

# Hiking the Mt. Whitney Trail

## Welcome to Mount Whitney

As you plan for your trip, remember your group's safety comes first, the summit is optional.

Mt. Whitney has many potential natural hazards: high altitude; steep terrain; snow and ice on the trail; high winds; lightning storms; and severe winter weather.

Start as a group, and stay as a group. You or someone in your group may be injured, exhausted, or ill.

You must recognize hazards, evaluate your group's abilities, and make good decisions about everyone's safety.

### Protect this Wilderness

You will be one of over 20,000 people on the Mt. Whitney Trail this year. The trail ascends through Wilderness designated by Congress because the American people want places where nature and its community of life remain unchanged by humans. Please commit to "leave no trace" practices throughout your trip to help preserve this fragile alpine wilderness:



## Plan Ahead and Prepare

### Wilderness Permits

- Wilderness permits are required year-round for all day trips in the Mount Whitney Zone and all overnight trips in wilderness.
- May 1 through October 31, daily trailhead quotas limit the number of people who may enter the Mount Whitney Zone.
- Permits for the quota season may be reserved in advance at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).
- Most reservations are allocated through an on-line lottery. Apply to the lottery between February 1 and March 15 at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).
- Beginning May 1 each year, any available permits can be reserved on a first come first served basis at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov)
- For trip planning information: visit the Inyo National Forest Website at [www.fs.usda.gov/inyo](http://www.fs.usda.gov/inyo), then select Mt. Whitney Trail; or call the wilderness permit office at 760-873-2483.
- Visit the Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks website at [www.nps.gov/seki](http://www.nps.gov/seki) if your trip includes overnight stays in the national park.

### Before you arrive at Whitney Portal

- Train your body for this strenuous 22 mile round trip hike, with over 12,000 ft. of elevation gain and loss.
- Study a topographic map and practice using your equipment.
- Plan your itinerary to allow extra time to acclimate to high altitude.
- Plan your meals & repackage food to minimize bulk.
- Agree on turnaround times and develop contingency plans if: someone gets injured; your party gets separated; or not everyone is able to reach the summit. Always accompany a weaker or ill group member down the trail.
- Give trip plans to someone at home: names of people in the group; car make & license number; permit reservation number; entry date, itinerary, & exit date.
- To report someone overdue by more than 24 hours: Inyo County Sheriff's Office (760-878-0383)
- The websites below offer trip planning advice, provide links to area services, or host discussion forums. The Forest Service cannot vouch for forum contents. [www.sierraelevation.com](http://www.sierraelevation.com)

[www.supertopo.com](http://www.supertopo.com)  
[www.whitneyportalstore.com](http://www.whitneyportalstore.com)  
[www.whitneyzone.com](http://www.whitneyzone.com)

### Campground, lodging, services

- Reservations for Whitney Portal, Lone Pine, or Onion Valley campgrounds: [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov)
- Lodging and services in Lone Pine: [www.lonepinechamber.org](http://www.lonepinechamber.org)
- Whitney Portal Store: [www.whitneyportalstore.com](http://www.whitneyportalstore.com)
- Whitney Trailhead and Horseshoe Meadows have walk-in campgrounds that are first-come, first-served.

### Water

- Water is readily available up to Trail Camp in lakes and streams. After the snow melts off, there is no surface water available above 12,400 ft. Plan on taking 3 liters to the summit from Trail Camp.
- Surface waters can contain pathogenic bacteria. Filter, boil or chemically treat water to ensure it is safe to drink.

### Summer day hike equipment

- 3 water bottles (liter size)
- Rain gear
- Insulating clothing layer
- Sunscreen and hat
- Sunglasses
- Map & compass/GPS or mapping handheld GPS
- Headlamp & extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Extra food
- Emergency blanket
- Human waste pack-out kit

### Overnight

### hike equipment

- Day hike equipment
- Tent or other shelter
- Stove
- Sleeping bag & pad
- Bear canister

### When snow & ice are on the trail

Specialized equipment may be necessary. Training in the proper use of this equipment before your trip is essential.

