

Big Bear Lake

Moderate-to-Strenuous, 9.2 miles



The Big Bear Lake is very pretty, set in a granite cirque with spectacular views of ragged ridges. Camping here makes a great base camp for exploring the basin and the other two lakes — Little Bear Lake and Wee Bear Lake just to the southeast. You will earn your right to see these lakes. The trail includes a lot of moderate to strenuous climbing, depending on your hiking shape, with an overall slope of 11%. However, it is well worth the effort to visit these eastern-most lakes of the Trinity Alps.

Hikes

♦ Big Bear Lake (41° 11.736'N, 122° 42.760'W)

Total Length (round-trip): 9.2 miles on Bear Lakes Trail

Elevation Gain: 2,800'

Difficulty: Moderate-to-Strenuous

Topo Map

♦ Tangle Blue Lake

Directions to Trailhead

19.9 miles to Bear Lakes Trailhead

Take Hwy 3 north from Trinity Center about 18.3 miles to the north end of Bear Creek Loop Road. Turn left and follow the road about 1.6 miles until it dead-ends at a washed-out bridge. The trailhead is across the creek. There is a trail sign that points the way slightly to the southeast where there is a creek crossing close to the Trinity River to get to the Bear Lakes Trailhead on the south side of the creek.

There is plenty of parking on the north side of the creek, but this trail only goes to Bear Lakes. If there are lots of vehicles, then the trail will be busy that day. However, midweek is usually a great time to visit these spectacular lakes and add them to your collection. Nevertheless, Bear Lakes are not as visited as many of the easier lakes to reach, and it is not uncommon to find yourself alone midweek or off-season.

The Trail

The trail starts at a sign on the south side of Bear Creek, and starts uphill right away. Very shortly you pass a sign marking the boundary of the Trinity Alps Wilderness. You will climb a couple of switchbacks, and continue uphill through the forest. On this trail there are numerous, very large old cedars and firs, with many oak trees. In the fall, the trail will be littered with oak leaves.

About a mile into the trail you will cross Bear Creek on the new bridge. The topo map shows the old trail to the old bridge in this portion, but is otherwise correct. Past the bridge the trail



Big Bear Lake in January

continues climbing with some more switchbacks.

You will pass through a fern meadow and some brush. Along the trail you will have spectacular views of Mt. Shasta and Mount Eddy.

Some 4 miles into the hike, you will come to the boulder/granite crossing. Follow cairns that take you either straight ahead or off to the right to get up to the ledge at lake level. As you come into the open, you can see a notch in the mountain on the left, across the creek. That is the way to Wee Bear and Little Bear lakes.

At about 4.5 miles, you will come to the edge of Big Bear Lake, one of the largest lakes in the Alps. The lake itself is in a granite cirque and has scattered stands of trees. In wetter years, there should be lots of wildflowers in early to mid summer.

The highest peak in the Bear Basin is unnamed and stands 7,034 feet according to the topo map. Locals call it Bear Lakes Peak or simply Bear Peak. You can see it to the southeast as you begin the granite slab crossing — it appears to be to the north of the notch to Wee Bear Lake. But once at Big Bear, it is hidden by the ridge between Big Bear and Little Bear.

If you are up for it, you can reach Wee Bear and Little Bear Lakes by following cairns to the southeast from Big Bear Lake through the notch. There is no marked trail but the traverse is not overly difficult with a distance of about a mile. Little Bear is a smaller version of Big Bear but with more trees, and is a good alternative if it is busy at Big Bear. You can return the way you came, and then make your back down the Bear Creek Trail to the trailhead from whence you began.



