

# Backpacking IDAHO

*From Alpine Peaks to Desert Canyons*

**Douglas Lorain**

**WILDERNESS PRESS**



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# Backpacking Idaho

## From the book...

### **St. Joe River-Bacon Peak Loop** (Trip 3)

A bonus of taking this trip in late August or early September is the chance to feast on the acres of huckleberries that carpet the ridges around Bacon Peak.

### **White Cap Creek** (Trip 6)

Very rugged cross-country side trips provide access to several more lakes, meadows, and forests, so you can enjoy the solitude here for as long as your food and vacation time hold out.

### **Snake River Trail** (Trip 7)

Your efforts are rewarded by the superb scenery, which features a continuous series of amazing views of the raging river, the ruggedly contorted canyon walls, and even occasional glimpses of the high Summit Ridge in Oregon.

### **Chamberlain Basin Loop** (Trip 10)

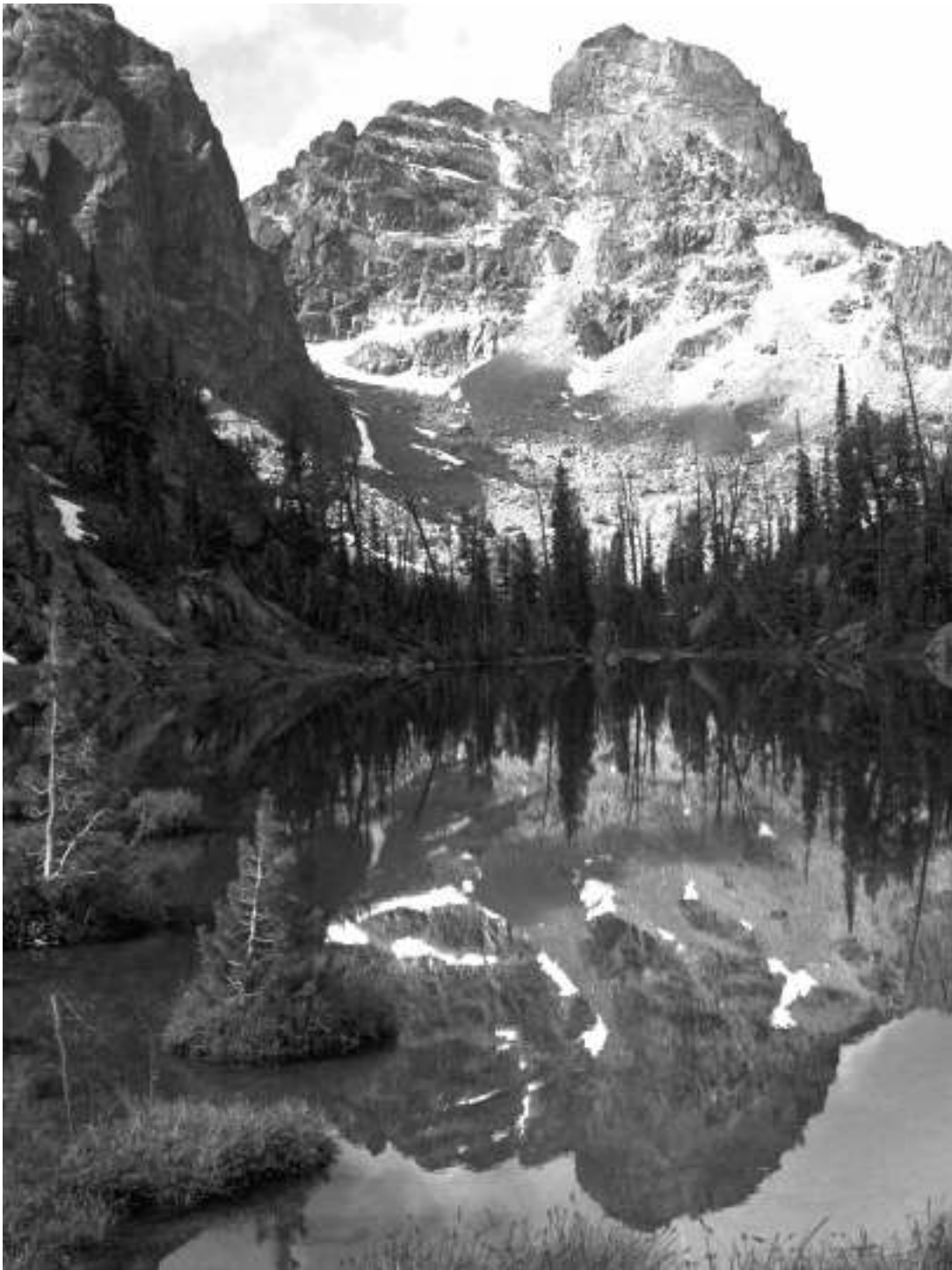
One night I lay in my sleeping bag for almost an hour listening to wolves howl—a classic wilderness experience that I will not soon forget.

