

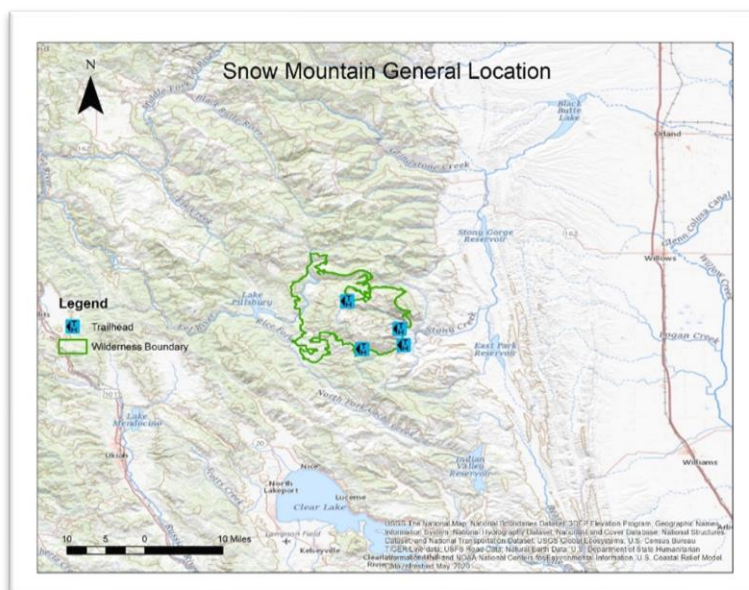
Snow Mountain Wilderness

Snow Mountain Wilderness Area is an area dear to my heart. It isn't in the High Desert, in fact its location in the California coast range is quite a distance from it, but it was an area I frequented while in college in the 70s, as well as a few times since. Unfortunately it was totally consumed by the Ranch fire of 2018. There are entry restrictions as of the publication of this article. The fire was one of California's biggest, burning nearly a half of a million acres and burning for six months. I don't really know the status of the trails and features I describe in this article, so please check with the Mendocino National Forest Office in Willows before entering this area.

Before the fire, this area had many great features and hopefully we will find that it still has them, or at least will soon as recovery unfolds. Because of its moderate elevation – the top is just over 7000 feet – it gave those who were anxious to backpack, an opportunity to get the cobwebs out early in the season. I have been there in every season and it has never disappointed me. I have been snowed on, rained on, and tortured with heat.

It had, at least before the fire, a verdant mantle of conifers. They included, white and red fir, Jefferey, sugar, and ponderosa pine, incense cedar, and Douglas-fir. I viewed it as an "island in the sky" similar to many of the High Desert mountains I have climbed in that it has vegetation not found in the surrounding lowlands, such as red fir and Jefferey pine.

It had an ample collection of creeks, streams, and springs. I also never came across poison oak or mosquitos. It is also a geological curiosity – there is evidence of glaciation on the top, probably the southernmost evidence in the coast ranges. The name of the mountain should make you aware of the fact that snow can be a worry, especially in the winter. Access roads will likely be closed, or at least snow-covered. When the Forest Service roads open in the spring, you may be able to get to the trailheads, but the trails can be snow bound until late May. As far as the fall season, you can get caught in an early snowstorm, as I did once, so be prepared for that occasion.



I have entered the area from the four main trailheads, although there are a few more that are probably more difficult to manage. Three of them: West Crockett, Happy Camp, and Fouts Springs involve a fairly arduous trip of a lot of ups and downs (mostly ups), but have their own reward such as a variety of scenery. However, because they start at lower elevations, they can be pretty hot in the summer. The two eastern trailheads are best accessed from the Sacramento Valley. The other two can also be reached from the Clear Lake area.

I prefer the Summit Springs Trailhead on the southern side of the mountain. It involves a lot of driving on dusty Forest Service roads, but it starts at a higher elevation and gets you into, what I believe is, the heart of the area quicker. The “heart” to me is in the well-watered high valleys of the mountain. All of the trails connect in this area. From this area you can do a nice loop around the top portion of the mountain. I know there is a lot more to this area than the higher elevation portion of the mountain, such as the fish-laden Stony Creek, but this is where I spent my time generally.



