



# Forest Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Coronado National Forest, Santa Catalina Ranger District | RG-R3-05-29 | Revised December 2023



## Mount Lemmon and the Catalina Highway

Follow this scenic drive from the Sonoran Desert to the forested summit of the Santa Catalina Mountains. Enjoy stunning vistas and unlimited opportunities for recreation—all right in Tucson's backyard.

### Know before you go



#### DAY USE FEE AREA:

Scan the QR code or visit [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) to buy a digital pass for day-use sites on Mount Lemmon, or buy one on site with cash or check. The Coronado pass is not valid at concessionaire-managed sites.



**SEASONS:** Year-round. Road can close for snow or fire danger. Call the road hotline at (520) 351-3351 for current conditions.



**ROAD SAFETY:** Winding road with blind turns. Watch for wildlife and bicyclists. Use pullouts to view scenery and let others pass.



**SUMMER SAFETY:** Be aware of extreme heat, venomous wildlife, monsoon storms, and flash floods during the summer.



**WATER:** Available during summer at Mt. Bigelow and Spencer Canyon, and inside the Palisades Visitor Center when open.



**INFORMATION:** The [Palisades Visitor Center](#) has a bookstore, hosts to answer questions, and indoor and outdoor exhibits.



**CABIN RENTALS:** Rent the [Palisades Ranger Residence](#) or [Sollers Cabin](#) up to 6 mo. in advance at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).

### Attractions



#### SKY ISLAND SCENIC BYWAY

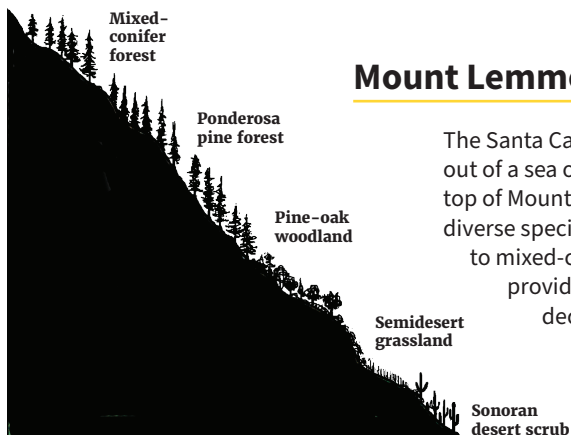
This paved, 24-mile route, also known as the Catalina Highway, climbs nearly 6,000 ft. from Sonoran Desert to pine forest, simulating the experience of driving from Mexico to Canada. Pullouts along the way offer exhibits and panoramic views of

Tucson and the surrounding mountains. Allow 1 hour drive time plus stops. Drive with caution; watch for wildlife and bicyclists.



#### SUMMERHAVEN and the SUMMIT AREA

Less than one hour from downtown Tucson, perennial water, picnic areas, and a network of wooded trails offer recreation opportunities for all interests and abilities. Mount Lemmon, Marshall Gulch, Ski Valley, and the amenities of Summerhaven make the top of the mountain a fantastic destination year-round. Parking areas can fill quickly during the busy season.



### Mount Lemmon: A Sky Island

The Santa Catalina Mountains—one of southern Arizona's *sky islands*—rise like a forested island out of a sea of desert. From around 3,000 feet at the base of the mountain, to over 9,000 feet at the top of Mount Lemmon, varied biotic communities, stacked in life zones or layers of habitat, harbor diverse species of plants and animals, from stands of saguaro and other cacti at the lower elevations to mixed-conifer forest near the top. Springs, snowmelt, and seasonal rains feed creeks that provide water for wildlife, as well as a refreshing delight for desert dwellers. The temperature decreases around 5 degrees with every 1,000 feet of elevation gain, causing up to a 30-degree difference between Tucson and Mount Lemmon. Precipitation increases with elevation. While Tucson might receive 12 inches of rain per year, Summerhaven averages nearly 30 inches. Be prepared for cooler temperatures and quickly changing weather when visiting Mount Lemmon.