### **Middle Fork Salmon River** (Trip 13)

Like all of the hot springs in this canyon, this is a great place to spend some time soaking sore muscles and enjoying the scenery.

### **Loon Creek Loop** (Trip 14)

The jagged peaks here rise above 10,000 feet and are made up of a stunningly beautiful collage of gray, white, and reddish rocks. When you add this colorful geology to the area's cirque lakes, clear streams, and flower-covered meadows, you have a great place to go for a backpacking vacation.



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Alpine Peaks  
to Desert Canyons

Douglas Lorain



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*Cover photos:* Castle and Merriam peaks, White Cloud Peaks (*front*);  
Buffalo Hump over Hump Lake, Gospel Hump Wilderness (*back*)  
*Frontispiece:* He Devil over tarn near Sheep lake, Seven Devils Mountains

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While the contributions and assistance of the persons listed above were invaluable, all of the text, maps, and photos herein are my own work and sole responsibility. Any and all omissions, errors, and just plain stupid mistakes are strictly mine.

# Featured Trips Overview Map



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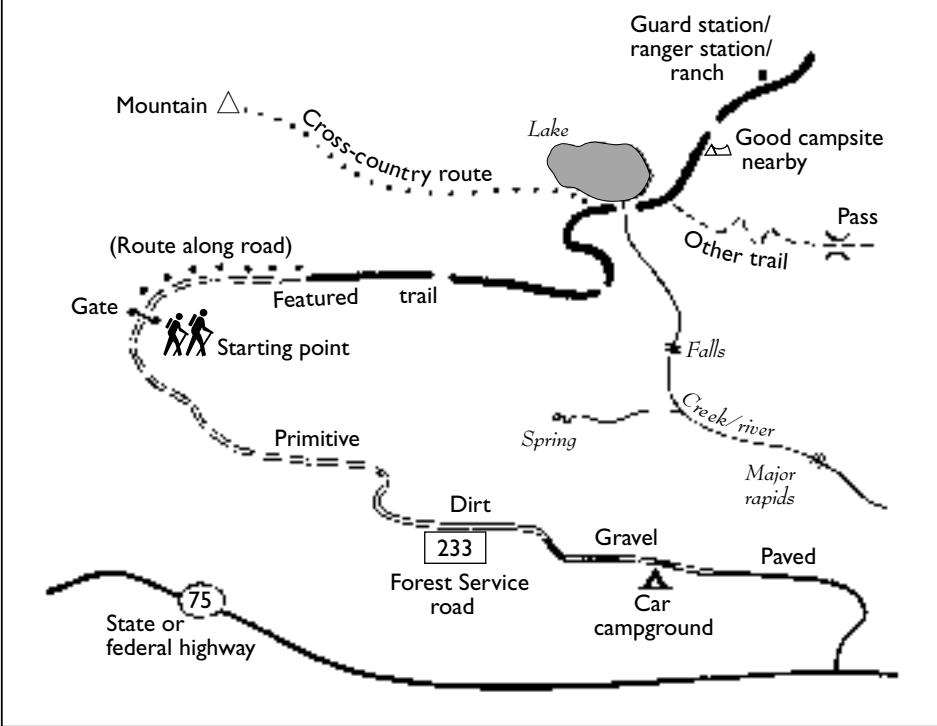
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**Map Legend**