The view from just north of the Summit Spring Trailhead

The Summit Springs trail is also steep, like the other trails, but it is short. It is on the south side of the mountain, so it can be a warm hike for a bit, with not much shade. But then it reaches the trees, and soon levels out. There is a pond just to the west that provides many campsites, but this spot can be very popular, so I usually head a little further west until I hit a second valley that has a nice spring and ample firewood.



The pond - a popular campsite, ringed with red fir

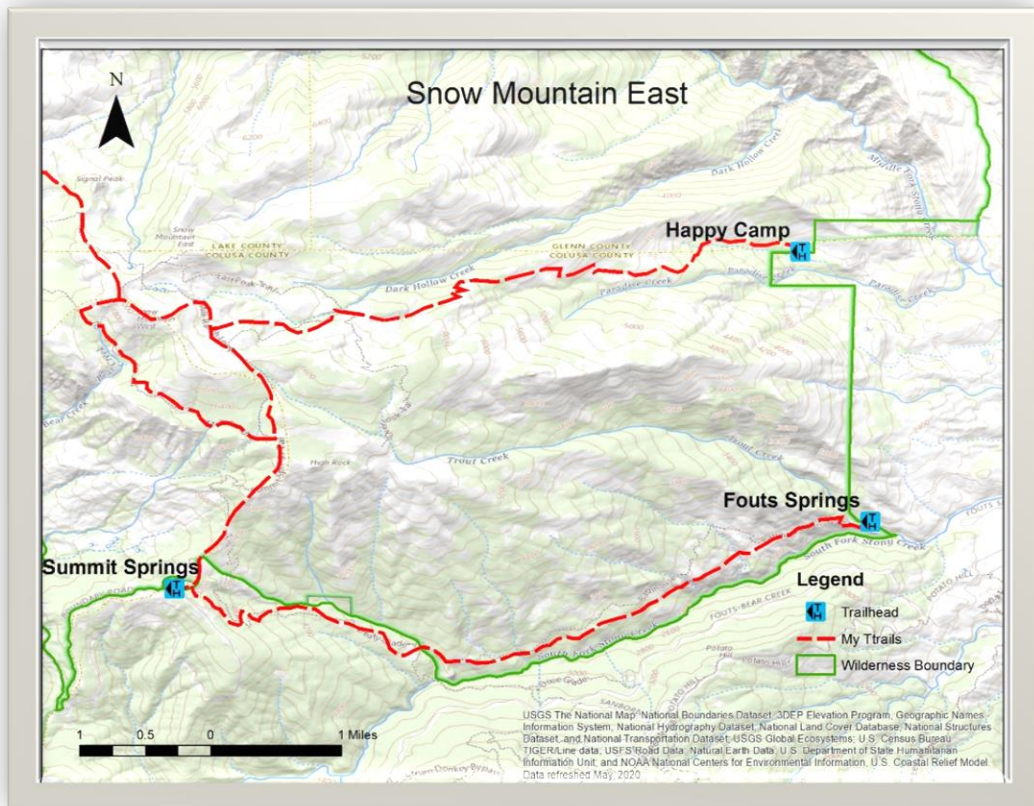
From this base camp you can make a loop as shown on the maps. This hike gives you some nice views, and brings you to the top. The mountain top makes a “U” shape. The inside of the U is likely the location of the past glacier. Hiking on the top of the mountain is cross-country, but once you get up there, it is fairly level. You can then circle back to your camp.

