

Miner Lake-Prairie Lakes Loop

Overview

This Sun Valley classic is a beautiful, challenging hike through varied terrain leading to three of our striking alpine lakes. The best of this bunch is the largest of the Prairie Lakes, which is an excellent spot to camp or even just grab a quick bite.

After a few early water crossings that can be tough during periods of high water, the trail's first couple miles roll gently through woods and meadows. Just after the 2.5-mile mark, the ascent steepens dramatically for nearly a mile – a real heart pumper. The last push to Miner Lake starts through a picturesque mountaintop meadow framed by the Smoky Mountains and ends in a shaded forest grove. Miner Lake is less popular than the Prairie Lakes, so it is a good spot to relax and enjoy some peace.

The rest of the hike is largely downhill. The Prairie Lakes lay two miles southwest of Miner Lake and the pleasant hike glides through alternating patches of light forest and sagebrush meadows. Wildflowers are prolific in mid-summer. There are four Prairies Lakes, but only two are easily accessible. The smaller of the two makes for a quick stop, but the largest of the Prairie Lakes is one of our valley's true gems.

The rest of the hike is a steady descent through woods and meadows, with a few easy water crossings before you come back to the junction that took you to Miner Lake.

We choose the clockwise route for this loop because the counterclockwise descent is much more difficult. For our money, take the calorie-burn and save the knees.

The Numbers

10.65-mile loop

1925 feet total elevation gain

Ascent Grade: 8.8% (Moderate)

Hardest Mile: 11.8%

Water

There is plenty of water throughout the hike except during the toughest section of the climb. Given the hike's difficulty and length, you may wish to bring a filter to refill along the route.

Drive

From downtown Ketchum, it is a 21.2-mile drive with the last 2.5 miles on a well-maintained dirt road. [Click here](#) for directions. There is parking for about 12 cars, though the lot will fill up on summer weekends.

There are bathrooms at the trailhead.



Parking and Trailhead

Season

Late June to early October

Route

There are two trails at the trailhead. Ideally, the route to Miner Lake begins on the trail to the left, though during wet seasons that trail can be covered in water a few steps in. In that case, start from the right trail and find a place to quickly cross over a small stream to access the leftward trail.

Regardless of which way you start, there are a number of stream crossings within the first 500 feet. Use deadfall to cross each of them.



Three early stream crossings (pictures taken during the dry season)



Crossing during wet season

At .15 miles, come to a signed intersection with Mill Creek. Stay right.



Signed intersection at .15 miles (Stay Right)

The next couple miles are a pleasant stroll through alternating patches of woods and meadows. There are a few easy water crossings along the way. At 2.25 miles, come to a signed junction pointing to Miner Lake. Veer left.



Junction at 2.25 miles (Veer Left)

Quickly come to another creek crossing – this one changes every year, so walk the bank until you find the driest route across.



Creek crossing at 2.3 miles

Come to another creek crossing at 2.45 miles. At 2.55 miles the hardest section of climb begins up a rocky slope. There is no water along this part of the route.

At 2.75 miles, a waterfall crashes to your left and the trail eases for a bit. It picks back up again at 3 miles until finally relenting at 3.3 miles as it dips back down to the creek. Take a second to catch your breath and filter water if you need to.

The trail then enters a beautiful mountaintop meadow and views open to the magnificent Smoky Mountains. The final push of climb begins at a small grove of pines around the 3.8-mile mark. As the climb eases, come to a junction with a sign pointing to the trail to Prairie Lakes. You will come back to this point, but first turn left and wind through the paths to Miner Lake's shoreline.



Junction at 3.85 miles (Pass and turn left to get to Miner Lake)



Miner Lake

Head back to the junction to Prairie Lakes and turn left. The trail immediately comes to an easy creek crossing and then ascends and quickly descends through the woods. The rest of the route to Prairies Lakes rolls through woods and meadows, though a few easy climbs sneak in here and there.

The smaller of the two easily accessible Prairie Lakes comes into view at about 5.75 miles. Cut left through the woods to access the shoreline.



Smaller Prairies Lake

Hop back on the trail and climb a small knob. The larger of the Prairie Lakes comes into view, though it is obscured by the woods between it and the trail. At about 5.95 miles, a small trail spur on your left runs down to the lake.



Spur at 5.95 miles (Turn Left)



Large Prairie Lake

From the lake, the trail descends through a pleasant mix of woods and meadows with a few more stream crossings along the way. The descent becomes more marked as you continue, but the soft trail is easy on the knees. Come to the junction with Miner Lake at 8.4 miles and stay straight to reach the trailhead.