# Featured Trips Summary Chart

TRIP	RATINGS (1-10)			DAYS	MILES	ELEVATION GAIN
	SCENERY	SOLITUDE	DIFFICULTY			
<b>Best In -</b>						
<b>April and May:</b>						
7 Snake River Trail	10	6	6	4-7	54	5300
<b>June:</b>						
5 Selway River Trail	7	5	5	4-6	50	4200
21 Central Lemhi Range Loop	8	9	8	4-6	45	10,300
20 Lost River Range Traverse	10	9	8	3-5	24	7300
8 Seven Devils Loop	8	6	5	2-4	28	4400
<b>July:</b>						
24 Bear River Range Highline Trail	8	7	5	3-4	25	2800
4 Warm Springs Creek Loop	6	7	7	3-4	32	5000
10 Chamberlain Basin Loop	5	7	7	4-7	50	10,300
12 Soldier Lakes Loop	7	6	7	3-5	40	7300
11 Bighorn Crags	9	4	6	3-6	46	9000
1 Long Canyon Loop	7	6	6	3-4	34	7500
16 Queens River Loop	9	7	5	3-4	31	5800
19 Pioneer Mountains Traverse	9	8	6	3-4	26	8200
15 Grand Sawtooths Loop	9	3	6	5-9	63	12,200
14 Loon Creek Loop	8	8	7	3-4	27	6100
<b>August:</b>						
17 Pettit Lake-Hell Roaring Loop	9	3	5	3-4	30	6000
6 White Cap Creek	6	8	5	5-7	52	5500
18 White Cloud Peaks Loop	10	5	8	3-5	28	5900
3 St. Joe River - Bacon Peak Loop	6	7	6	3-4	31	5000
22 Bechler River Trails	7	3	3	3-5	41	1700
<b>September and October:</b>						
2 Snow Peak - Mallard Larkins Loop	7	5	9	3-5	34	10,100
9 Gospel Hump Loop	7	8	10	5-8	68	12,600
13 Middle Fork Salmon River	7	6	6	6-8	67	4200
23 Snake River Range Traverse	8	6	8	3-6	45	9800



*Snow Peak over Snow Peak Pond, Trip 2*

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# Introduction

Idaho is a virtually undiscovered backpacker's paradise. Although the state has millions of acres of wilderness, it has no national parks and few well-known destinations to draw the crowds. As a result, Idaho remains a great place to "get away from it all."

What all those crowds heading for more famous hiking areas don't realize is that Idaho hides some of North America's most beautiful scenery. The mountains of Idaho are at least as scenic as anything found elsewhere in the American West and, in fact, they are far better than most. The canyon country is great too and is, if possible, even more spectacular than the mountains. These great gashes in the earth are incomparable in their depth, their scenic grandeur, and the abundance of their wildlife.

Idaho's nearly ideal climate helps to make exploring the state's natural wonders a joy. The weather here is consistently better than in bordering geographic regions, with fewer thunderstorms than in the Rocky Mountain states to the south and east, and much less rain than in soggy Oregon and Washington to the west. So Idaho boasts the ideal combination of solitude, outstanding scenery, and good weather — in other words, Shangri-La for backpackers.

There are many ways to see and appreciate the beauty of Idaho. Many parts of the state can be seen just as easily on dayhikes, rafting trips, bicycle tours, or even from your car. The focus of *this* book, however, is on the best ways for *backpackers* to see the state. Most of Idaho's best scenery is far from roads and can be truly appreciated only by those willing to hit the trails. After many years and thousands of trail miles, I have selected what I believe to be Idaho's very best backpacking trips. The focus is on *longer* trips — from 3 days to 2 weeks. These are beyond a simple weekend outing, but they make *terrific* vacations, and give you enough time to fully appreciate the scenery. Best of all, you'll have the chance to really get to know and love the state.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each featured trip begins with an information box that provides a quick overview of the hike's vital statistics and important features.