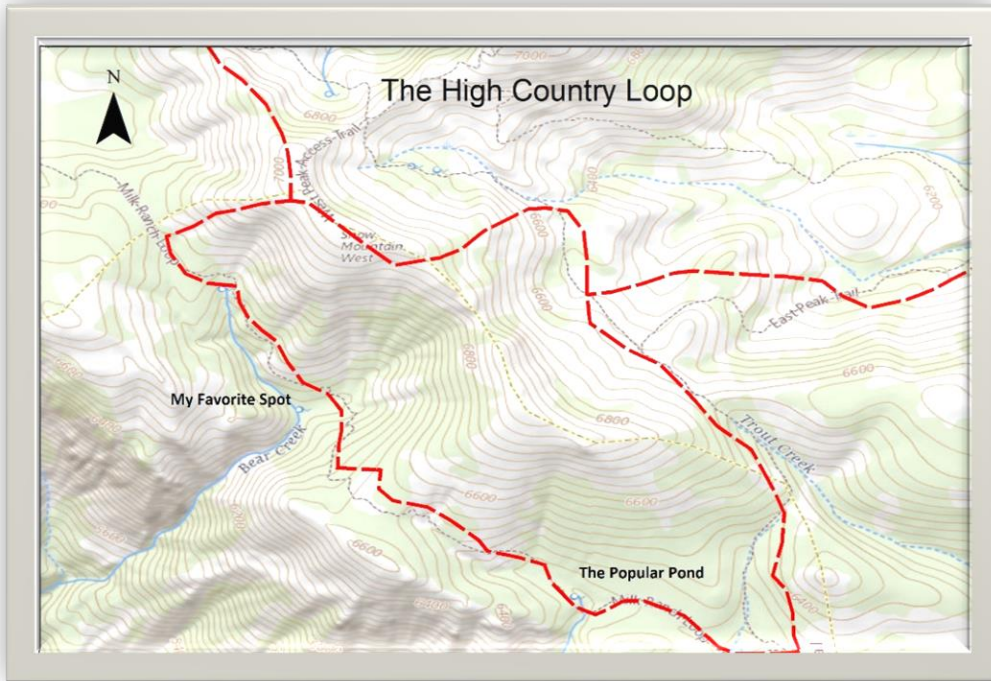
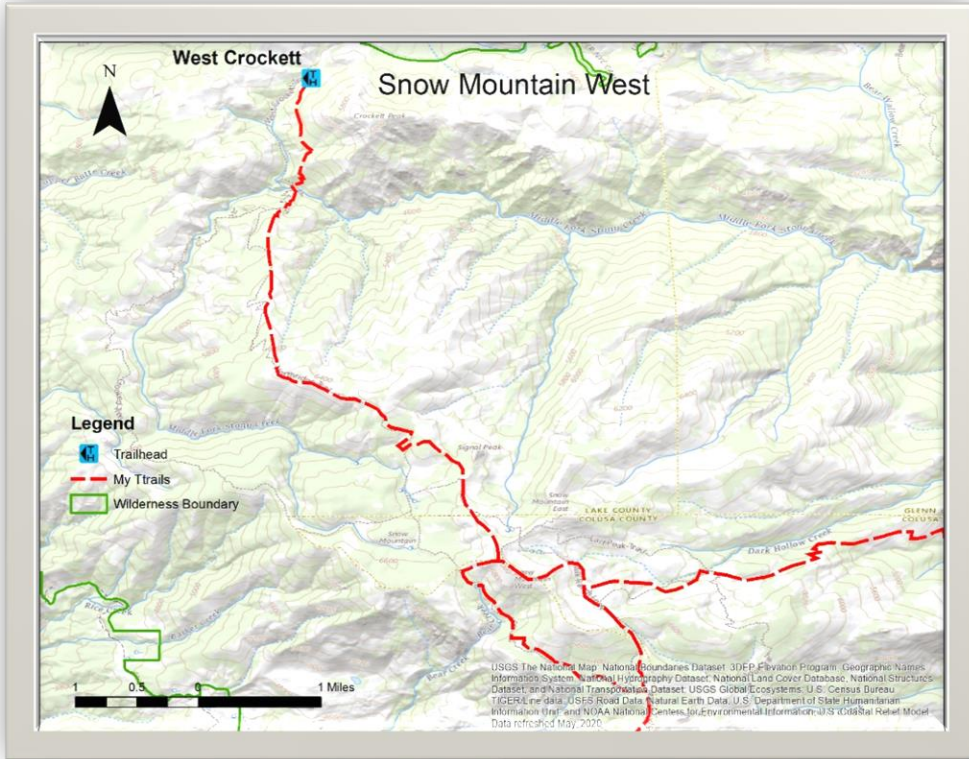


Looking west at the red fir and incense cedar from near the top



Looking north from that same spot





All maps and pictures by Bob Earle