

Surprise Valley

Overview

The challenge of this long, difficult hike is surpassed by its idyllic reward—the beautiful Surprise Valley. This stunning U-shaped valley, with its peaceful pond and dramatic mountain backdrop, is a perfect place to sit and appreciate the quiet majesty of Idaho.

The hike begins with a moderate climb alongside Fall Creek before rolling gently through patches of forest and open meadows. The trail dramatically intensifies after the 3.5-mile mark, with an ascent grade that tops 20% between miles 3.5 and 4. The final mile to Surprise Valley eases somewhat, but it is still a great relief when the trail begins descending toward the valley just before the 5-mile mark.

For an excellent overnight backpacking trip, continue beyond Surprise Valley to Betty Lake and the [Betty-Goat-Baptie Lakes Loop](#). Park one car at the Betty Lake trailhead and another at the Surprise Valley trailhead to create a challenging, scenery-packed point-to-point adventure.

The Numbers

9.87 miles out and back

2502 feet total elevation gain

Ascent Grade: 8.8% (Moderate/Difficult)

Hardest Mile: 17% (Extremely Difficult)

Water

The trail parallels the Left Fork of Fall Creek for several miles, but the creek is often too far below the trail to easily access. You will cross the creek at 1.85 miles.

Although the difficult climb between miles 3 and 5 is mostly shaded, it is a brutal ascent. Unless you have plenty of water, turn right at the junction at 2.85 miles and walk about 1/10th of a mile to Fall Creek to refill before circling back to begin the steepest part of the hike.

There is also a large pond in Surprise Valley at the destination.

The Drive

From downtown Ketchum, it is a 27-mile drive to the trailhead with 17.7 of those miles being on well-maintained dirt roads.

[Click here for directions to the trailhead.](#) There is parking for about 15-20 vehicles. Other hiking options from the trailhead are [Moose Lake](#), [Waterfall Trail](#), [Upper Fall Creek](#) and [Left Fork of Upper Fall Creek](#).

There are bathroom facilities at the trailhead.



Parking and Trailhead

Season

Late June through early October

Route

The trail immediately crosses a wooden bridge spanning Fall Creek. At 0.1 miles, come to a gate on your right and squeeze through the fence. Continue through a sagebrush field before entering a pine forest around the half-mile mark.

The woods grow thicker and the climb intensifies at about 0.8 miles. The ascent moderates around the one-mile mark, where nice views open up toward Fall Creek flowing far below. The trail descends briefly at 1.4 miles before entering a large sagebrush field at 1.6 miles. At 1.8 miles, come to a creek crossing and look for deadfall that may make the ford easier.



Creek crossing at 1.8 miles

Immediately after the ford, come to a signed junction. One trail leads toward Moose Lake and Surprise Valley, while the other heads toward Left Fork of Upper Fall Creek. **Stay right toward Moose Lake and Surprise Valley.**



Signed junction just after the crossing (Stay Right)

Continue through an open field with the striking frame of Standhope Peak rising above you. Willows line portions of the trail and often provide cover for moose and other wildlife, so stay aware of your surroundings, particularly if you are hiking with dogs.

At about 2 miles, re-enter a light forest as the trail begins alternating between small meadows and wooded sections. At 2.8 miles, descend toward Fall Creek. Shortly afterward, come to a signed junction with the Surprise Valley/Fall Creek Trail. Stay left.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The climb between miles 3 and 5 is mostly shaded, but it is a **brutal ascent**. Unless you have plenty of water, turn right at the junction at mile 2.85 and walk about 0.1 mile to Fall Creek to top off your bottles. Then return to the junction and continue the hike.



Junction at 2.85 miles (Stay Left)

The trail continues to climb through the woods, steepening as you approach the junction with Upper Fall Creek. At 3.43 miles, reach the junction and stay left.



Junction with Upper Fall Creek (Stay Left)

The rocky trail intensifies dramatically after the junction, and a series of switchbacks begins at about 3.6 miles. Even though the climb is shaded, this section is really tough, so take your time, regulate your breathing, and stay hydrated.

You finally get a little relief shortly before the 4-mile mark as you pass a 300-foot granite wall to the south. Continue through a small meadow, laced with streams except during dry years, then re-enter the woods as the trail begins to climb again.

At 4.4 miles, enter another small, pleasant meadow, with trees to your right and a rocky slope to your left. Just before the 4.6-mile mark, enter a field of boulders. Keep a sharp eye on the trail as you continue to climb. Cairns begin marking the route at about 4.8 miles, and by 4.9 miles, the trail becomes easier to follow and finally starts to descend.

Look to your left for a large pond. Just beyond it is Surprise Valley, marked by a sign. This is one of the most idyllic spots along any hike in the region, so take your time and enjoy the reward for the tremendous effort it took to get here.





As the sign indicates, you can continue from Surprise Valley to Betty Lake and connect with another of our favorite hikes: [The Betty-Goat-Baptie Lakes Loop](#).

Combining the two routes would make for a tremendous overnight backpacking trip. Leave one car at the Betty Lake trailhead and another at the Surprise Valley trailhead to create a difficult but rewarding point-to-point trek.