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This lets you rapidly narrow down your options based on your preferences, your abilities, how many days you have available, and the time of year.

### **Scenery**

This is a subjective opinion of the trip's overall scenic quality, on a 1 (an eyesore) to 10 (absolutely gorgeous) scale. This rating reflects my personal biases in favor of flowers, photogenic views, and clear

streams. If your tastes run more toward lush forests or rolling grasslands, then your own rating may be quite different. Also keep in mind that the rating is a *relative* one. **All** the featured trips are beautiful, and if they were located almost anywhere else in North America would justifiably draw crowds of admirers.



*Along Long Canyon Trail, Selkirk Mountains, Trip 1*

### **Solitude**

Since solitude is one of the things that backpackers are seeking, it helps to know roughly how much company you can expect. This rating is also on a 1 (bring stilts to see over the crowds) to 10 (just you and the mountain goats) scale. It is worth noting, however, that by comparison to almost any other state, the Idaho backcountry is remarkably free of crowds. With few exceptions, it is rare to see more than one or two other

parties during a full day of hiking. In the years of research for this book, I spent hundreds of memorable nights camped near scenic lakes, fish-filled streams, or other idyllic locations throughout

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Idaho, and more than 75% of the time I had these choice spots all to myself. Hikers who are accustomed to the relatively crowded trails of other states should, therefore, take this rating with a grain of salt.

### **Difficulty**

This is yet another subjective judgment. The rating is intended to warn you away from the most difficult outings if you're not in shape to try them. The scale is *relative only to other backpacking trips*. Most Americans would find even the easiest backpacking trip to be a very strenuous undertaking. So this scale of 1 (barely leave the La-Z-Boy) to 10 (the Ironman Triathlon) is only for people already accustomed to backpacking.

### **Mileage**

This is the total mileage of the recommended trip in its *most basic form* (with no side trips). I have never, however, seen the point of a "bare bones," Point-A-to-Point-B kind of trip. After all, if you're going to go, you may as well explore a bit. Thus, for many trips, there is a *second* mileage number (in parentheses below) that includes distances for recommended side trips. These side trips are also shown on the maps and included in the "Possible Itinerary" section.

I have made every reasonable effort (and some *unreasonable* ones) to ensure that the mileages shown are accurate. Users should *not*, however, assume that the numbers are exact. Idaho hiking guidebooks are notoriously lax about including mileages.



*Mushrooms along lower Selway River Trail, Trip 5*



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Wilderness maps for the state rarely, if ever, include mileages. Even the distances indicated on trail signs (when they are given at all) are often contradictory and usually unreliable.

Mileages for this book are shown to the nearest 1 mile (0.5 mile for short distances) and are based on a combination of map extrapolation and my own pedometer readings. These numbers can be considered accurate to within a margin of error of perhaps +/- 10%. To attempt to give mileages with any more precision would give the reader a false sense of accuracy. Hikers accustomed to tracking their progress with a higher degree of precision will need to adjust their mindset. Such exactness is not possible when traveling in the vast backcountry of Idaho.

### ***Elevation Gain***

For many hikers, how far *up* they go is even more important than the distance. This box shows all of the trip's ups and downs in a *total* elevation gain, not merely the *net* gain. As with the mileage section, a second number (in parentheses below) includes the elevation gain in recommended side trips.

### ***Days***

This is a *rough* figure for how long it will take the average backpacker to do the trip. In general, it is based on my preference for traveling about 10 miles per day. Also considered were the spacing of available campsites and the trip's difficulty. Hard-core hikers may cover as many as 25 miles a day, while others saunter along at 4 or 5 miles per day, a good pace for hikers with children. Most trips can be done in more or fewer days, depending on your preferences and abilities.

### ***Shuttle Mileage***

This is the shortest driving distance between the beginning and the ending trailheads. Since most trips in this book are loop trips, a shuttle mileage is usually not applicable.

