

Bearpaw Meadow

This is a good hike for a group needing a challenge through beautiful country.

Trail Type: Out and Back

Skill Level: Difficult

Distance: 22 miles

Trail Head Elevation: 6729 feet

Elevation Gain: 1700 feet

Trailhead coordinates: 36.554884, -118.749207
(36° 33' 17.58"N 118° 44' 57.14"W)



To get to the trailhead: Take Generals Highway (SR 198) east to Crescent Meadow Road, just south of the Giant Forest Museum. Continue three miles, to the Crescent Meadow Parking Area.

The hike starts at the Crescent Meadow parking lot. A wilderness permit is required and can be obtained at the Lodgepole Visitor Center between 7 am and 3:30 pm. With the permit you can drive to Crescent Meadow even on summer weekends, when the road is closed to other visitors. Be sure to check trail conditions when you pick up your permit.

The hike to Bearpaw is a surprisingly difficult trek. Although a sign at the trailhead says the trail was built to minimize elevation changes, the trail still has quite a bit of climbing: 2,000 feet of elevation gain outbound and 1,300 foot returning.

The first segment of the trail, from Crescent Meadow to Wolverton Cutoff, is the most scenic. After a brief hike through the Giant Forest and up a wooded slope, the trail breaks out into the sunshine. There's a fine view down-valley to Moro Rock and the arid-looking foothills, as well as across the valley to the spires of Castle Rock, and up-valley to the much lush, conifer-clad River Valley terminating in the dramatic, craggy Great Western Divide, perfectly spread out in front of the trail. Bearpaw Camp is on the ridge that's clearly visible just in front of the Great Western Divide.

The trail proceeds through lush, open, light-filled forest with more views up-valley. After Wolverton Cutoff, the trail ascends through patches of dense forest interspersed with exposed stretches. It's a pretty good pull up to the Mehrten Creek Trail intersection. After that are several hazardous sections where the trail is cut into a sheer vertical cliff with nothing to keep you from falling off. There are a few such sections before Mehrten Creek, too, but the scariest ones are between Mehrten Creek and Buck Creek.

The trail descends to a creek crossing with a footbridge, then begins the final ascent to the ridgetop. This is the most challenging part of the hike. This part of the trail is densely wooded and there aren't any views; much of the ascent is in a hidden ravine that doesn't show up on topographic maps. In addition to camp sites, this is the location of the Bearpaw Meadow Camp, a simple tent hotel run by the park concessionaire (reservations required).