

Great Basin National Park

Great Basin National Park is a real jewel in the state of Nevada. Even though it is in the middle of what some call nowhere (sorry east Nevadans), its features make it well worth the drive. It truly is an island in the sky, rising above the dry valleys below, and holding alpine forests and even a glacier. And the Lehman Caves provide a wonderful addition to the already full docket. Once you drive the many miles on a very windy road from either Baker or Ely Nevada you arrive in an area more like the Rocky Mountains, where dense forests encircle snow-fed lakes.



Location of the Park, on the border of Nevada and Utah

The information kiosk and caves are near the park entrance. They are open year-round, while the campgrounds upslope are closed each winter. There are many trails and campsites throughout the park, but I am describing only the trails I have hiked in two different trips.

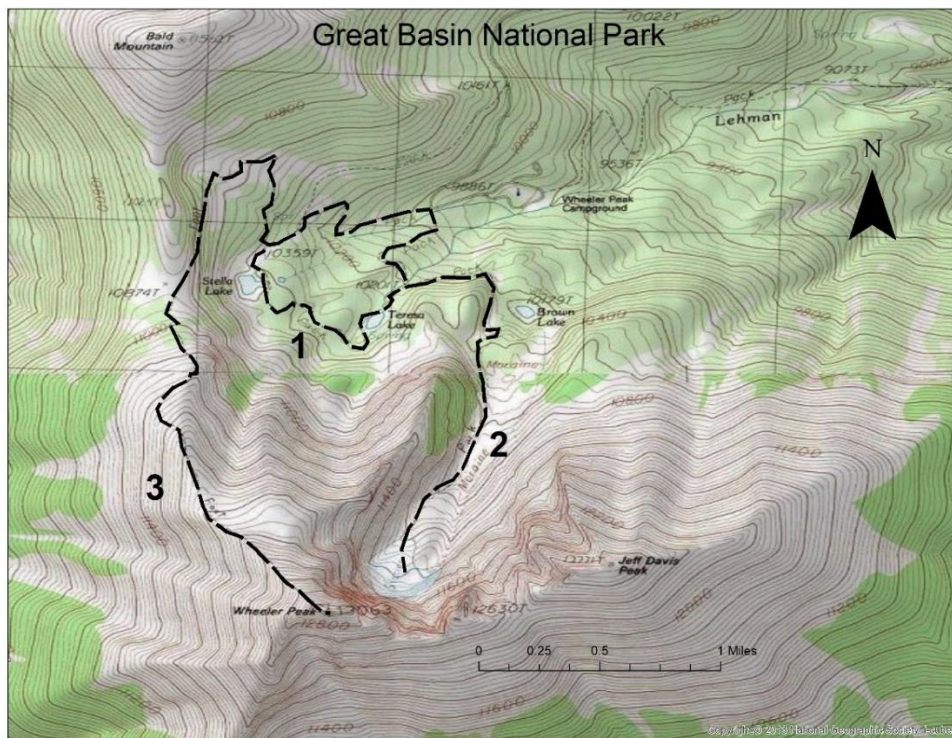
The vegetation changes as you go from 6600 feet elevation at the park entrance to the Wheeler Peak Campground at 10,000 feet. The lower slopes have Utah juniper, Rocky Mountain juniper, and single-leaf pinyon pine. While the upper slopes boast white fir, Engelmann spruce, limber pine, bristlecone pine, ponderosa pine, common juniper, and Douglas-fir.



One the road up - Wheeler Peak and the high country in September (Notice the fall colors)

The three trails I took (identified on map):

1. The Lake Circuit
2. The Bristlecone Pine and Glacier Trail
3. Hike to Wheeler Peak



The Lake Circuit

The little two-mile circuit above the Wheeler Campground is a perfect way to get used to the altitude (you are over 10,000 feet after all). You will see an abundance of Engelmann spruce along the way. I went counterclockwise and found Stella Lake first. This lake, as were all the lakes in the area, caused by large alpine glaciers carving out the bowls (known as cirques) in which the lakes sit. Teresa Lake was an easy jaunt from there before I headed back to camp.



Stella Lake

The Bristlecone Pine and Glacier Trail

This trail involves about a five-mile round trip to see both the bristlecone pine display as well as the glacier. Bristlecone pines are the oldest living things on earth*. One here was estimated to be nearly 5000 years old! There are three groves of them in the park, but this grove is the easiest to get to. The ones that live at the higher elevations (and this tree is often the only one at tree line) usually have a very gnarly look.

The trail continues beyond the pines to the Wheeler glacier. Now, there is some debate on whether this is a real glacier or a “rock” glacier, the latter being simply a permanent ice field that contains a lot of rocks. Alpine glaciers are defined as compacted ice that slowly moves downward. This one isn’t moving, but in reality, many glaciers on earth are stationary, or in most cases, these days, receding. Thousands of years ago this one was certainly moving, as proven by the moraine just a little way downhill from it. So whatever the outcome, it is quite a magical thing to see – permanent ice in dry Nevada!

*They are the oldest living non-clonal organism. Some quaking aspens in Utah are 80,000 years old, because they primarily sprout up new trees from roots, and all have basically the same DNA.



One of the ancient bristlecone pines on the trail



Lehman Creek on the trail



A rainbow and alpine forest at the start of my hike



Me "skiing" down Wheeler Glacier

Hike to Wheeler Peak

This trail starts just above Wheeler Peak Campground in the forest, before it slowly gives way to grassland and ultimately rocky terrain. Its eight-mile roundtrip can be done in a day, but remember – you will be at high elevation, eventually over 13,000 feet altitude, so take it easy! However, the view is awesome so it is worth the effort.



The author on top of Wheeler Peak



Looking down from Wheeler Peak at the road to the trailhead and Wheeler Peak campground



This was inside the Lehman Caves on one of my trips

For more information:

<https://www.nps.gov/grba/index.htm>