### ***Map(s)***

Every trip includes a sketch map that is as up-to-date and accurate as possible. These sketch maps use bold lines to indicate the



*Along Highline Trail, Bear River Range, Trip 24*

main route and all recommended side trips, so you can get an instant overview of the hike. As every hiker knows, however, you'll also need a good contour map of the area. This entry identifies the best available map(s) for the described trip. If you need USGS maps, they are now available free over the Internet from [www.topozone.com](http://www.topozone.com) or [www.maptech.com](http://www.maptech.com). Simply center your search on a particular location, then print out a map on a scale from 1:24,000 to 1:200,000.

### **Season**

There are *two* seasonal entries shown for each trip. The first tells you when a trip is usually snow-free enough for hiking (which can vary considerably from year to year). The second lists the *particular* time(s) of year when the trip is at its very best — when the flowers peak, or the fall colors are at their best, or the mosquitoes have died down, etc.

### **Permits and Rules**

Compared to more crowded states in the American West, Idaho has very few restrictions on backcountry visitors. Except for



*Plummer Peak over Three Island Lake,  
Sawtooth Mountains, Trip 15*

Yellowstone National Park, most of which is in Wyoming, there are no trail quotas anywhere in the state, and hikers don't need to worry about making reservations. Very few areas even require that you fill out a free permit. Some places do have regulations that restrict the use of fires or the number of people in each party. These and other rules are noted in this section.

### **Contact**

This is the telephone number for the local land agency responsible for the area. You can contact it to check on road and trail conditions before your trip.

Unfortunately, you should not expect to get much useful or reliable information from these

local land managers. In researching this book, I asked dozens of Forest Service personnel hundreds of questions about trail lengths, when trail maintenance was last done (which can range from last week to not since the trail was built over 50 years ago), if a trail was snow-free enough for travel, and if a trail shown on the map even exists (they often don't). The answer was almost always "I don't know, we don't keep track of that information." Only *once* did I receive accurate and reliable information.

### **Special Attractions**

This section focuses on attributes of a particular trip that are rare or outstanding. For example, almost every trip has views, but some have views that are *especially* noteworthy. The same is true of

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areas where you have a better than average chance of seeing wildlife, excellent fall colors, and so on.

### ***Problems***

This is the flip side to the “Special Attractions” section. It lists the trip’s special or especially troublesome problems. Expect to read warnings about areas with particularly abundant mosquitoes, poor road access, grizzly bears, or limited water.

### ***Tips and Warnings***

Throughout the text are numerous helpful hints and ideas that come from my personal experience. Hopefully, these prominently labeled *Tips* and *Warnings* will make your trips safer and more enjoyable.

### ***Possible Itinerary***

This is given at the *end* of each trip. To be used as a planning tool, it includes daily mileages and total elevation gains, as well as recommended side trips. Although I have hiked every mile of every trip, many were not done exactly as written here. If I were to re-hike a trip, I would follow the improved itinerary shown here.

### ***Variations***

Not included with every trip, this self-explanatory section suggests the best ways to lengthen, shorten, or otherwise alter the recommended trip.



8 *Lower Twin Lake, Sawtooth Mountains, Trip 17*

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# Backpacking in Idaho

Authors of hiking guidebooks face a paradox. Without dedicated supporters the wilderness would never be protected in the first place. The best and most enthusiastic advocates are those who have actually visited the land, often with the help of a guidebook. On the other hand, too many boots can also be destructive. It is the responsibility of every visitor to tread lightly on the land and to speak out strongly for its preservation.

Although Idaho has over 4 million acres of officially designated wilderness, the job of protecting Idaho's precious wildlands is far from complete. You are strongly encouraged to join in the efforts to set aside more of the state's millions of acres of unprotected roadless terrain. But even land that is officially protected as wilderness needs continued citizen involvement. Issues like use restrictions, grazing rights, mining claims, horse damage, and entry fees all continue to present challenges. Remember: *you own this land*. Treat it with respect and get involved in its management.

