Box Lake

Whitebird Ridge, near Lockwood Point

South Fork of the Salmon River.

Spanning seasons in a day, visitors can explore the contrasts of the Payette National Forest. From warm, deep canyons to crisp alpine lakes, the forest is the centerpiece for outdoor recreation in Idaho’s Heartland. This spectacular land is bordered by two of the deepest canyons in North America: the Salmon River Canyon on the north and Hells Canyon of the Snake River on the west. To the east lies the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, one of the largest congressionally designated Wilderness areas in the lower 48 states.

“\textit{The mountains are calling and I must go.}”
- John Muir

Fast Forest Facts

- Acres: 2.3 million
- Species of mammals & birds: Over 300
- Deepest Canyon in North America: Hells Canyon at 8000’
- Backcountry Airstrips: There are six airstrips on the Payette National Forest

What’s Inside

- Special Places
- Scenic Byways
- Winter Recreation
- Forest Map
- Campgrounds
- Activities
- Know Before You Go
- Contact Information

Come see for yourself!

This Visitor Guide provides the information you need to make the most of your Payette National Forest experience.
Rapid River

Especially popular in the spring for early hiking and biking, and in the fall for hunting, the Rapid River Recreation area offers excellent opportunities for a more primitive recreation experience. Multiple trails present hikers the chance to view wildlife, wildflowers, and amazing scenery. Rapid River is a designated Wild and Scenic River for its entire length and is important habitat for threatened Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout. Within the Rapid River area on the New Meadows District, Black Lake is a popular recreational destination, which is accessible via road 002 from Council.

Sheep Rock

Sheep Rock is a scenic overlook and interpretive trail in a fairly remote area on the Idaho rim of Hells Canyon. At an elevation of 6,847 feet, the overlook provides visitors with an up-close birds-eye-view of one of the greatest lava extrusions of geologic time. Your journey to Sheep Rock from Council (via road 002) takes you through some of central Idaho’s most amazing country. Broad vistas of jagged mountains and open spaces await with wildflowers accentuating your trip. Birds of prey and the possible sighting of bighorn sheep or mountain goats will thrill the wildlife viewer.

Heritage Resources

Waiting silently in the canyons and mountains of the Payette National Forest are reminders of the centuries-old relationships between people and the land. There is a rich history of cultural diversity here with a story to tell. Many American Indians were the first to call southwestern Idaho home. They continue their traditions today through fishing, hunting, and gathering. Lewis and Clark’s explorations, Oregon Trail emigration, and gold discoveries brought people from all over the world to Idaho. On the Payette National Forest, the remains of mining towns and cemeteries give voice to some of the thousands of Chinese immigrants who arrived after the California Gold Rush of 1849, seeking fortunes in the gold fields, railroad camps, fish canneries, and on the great agricultural ranches of the southwest. As they ventured into the Idaho wilderness they brought their cultures and customs into these remote areas, creating a society within the existing Euro-American culture.

Special Places

Wildness

Wildness is an area of federal land that is free from modern human manipulation, is undeveloped and natural, and provides outstanding opportunities for solitude and a primitive type of recreation.

The Payette National Forest has portions of two congressionally designated wilderness areas. The Hells Canyon Wilderness (administered by Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and Wallowa-Whitman National Forest) is 23,494 acres of high mountain peaks, ominous canyon rim-rocks and quiet solitude. Split by the Snake River the Hells Canyon Wilderness straddles the Idaho and Oregon state boundary. At lower elevations, dry, steep slopes break over into the Snake River canyon.

Today the Warren Mining District remains as an important vestige of ethnic heritage and several sites in the district are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. At the Chinese Cemetery at Warren, interpretive signs lead visitors through this historic site. From 1933 to 1941, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were major contributors to the development of the Payette National Forest, where four camps were in operation. The buildings at the McCall District Administrative Site and the Paddy Flat Administrative Site are visible reminders of their accomplishments.

For more information on the Payette National Forest visit www.fs.usda.gov/payette.
Payette River Scenic Byway

The lookout is staffed through the summer and fall months, and personnel are usually available to give you a glimpse at an era of fire detection that is rapidly being replaced by more modern fire-spotting techniques.

- Krassel Ranger District: Sheep Eater (within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness), Williams Peak, Miners Peak
- McCall Ranger District: Pilot Peak, Carey Dome, Brundage Mountain, War Eagle
- New Meadows Ranger District: Granite Mountain, Pollock Mountain, Lick Creek
- Council Ranger District: Horse Mountain, Indian Mountain
- Weiser Ranger District: Sturgil Mountain

For more information, visit the Forest Fire Lookout Association at www.firelookout.org.

Fire Protection has long been an integral part of the Forest Service, and the Payette National Forest has been home to as many as 70 fire lookout structures. Six lookouts are on the National Historic Lookout Register. There are examples of several styles of construction still visible from a single steel tower to early wooden structures.

Payette River Scenic Byway

From the junction of Idaho 44 and Idaho 55 west of Boise, this byway heads north on Idaho 55 to Horseshoe Bend where it meets the Payette River. From there it passes through the Boise and Payette National Forests and the towns of Cascade and McCall before reaching the northern end at New Meadows.

