3-mile scale on the map). Most maps in this book are printed from the 500K series, don't let the scale confuse you.



Land Administration

(See Appendix A)

- **National Forest Service:**
Salmon Ranger District
(Salmon-Challis NF)
- **BLM:** Salmon Field Office
- **Idaho Fish and Game:**
Salmon Region
- **Chamber of Commerce:**
Salmon

Total Miles/Road Ratings

- **Total Miles:** 14.5
- **2WD paved or graded gravel/dirt:** 1.2 miles paved; about 4 miles graded gravel/dirt
- **4WD recommended:** about 2.5 miles (4WD required if the weather is bad). Not suitable for trailers.
- **4WD experience required:** about 10.8 miles. The route requires high clearance of 8 to 10 inches in only a few spots—careful tire placement may get you around these if you have 8 inches of clearance, but you may also need to do a little road maintenance. Bring a shovel and a saw. For this trip you need an experienced driver, one who knows his/her vehicle well. A short wheel base is a plus for tight switchbacks, sharp gullies, and narrow squeezes between shrubs and trees. Where the road crosses a rock slide area there is a shelf section with a steep drop-off on one side. There are other short shelf sections and sections of very steep grades. Depending on the condition of the creek and its tributaries, there may be water spilling over into the road. Creek overflow was barely encroaching on the road when we were there—mostly it was just muddy spots (conditions hard to believe from the approach through dry sage and dust at lower elevations). The road climbs from 4,255 feet to 9,554 feet in 14.5 miles. Most of the route is 4WD—and periodically it is Hair-Raising 4WD.

Expedition Directions

Set your GPS to display Degrees and Decimal Minutes. All along this route there are two-tracks and roads leading to side canyons, springs, mining prospects etc. There are more roads on the ground than appear on most maps. It is not always easy to tell which road is the main road. Keep track of mileage, maps and GPS coordinates.

GPS: 45° 07.036' N • 113° 46.359' W

Mile 0.0 • Elevation: 4,255 ft.

Turn northeast on N. Barracks Lane off Highway 28, about 7.8 miles southeast of Salmon. Barracks Lane is paved and signed. If you miss the small sign, you'll know you have gone too far south when you see the "Halfway between the equator and the North Pole, 45th Parallel" sign. Note on the map there's also a "Wimpey Creek Road", but that is not the access to the section of the Continental Divide explored by this expedition.

At mile 0.4, bear right at a junction with North Lemhi Road. Follow N. Barracks Lane as it curves east to meet South Lemhi Road, and also Bohannon Creek Road.

At mile 1.2 turn left (northeast) on Bohannon Creek Road. The pavement ends here and graded gravel begins.

GPS: 45° 08.754' N • 113° 42.953' W

Mile 4.5 • Elevation: 4,856 ft.

Turn right (south) and go downhill on West Fork Wimpey Creek Road. **Navigation Alert!** Watch carefully for the small sign which is almost hidden by shrubs. There is a large Eagle Valley Ranch sign at a nearby cattle guard, where Bohannon Creek Road continues north. When you can see this sign, you are near the West Fork Wimpey Creek Road turn.

Descend to Bohannon Creek and cross the creek on a bridge. Follow West Fork Wimpey Creek Road (no longer signed) as it turns left (north) after crossing the bridge.

At about mile 6, enter Sawmill Gulch (identified on maps). 4WD is recommended. The dirt road now runs in the narrow gulch for about 0.5 mile, then turns sharply left (northwest) and climbs (the left turn is not signed). At the sharp left turn, a road also leads right (straight) to Sawmill Gulch Spring—don't go that way. West Fork Wimpey Creek Road jogs northwest briefly before turning east to switchback up the dry foothills. When you reach the treeline at about mile 7 you are on a ridge above the creek.



GPS: 45° 09.282' N • 113° 39.794' W

Mile 8.5 • Elevation: 6,380 ft.

Bear left, uphill at a “Y” intersection (the right fork leads to Albertson Spring, which is listed on the Bohannon Spring USGS map). **Navigation Alert!** Neither fork is signed. It is easy to miss this “Y” altogether, or to mistake it for the next “Y” intersection, where you bear right.

As noted above, bear right at the **second** “Y” junction, just 0.5 mile further, at mile 9. The turn is not signed. The coordinates are 45° 09.728' N, 113° 39.765' W. Your route stays close to the ridgeline.