To their credit, almost every agency official who reviewed this material stressed the need for hikers to leave no trace of their visit. But the time has come for us to go beyond the well-known "no trace" principles and leave behind a landscape that not only shows no trace of our presence, but is actually in *better* shape than before we visited it.

## GENERAL BACKPACKING GUIDELINES

This book is not a "how to" guide for backpackers. Anyone contemplating an extended backpacking vacation will (or at least *should*) already know about equipment, the "no-trace" ethic, conditioning, how to select a campsite, food, first aid, and all the other aspects of this sport. There are many excellent books covering these subjects. It is appropriate, however, to review a few general backpacking guidelines and discuss some tips and ideas that are specific to Idaho:

**Obviously, be scrupulous to leave no litter of your own.** Even better, remove any litter left by others (blessedly little these days).

Do some minor trail maintenance as you hike. Kick rocks off the trail, remove limbs and debris, and drain water from the path to reduce mud and erosion. Report major trail-maintenance problems,



*Peak 9918 over Lake Ingeborg, Sawtooth Mountains, Trip 15*

such as large blowdowns or washouts, to the land managers so they can concentrate their limited dollars where those are most needed.

If you are a plant expert, **remove any introduced noxious weeds that you see.** Musk thistle, spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, and purple loosestrife are just some of the invasive species that land managers need help in eliminating.

Always camp in a place that either is compacted from years of previous use or can easily accommodate a tent without being damaged — sand, rocks, or a densely wooded area is best.

**Never camp on fragile meadow vegetation or immediately beside a lake or stream.** If you see a campsite “growing” in an inappropriate place, be proactive: place a few limbs or rocks over the area to discourage further use, scatter “horse apples,” and remove fire-scarred rocks. Report those who ignore the rules to rangers (or offer to help the offenders move to a better location).

**Never feed wildlife,** and encourage others to refrain.

**Do not build campfires.** I have backpacked several thousand miles in the last 15 years and built just one fire (and that was only in an emergency). While there are still places in the forests of Idaho

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where you may be able to build a small campfire with a clear conscience, you simply don't need a fire to have a good time, and it damages the land. When you discover a fire ring in an otherwise pristine area, scatter the rocks and cover the fire pit to discourage its further use.

**Leave all of the following at home:** soap — even biodegradable soap pollutes; pets — even well-mannered pets are instinctively seen as predators by wildlife; anything loud; any outdated attitudes you may have about going out to “conquer” the wilderness.

## IDAHO-SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

A parking pass is now required at all trailheads in the popular Sawtooth National Recreation Area and at some trailheads in the Ketchum Ranger District of the Sawtooth National Forest. In general, cars parked within 0.25 mile of any trailhead must display a pass. As of this writing, a three-day permit cost \$5, and an annual pass was \$15.

The winter's snowpack has a significant effect not only on when a trail opens, but also on peak wildflower times, stream flows, and how long seasonal water sources will be available. The best plan is to check the snowpack on about April 1, and make a note of how it compares to normal. This information is available through the local media, by contacting the Snow Survey Office in Boise at (208) 378-5740, or by checking the snow survey website at [www.idsnow.id.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.idsnow.id.nrcs.usda.gov). If the snowpack is significantly above or below average, then adjust a trip's seasonal recommendation accordingly.

Except on popular trails in places like the Sawtooth Mountains, trail maintenance in Idaho is not as regular as in most other western states. Most trails are cleared only once every few years, and many trails get no maintenance at all. You should expect to encounter downed logs or other obstacles as you hike. You should also expect that many minor trail junctions will not be signed, so watch the map and the surrounding terrain closely to locate obscure junctions.

A bit of advice for urbanites visiting the Idaho backcountry: in rural Idaho (and, for that matter, in much of the rural American West) the *correct* pronunciation of the word “creek” is *crik*, with a short “i” sound rather than a long “e” sound. Keep this in mind so you don't end up sounding like “ignorant city folk.” Also, when you are passing an oncoming car on rarely used rural roads it is



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