For motorists, it can be a distracting drive as the river crashes and tumbles its way over the rocks through this narrow river valley. There are occasional pull-offs where you can view the wilder parts, and treat your senses to the sight, sound, smell, and rhythm of the river. Along this byway are some great locations for camping, hiking, boating, fishing, and guided float trips.

Nordic and Backcountry Skiing

Over 30 km of groomed trails can be found at the Bear Basin Trail System, just three miles west of McCall. Trails meander through meadows and wooded terrain, with surprising vistas around the corners. A warming hut and toilets can be found at the trailhead, along with a fee box to help defray the cost of grooming.

Nordic and Backcountry Skiing

If you are looking for more remote terrain, Brundage Mountain offers snowcat skiing trips that open up 18,000 acres to backcountry skiing.

Little Ski Hill

Built in 1937 as a winter diversion for local forest workers, the Little Ski Hill has served the region’s youth and skiing community for over 60 years. A T-bar provides access to 405 vertical feet of terrain. This small but action-packed facility is located two miles north of McCall, Idaho on Highway 55.

Winter Recreation

The Payette National Forest hosts two downhill ski areas: Brundage Mountain and Little Ski Hill. Both work in close partnership with the Forest Service to guarantee exceptional skiing opportunities.

Brundage Mountain

Best known for its powder-studded glades and wide groomed runs, Brundage Mountain receives an average of 320” of snow each winter and operates from Thanksgiving to mid-April. Five lifts access 1,500 acres with a vertical drop of 1,900’.

If you are looking for more remote terrain, Brundage Mountain offers snowcat skiing trips that open up 18,000 acres to backcountry skiing.

Little Ski Hill

Built in 1937 as a winter diversion for local forest workers, the Little Ski Hill has served the region’s youth and skiing community for over 65 years. A T-bar provides access to 405 vertical feet of terrain. This small but action-packed facility is located two miles north of McCall, Idaho on Highway 55.

Snowmobiling

Snowmobiling’s phenomenal rise in popularity on the Payette National Forest has taken the winter woods by storm. Several hundred miles of roads and groomed trails on the national forest are accessible by snow machine. The grooming program is a cooperative effort among the Payette National Forest, Valley County and Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.

Popular play areas for advanced snowmobile riders include Wong’s Bowl and Council Mountain.

Before venturing out, make sure you have the most current Winter Travel Map, available at Forest Service offices.

Backcountry skiing

Early spring skiing can be excellent in Hells Canyon and Brownlee Reservoirs. And when you’re looking for a spot to rest for the evening, Big Bar dispersed campground provides access to several hiking trails. Primitive camping is also available in pull-offs along the road between Hells Canyon Park and the dam.

The Payette Avalance Center provides avalanche advisories and mountain weather information for the Payette and Boise National Forests: www.payetteavalanche.org

For More Information

Brundage Mountain Resort
1-800-844-3246
www.brundage.com

Little Ski Hill
208-634-5691
www.littleskihill.com

The Payette Lake Ski Club provides information and access to skiing and snowboarding and is a great place to start your winter adventure.

For more information, visit www.payetteakesskiclub.org or call 208-634-5691

Winter Recreation

Without the Snow

Spring comes early in Hells Canyon, and some trails remain snow-free nearly year-round. This is a great time to hike the canyon to see wildlife and avoid the heat of summer. The best late winter trails are:

- Esko Creek #233
- Mid-slope Trail #222
- Allison Creek #314
- Kinney Creek #219
- Deep Creek Stairway #218

Early spring skiing can be excellent in Hells Canyon and Brownlee Reservoirs. And when you’re looking for a spot to rest for the evening, Big Bar dispersed campground provides access to several hiking trails. Primitive camping is also available in pull-offs along the road between Hells Canyon Park and the dam.
Before venturing on to the Payette National Forest, please pickup a map with the level of detail appropriate for your planned activities:

For backcountry and off-road travel:
Forest Visitor and Travel maps are available at all district offices.

For hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding:
Topographic maps are recommended. Visit the US Geological Survey for online purchases: www.usgs.gov

For more information, contact the Payette National Forest:
Forest Supervisor's Office
District Ranger Office
Forest Visitor and Travel maps are available at all district offices.

For more information, contact the Payette National Forest:
McCall and Krassel Ranger Districts

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Weiser, New Meadows, and Council Ranger Districts

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America The Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Interagency Pass Program

The America The Beautiful Interagency Pass Program is a suite of annual and lifetime passes that provides visitors a convenient way to access federal recreation lands.

Note: The passes listed below are honored nationwide at all Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, and US Fish & Wildlife Service sites charging an entrance or standard amenity fees. Entrance and standard amenity fees are not charged to persons 15 and under.

Senior Pass
Available to US citizens 62 years and older. In some areas, is good for discounts on other fees such as camping. Must be obtained in person with proof of age such as a driver’s license.