GPS: 45° 10.367' N • 113° 39.178' W

Mile 10.0 • Elevation 7,040 ft.

Navigation Alert! Bear right at yet another “Y” intersection that comes up 0.5 mile from the last one listed above. Drive slightly downhill to enter West Fork Wimpey Creek Canyon. This turn is not signed, and the roads look similar in terms of use.

Once you are driving along the creek, the road narrows and shrubs brush the sides of vehicles. There are several small creek fords. Near most of the interesting pioneer-era cabins there are turnouts or short spur roads.

In the upper reaches of the creek drainage, the road climbs into alpine terrain. Limber pines cling to the slopes. The battered trunks and roots of downed trees weather to beautiful reds and golds. On the last long switchback before the crest, there are some flat spots in open, park-like stands of limber pine. The best informal campsites are also here.

The scenic, sinuous ridge of the Continental Divide along the border between Idaho and Montana.

GPS: 45° 11.238' N • 113° 35.858' W

Mile 14.5 • Elevation: 9,554 ft.

The end of this expedition is on the crest of the Beaverhead Mountains of the Bitterroot Range, on the Continental Divide along the Idaho/Montana border. A short road on the right (south) leads to a mining pit that is visible on the ridge. Walk north on the ridge of the Divide to find the unofficial trail to Highup Lakes.

Retrace your route to Highway 28. Some other nearby trips are described in Expeditions 22, 23, and 24.

Hiking to Highup Lakes: The trail route drawn on the map is approximate. There is no official trail, but a user-created trail is obvious where it leaves the Divide to drop into Montana. The hiking route is about 1.3 miles, a short but strenuous hike. The initial descent is quite steep and I suspect mountain goats also use it. Trekking poles are recommended. After about 0.25 mile of the really steep stuff, the going gets easier as you traverse along a shelf under the Divide, following approximately the 9000 to 9200 contour lines on the map. The larger of the two Highup Lakes sits at an elevation of 9,166 feet (45° 11.980' N, 113° 36.547' W).

Other Nearby Excursions...

Sacajawea Interpretive Center

The Sacajawea Interpretive, Cultural, and Educational Center is located in Salmon. The park is open year-round, and there is a picnic site near the river. The Interpretive Center is open from Memorial Day to September 23 on weekdays. The turn to the center is signed in Salmon.

Lewis and Clark Back Country Byway

Signs near Tendoy, about 20 miles southeast of Salmon, show the turn east to the Lewis and Clark Back Country Byway. This scenic byway is 39 miles long, 2WD in good weather, and is groomed for snowmobile use in winter. There were nine signs at Lemhi Pass on the Continental Divide when we were there. The pass is marked as the Montana/Idaho border, and quotes from Lewis & Clark's journals are posted. Other signs mention Shoshone Indian trails, regulations related to motorized vehicles and stock use, and the forest boundary. Sacajawea Memorial Camp is nearby. From Lemhi Pass the Byway turns north and follows the Divide before descending to Highway 28 along Warm Spring Wood Road.

Bighorn Craggs

One area in the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness outshines all the rest—Bighorn Craggs. This area is accessed via a trailhead that is easily reached by roads from the east side.

Drive north from Salmon on Highway 93 to the town of North Fork. Then go west on Highway 030 about 26 miles to Panther Creek Road 055; then south on Panther Creek Road to Yellowjacket Road 122 (about 30 miles). Then continue west on Yellowjacket Road to Yellowjacket Lake Road 113 (about 6 miles); then north on Yellowjacket Lake Road to Bighorn Craggs Road 114 (about 8 miles). Bear right (northwest) on Bighorn Craggs Road 1.8 miles to Craggs Campground and trailhead. 4WD is recommended from Yellowjacket Road to the end of the trip. Expect steep switchbacks and sections of narrow dirt road, but no big washouts or difficult stream crossings.

Bighorn Craggs top out at over 10,000 feet. Spires and ridges preside over an area rich with alpine lakes. Bighorn Outfitters offer horseback expeditions, or they'll pack your gear in so that you can hike pack-free. Even day hikes give you a taste of this spectacular landscape. The area appears on the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness, North Half map; and also on the Salmon National Forest Travel map.