- Ice axe, crampons, helmet
- Snowshoes or skis
- Avalanche beacon, probe, and snow shovel

## Store Food Safely

### Campground and trailhead

Always use the food storage lockers at the campgrounds and the trailhead. Space is limited, so minimize the amount of food you store and don't place non-food items in lockers. Please leave ice chests at home. To bears, "food" includes water bottles, coffee mugs, soda cans, trash, wrappers, cosmetics, grocery bags and ice chests. Do not leave these "food" items in your car or tent. Keep a clean camp and never leave trash or food unattended.

To discourage bears from entering your camp at Whitney Portal, finish your meals and store all food items in the lockers by nightfall.

Always keep your pack or food within your immediate reach at Whitney Portal. Bears have been known to take packs left next to vehicles while hikers set up camp or went inside a restroom

### On the trail

Bear canisters are required on the Mt. Whitney Trail from Memorial Weekend to November 1.

Bear canisters are the only effective means to store your food. We strongly recommend you use a bear canister throughout the year. Bears may be active during spring and fall, and marmots will attempt to get improperly stored food.

Before you leave the trailhead, make sure that **all** food, trash, toiletries and anything with a scent will fit inside the canister the first night.

Forest Service rangers will issue citations to hikers that counterbalance food or hang trash from trees when canisters are required.

**Bear canister rental locations:** InterAgency Visitor Center in Lone Pine; Whitney Portal Store; and sporting goods stores in Lone Pine.



Damage by bear getting to food left in trunk

## Pack Out Your Human Waste

Why can't I just bury my poop, like in other wilderness areas? First, consider there are over 20,000 people on the mountain each year. Then consider that much of the area is solid bedrock. There is simply not enough soil to decompose the human waste from this many hikers. And with limited soils to filter waste, there is the potential to harm water quality. Remember, you need to drink the water too.

On Mt. Whitney, pack-out kits are the only acceptable method for the disposal of human waste, year-round. Please do not bury your waste in the snow. Once the snow melts, your waste is an unhealthy and unsightly affront to everyone's wilderness experience.

### Where to get pack-out kits

InterAgency Visitor Center in Lone Pine (cost of the kit is paid through permit reservation fees).

### How to use a pack-out kit

- Find a secluded location.
- Spread the large inner bag on the ground. Don't spill the powder!
- Crouch over the bag and relieve yourself. Dispose of toilet paper in the bag.
- Tie a knot in the inner bag. Then zip lock it inside the outer bag.

**Fight Odors:** Add a cup of water or urinate in the inner bag. The powder inside absorbs liquid to create an odor-fighting gel.

**Urine:** Urinate on bare ground or rocks (not plants), and stay at least 100 feet from water or campsites. It is okay to urinate inside the pack-out kits.

**Animals:** Store only human waste and tissue in your pack-out kit. Trash or food scraps will attract animals.

**Storage:** Store used kits outside your tent or in your pack. Do not store kits in bear canisters.

**Hygiene:** Wash your hands after using pack-out kits and before eating or preparing food.

**Disposal:** Dispose of used kits only at the receptacle at the trailhead, next to the trailhead toilet.



Each year, hikers packed out almost 7,000 pounds of waste

## At High Altitude

**Arrive a few days early:** Stay at a campground located at a moderate (8,000 - 10,000 ft.) elevation: Whitney Portal, Onion Valley, or Horseshoe Meadows.

**Day hike to higher elevations:** You will acclimate better by day hiking at higher elevations and sleeping at moderate elevations. We recommend you take acclimation hikes at Horseshoe Meadows or Onion Valley to lessen the number of people on the Whitney Trail.

**Travel at a slow, steady and comfortable pace:** If you are day hiking to the summit, start up the trail well before dawn.

**Stay hydrated and well nourished:** Be sure to replenish electrolytes. Don't forget any prescribed medications.

**Recognize Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS):** Also called altitude sickness, AMS symptoms include persistent headache along with difficulty sleeping, dizziness, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting. AMS can affect anyone. Your age, gender, physical condition or previous high altitude experience has no bearing on whether you will be affected by AMS. If you experience more than mild discomfort from AMS, you should descend immediately.