Pass Program
For more information, visit http://store.usgs.gov/pass

To see the most current campground and cabin rental opportunities or to make reservations, go to www.recreation.gov, or call the National Reservation Service at 1-877-444-6777.
Recreating on the Payette National Forest

Activities

Hiking

With approximately 2000 miles of trail on the Payette National Forest, there is diversity for all users to enjoy. Some trails on the forest are designated for motorized use, but many trails are solely for non-motorized opportunities. For more details on these designations please refer to the Motor Vehicle Use Map and the Forest Visitor maps available at any District Office.

Fishing

The Payette National Forest has about 400 lakes and reservoirs and 4000 miles of fish-bearing streams. Over 46 different species of fish inhabit our waters. They vary from warm water bass, crappies, and catfish in Hell’s Canyon Reservoir to native and introduced salmonids in colder waters. Native species, such as northern pikeminnow, mountain whitefish, and suckers, provide diversions from trout fishing. The Snake and Salmon Rivers contain white sturgeon that are regulated as a catch and release fishery.

Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) Use

The value public land for a variety of uses, among them the opportunity to take ourselves and our vehicles off the paved highway and into a natural setting. Off road vehicles are permitted on designated trails and roads within the Payette National Forest. These trails and roads are built specifically to minimize the impact of vehicles on fragile ecosystems, such as meadows and streams.

Know Before You Go

Unpaved and primitive roads present special challenges even in good weather. Before you take off, think about another challenge – your responsibility to ‘Tread Lightly.’ Here’s how:

Travel only where motorized vehicles are permitted.
Respect the rights of others to enjoy their activities undisturbed.
 embraces yourself by getting maps and information; ask owners’ permission to cross private property.
Avoid streams, lakeshores, meadows, muddy roads, steep hillsides, wildlife, and livestock.
Responsible to protect the environment and preserve opportunities to enjoy your vehicle on wild lands.

Dispersed Camping

Camping is free in most remote areas of the forest and is an extremely popular way of ‘getting away from it all’ in the summer and fall months. Several of the popular camping areas have minimal facilities (such as fire rings and restrooms) to protect the natural resources. Other areas are just a pull-off from the road. Your vehicle may go up to 300 feet from a designated open road on most areas of the forest for the purpose of dispersed camping. Some road corridors are closed to motorized off-road camping due to concerns about resource damage. Please refer to the Motor Vehicle Use Map for details.

Wash Away from Water

Soap degrades water quality and harms fish and other aquatic life. Wash at least 200 feet from the water.

Use Established Fire Rings Wisely

- Check at the local Ranger Station for current fire restrictions. Remember that they can change on a daily basis.
- Use existing fire rings if possible.
- To put out a campfire, slowly pour water onto the fire, stir, and drench until all material is cool to touch.
- Do not simply bury your fire. The coals can smolder and re-ignite.
- NEVER leave a fire unattended, even if it appears to be out.

Be Bear Aware!

If bears become accustomed to human food, they may become aggressive towards people or cause property damage. Eventually these bears may have to be destroyed.

- Keep a clean campsite. Store food and garbage in closed vehicles and out of sight.
- Never put food scraps in the campfire; it attracts bears and skunks.
- Don’t keep food (or anything that smells) in tents.
- Store stoves in a secure place when not in use. Some bears also target motor oil, insect repellent, liquor and other things that look like food. Keep these items stored properly.

For more information, visit www.idbearAware.org.

Please remember: ‘Pack it In, Pack it Out’; there are no trash facilities on the Payette National Forest.

Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds can rapidly displace native plant species that provide habitat for wildlife and feed for people and livestock. Here’s how you can help reduce their spread:

- Learn to recognize common noxious species.
- Don’t camp or drive in weed-infested areas.
- Don’t pick the flowers of noxious weeds and take them home.
- When using pack animals, carry only food that is certified weed-free. Within 96 hours before entering backcountry areas, feed them only weed-free food.

Human Waste

Bacteria and viruses found in human feces are known to cause many different gastrointestinal diseases. Please follow these simple steps when nature calls:

- Find a spot at least 200 feet from any water source.
- Dig a hole 6-8 inches deep and bury human waste.
- Pack out used toilet paper.

For more fishing information:

Fishing regulations vary widely across the forest and include ‘put-and-take’ fishing trophy fish lakes, catch and release fishing for some native species, harvesting encouraged areas for non-native species, and even some fishing for cultivated salmon and steelhead.

Visit the Idaho Department of Fish and Game at fishandgame.idaho.gov

Spotted knapweed (© John Cardona)

For more information on Noxious Weeds:
Your Recreation Fee Dollars at Work

Recreation fees have made a real difference in our ability to serve our national forest visitors because these dollars can be reinvested into services and infrastructure. Some of the recent highlights of accomplishments on the Payette National Forest include:

- Increased maintenance at all campgrounds
- Funded campground hosts at major campgrounds
- Water testing at all fee campgrounds
- Continued work on forest rental cabins
- Future Environmental Assessment work to bring new outfitter and guide opportunities to the forest
- Designed and printed this Visitor Guide

Volunteering on Payette NF

Check out the Forest Service Volunteer Program on the Payette National Forest. The jobs are exciting and diverse, scenery is exceptional and co-workers are friendly. For more information, contact any Forest Service office or visit www.volunteer.gov.

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