

McKinley Lake by Bike/Hike

One of the hidden blessings of living in Missoula is our backyard wilderness area, the Rattlesnake. Excepting Stuart Peak, it is little visited. This is due, primarily, to its inaccessibility; it's a long slog into the most remote and beautiful lakes from all of the trailheads, and in particular from the Rattlesnake Trailhead in north Missoula.



Along the lower section of Rattlesnake Creek upstream from the trailhead.

Perhaps the most satisfying way to reach the most remote regions of the Rattlesnake is by bike from your front door in Missoula. It's about a 20 mile ride from town, along Rattlesnake Creek to the Wilderness boundary. From there, the high lakes can be reached by hikes of moderate length, though they aren't easy due to the strenuous bike in.

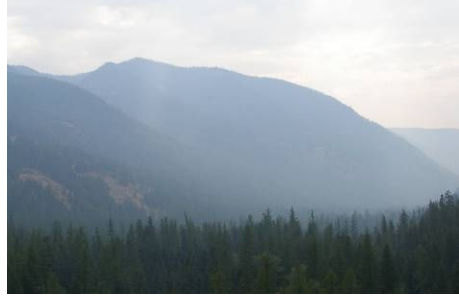
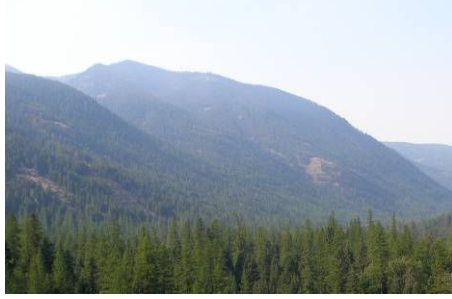
There are a few directions that you can go once you reach the boundary. One is Lake Creek trail, which leads all the way to the Stuart Peak Trail along the ridge connecting Stuart and Mosquito Peaks. The trail skirts first Carter Lake and then McKinley Lake, which is where I turned around. After the long bike ride, the hike in was strenuous, but the trail was truly steep only in the last half mile up to McKinley Lake.



Mosquito Peak is in the upper-right of the picture.

On the day of my trip, it was a smoky and got increasingly smokier as the day went on (see the two pictures below). The views from the lakes themselves don't

compare to those you get from the high ridges and peaks (see my Finley Creek to Missoula entry). Still, it was a beautiful day, with the fall colors beginning already.



Two shots of Sheep Mountain, in the morning (left) and through more smoke in the afternoon.

The lakes in the Rattlesnake once constituted Missoula's water supply and so were dammed in order to ensure consistent water through the winter. The downside of this is an unattractive "bathtub ring" that is noticeable around many of the lakes (see below picture).



Left: late summer color; right: McKinley Lake.



An old cabin between Carter and McKinley Lakes (left); Carter Lake (right).