- AMS symptoms will worsen if you continue to ascend.
- AMS may impair your judgment. Your group's safety depends on everyone making good decisions on the mountain.



Above Outpost Camp in May

## Seasonal Conditions

### Come prepared for severe weather

It may be warm and sunny at the trailhead, but weather conditions can change quickly at higher elevations. Be prepared for high winds, subfreezing temperatures, rain or snow at any month.

**May-June:** The winter snowpack slowly recedes. Expect snow on the ground above Lone Pine Lake through Memorial Day weekend, and snow on the switchbacks above Trail Camp through June. Nights are usually still below freezing. Winter-like storms are still possible.

**July-early September:** The trail is usually snow free and the weather can be fair and pleasant. At elevations above Trail Camp, however, it is often cold and windy. Thunderstorms and lightning are a significant hazard. If thunderstorms are forecast, plan to leave the summit by noon. Be aware thunderstorms sometimes will occur early in the day. At the first sign of lightning, leave the summit area or exposed ridge tops.

**Late September-October:** Short days and cold temperatures make day hikes to the summit difficult. Storms may bring severe cold and snow.

**November-April:** Winter prevails, with deep snow and very cold temperatures. Winter storms may drop several feet of snow and have winds over 100 mph. The road to Whitney Portal is usually closed 8.3 miles from Lone Pine (at elevation 6,400 ft., about 3 miles from the trailhead) from mid-November to late April.



Dressed for the summit in summer

## Fall Conditions

Crampons and ice axe should be used when there is snow and ice on the trail. From the cables to Trail Crest there are hazardous areas where a slip or fall can lead to injury or a fatality.

Snowfall on the Whitney Trail after mid-September may not melt off from the upper elevations.

Your ascent and descent will take longer than on dry trail. Plan extra time into your itinerary.

Be prepared to climb on firm, hard, and slick snow, especially once the sun leaves the north-facing slope above Trail Camp (the entire slope is in shadow by mid-afternoon).

Snow and ice on the trail require you to have learned & practiced how to walk with crampons and how to self-arrest with an ice axe.

Ski poles are no substitute for an ice axe; you will not be able to self-arrest if you fall.

Sliding down the snow on your bottom (glissading) from Trail Crest is not a safe option. The slope angle and underlying ice will likely cause you to slam into rocks at high speed. There have been injuries and fatalities here due to glissading.

Just because someone else decided to summit in questionable conditions should not determine what you decide to do. You need to make your decisions based on your skills and the abilities of the weakest member of your group.

Above information courtesy of Kurt Wedberg, Sierra Mountaineering International



Switchback near Trail Crest, early October 2010

## Decide Where to Camp

You do not have to camp Outpost Camp or Trail Camp. Other choices include Lone Pine Lake or Consultation Lake. Always choose a well-established site. Please comply with signs that indicate areas closed to camping, and do not build rock walls around your campsite.

**Outpost Camp:** Located in Bighorn Park 3.8 miles from the trailhead at elevation 10,300 ft. Relatively sheltered campsites are located on a gravel flat amidst

