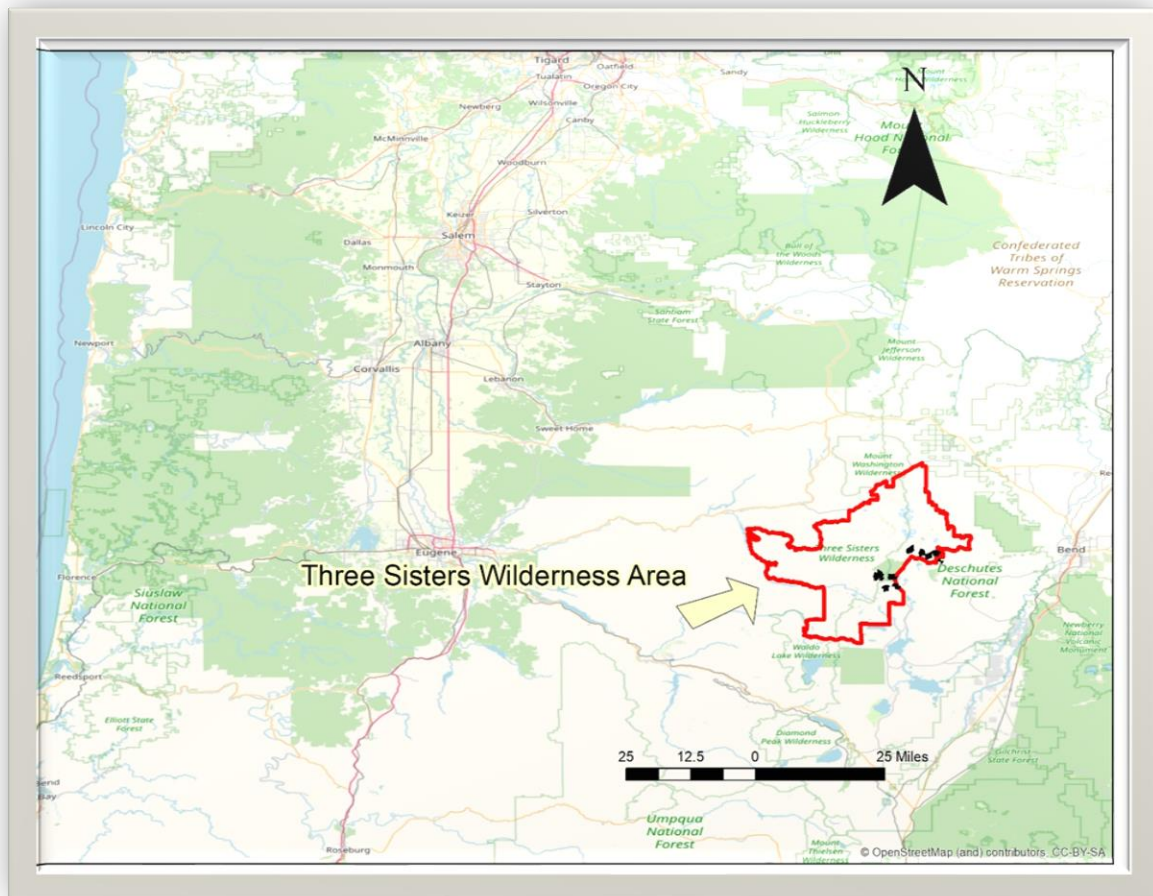


## Three Sisters Wilderness Area

The Three Sisters Wilderness Area is the most visited wilderness area in Oregon, but for good reason. It is a wonderful example of the volcanic Cascade mountain range's glacier-carved valleys and lakes. Because of its popularity, hikers should be aware that a long-planned permit system that will limit the number of people allowed to hike in the wilderness area will go into effect in 2021. Permits will be available to purchase on Recreation.gov on April 6, 2021.

It is one of the largest wilderness areas in the Northwest, and there are a multitude of trails. Yet, I have only sampled a few – something I hope to rectify in the next couple of years. I will describe four trails that I have taken in the last few years. They all start on the east side of the Cascade crest, and are a short drive from Bend, Oregon. They all start in the mid-elevation landscape, but have mostly easy access to the alpine high-country.



Access to all four of the trails is from the Cascades Lakes Highway (OR 372). The first two trails are across the road from Elk Lake. They both have a fairly easy access to the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). The two other northern trailheads have access to great east-side high country, but only one viable route to the PCT.

The Six Lakes Trailhead leads to two lakes, Blow Lake and Doris Lake. They can be pretty crowded, but provide a quick high-country access for a short weekender. You'll see a lot of lodgepole pine on the way up, then increasingly see mountain hemlock and white pine. I only made it to Doris Lake on my overnighter, but it was just a short, relatively easy trip over the crest to a slew of lakes and the PCT.

On another trip out of Elk Lake Trailhead, I made it over the crest to the west side and to great lake-studded territory and the PCT. Like the Blow Lake Trail, it wasn't that steep and the going was nice and easy. I saw the same collection of white pine, lodgepole pine, and mountain hemlock conifers. Both of these Elk Lake area trails are in a volcanic rock landscape and therefore running water is at a minimum until you get to the far western part of the wilderness area. Treating your water is advisable. Part of my route took me on the PCT, and through delightful Island Meadow (pictured).



*Evening at Horse Lake*



*Island Meadow on Pacific Crest Trail*



*South Sister Peak, on our way to Moraine Lake*

The Todd Lake Trailhead might be the busiest trailhead I have ever encountered. So a very early start is recommended. This trail is steeper than the Elk Lake trailheads. In fact, if you proceed further uphill from where we ended our hike, you can set your foot on several glaciers that ring Broken Top. You can get a real alpine experience if you hike a little way cross-country toward the peak (shown in picture below). You can make your way back to the Todd Lake Trailhead, or go west, then south down Crater Creek towards the Green Lakes Trailhead if you want to consider a car shuttle.



*Broken Top, with mostly whitebark pine in the foreground.*

The Devils Lake Trailhead isn't as crowded as the Todd Lake one, but you will have to park on the busy road, or start from a more proper trailhead near Devils Lake. This trail takes you up a moderately steep canyon, but levels out fairly quickly as you approach Moraine Lake, a nice lunch spot, but camping would be not optimal and may be restricted. On this day-hike, we followed the trail eastward and hiked down Fall Creek to the Green Lakes Trailhead. It makes a nice short loop if you can car shuttle, as we did. I have been up to Green Lakes a few years back. It is much bigger than Moraine Lake, and nearer to the Broken Top glaciers. The trail isn't shown on older USGS topographic maps, but the trail is well marked and follows Fall Creek upstream.