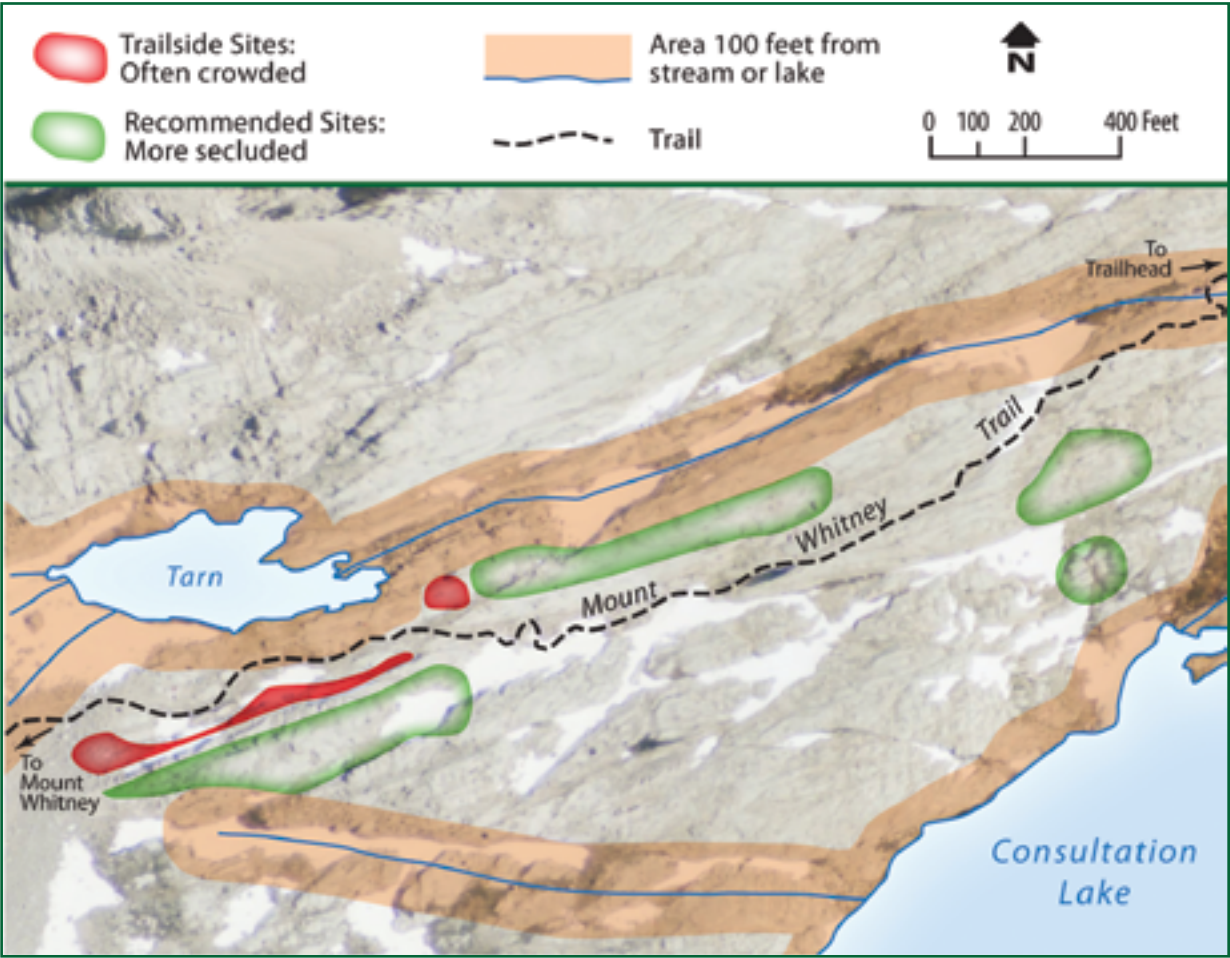
trees and willows. Additional sites are located at the west end of Bighorn Park, north of Lone Pine Creek.

**Trail Camp:** Located 6 miles from the trailhead at elevation 12,000 ft., Trail Camp is above tree line and exposed to wind. Campsites are scattered off both side of the trail. Look in the granite slabs south or east of the tarn at Trail Camp for a more secluded campsite.

### Regulations to protect the wilderness

- Camp more than 100 feet from lakes, streams, or the trail.
- No camping at Mirror Lake or Trilside Meadow.
- No campfires.
- Do not wash or discharge soap within 100 feet of lakes or streams.
- Do not leave trash in the wilderness.
- Use your pack-out kit for human waste.
- Do not urinate within 100 feet of lakes, streams, or campsites.

### Campsite Options in the Trail Camp Area



### Give Back to the Mountain



Join us on a Friends of the Inyo volunteer stewardship project on the Inyo National Forest. For trip dates and details, visit: [friendsoftheinyo.org](http://friendsoftheinyo.org)

### Contact Us

**Inyo National Forest**  
[www.fs.usda.gov/inyo](http://www.fs.usda.gov/inyo)  
 InterAgency Visitor Center 760-876-6222  
 Wilderness Permit Information 760-873-2526  
 TDD line 760-876-6228



Scan this QR Code with your mobile device to visit the Inyo National Forest website.

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