**EMERGENCY OR FIRE: DIAL 911**

**SANTA CATALINA RANGER STATION: (520) 749-8700**

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

## Recreation Opportunities



### PICNICKING

Picnic areas at all elevations are open year-round. Amenities include picnic tables, pedestal grills, and vault toilets. Bring your own water. Group picnic sites at Rose Canyon Lake can be reserved at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov). See map for locations.



### HIKING & BIKING

Around 250 miles of singletrack trails weave across the Santa Catalina Mountain Range. Routes vary from short loops to long routes that link with other system trails, offering distances and difficulty levels for all abilities. See map and trail descriptions on next page.



### OUTDOOR LEARNING

Exhibits at pullouts along the highway, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Palisades Visitor Center tell about the natural and cultural history of the area. The wheelchair-accessible patio at Palisades is also a great place to see many species of hummingbirds during the summer months.



### NIGHT SKY VIEWING

Southern Arizona is well-known for its dark night skies, which make for excellent stargazing. The Mt. Lemmon SkyCenter hosts viewing events and observatory tours. Advance reservations required. If you camp on the mountain, be sure to soak in the nighttime view.

Photo © UA Mt. Lemmon SkyCenter / B. Foott



### CAMPING

See map for locations. Most sites are first come, first served. Pay with cash or check on site. \*Coronado pass is not valid at the concessionaire-managed campgrounds (indicated with an asterisk). **W** = Drinking water available. **R** = Reservations at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).

CAMPGROUND	SEASON	SINGLE SITES	GROUP SITES	TENT	TRAILER (Up to 22')
Molino Basin	Nov. 1 - May 1	X	X	X	X
Gordon Hirabayashi	Nov. 1 - May 1	X	X	X	X
General Hitchcock	Mar. 1 - Dec. 15	X		X	
*Rose Canyon (R)	Apr.-Oct.	X		X	X
*Showers Point (W, R)	Apr.-Oct.		X	X	
*Whitetail (W, R)	Apr.-Oct.		X	X	
*Spencer Canyon (W)	Apr.-Oct.	X		X	

## Special Places



**WINDY POINT:** Stop at this scenic vista for incredible panoramic views of the Tucson basin and surrounding ranges and an up-close look at the granite pinnacles eroded by weather into fascinating formations.



**ROSE CANYON LAKE:** This 6-acre lake is stocked with trout during summer. Visit [www.azgfd.com](http://www.azgfd.com) for fishing information and licenses. No boats. Day-use picnic sites and campground. Coronado pass not valid at this concessionaire-managed site.



**SKI VALLEY:** Mount Lemmon is home to the southernmost ski resort in the United States! [Ski Valley](http://SkiValley.com), perched at over 9,000 feet, offers 21 runs for skiing and snowboarding in the winter, as well as 30-minute Sky Rides on their lift year-round.



**PUSCH RIDGE WILDERNESS:** This rugged wilderness encompasses nearly 57,000 acres. Despite its proximity to the city, this wilderness area offers outstanding opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation.

## About Mount Lemmon

Known as *Babad Do'ag* (or Frog Mountain) to the Tohono O'odham, Mount Lemmon has been home to Indigenous people for thousands of years. Evidence of villages near the base of the mountain tell of communities that thrived here utilizing the natural resources of the area. Many tribes maintain connections to the landscape today and continue traditions, including gathering plants and holding ceremonies, like the annual saguaro fruit harvest.

By the late 1800s, settlers were ranching and prospecting in the area. In 1881, before any roads reached the top, a rancher guided botanists John

and Sara Lemmon, for whom the mountain is named, up the north side of the mountain by horseback following a route near what would become the Control Road in the 1920s.

The Santa Catalinas became a National Forest in 1902. Sawmills on the mountain provided lumber for early structures, including a hotel in what is now Summerhaven.

By the 1930s, more people wanted to visit the mountain, but the Control Road was too long of a trip from Tucson. Frank Hitchcock, then publisher of the *Tucson Citizen*, promoted the idea of a route up the south side of the mountain.

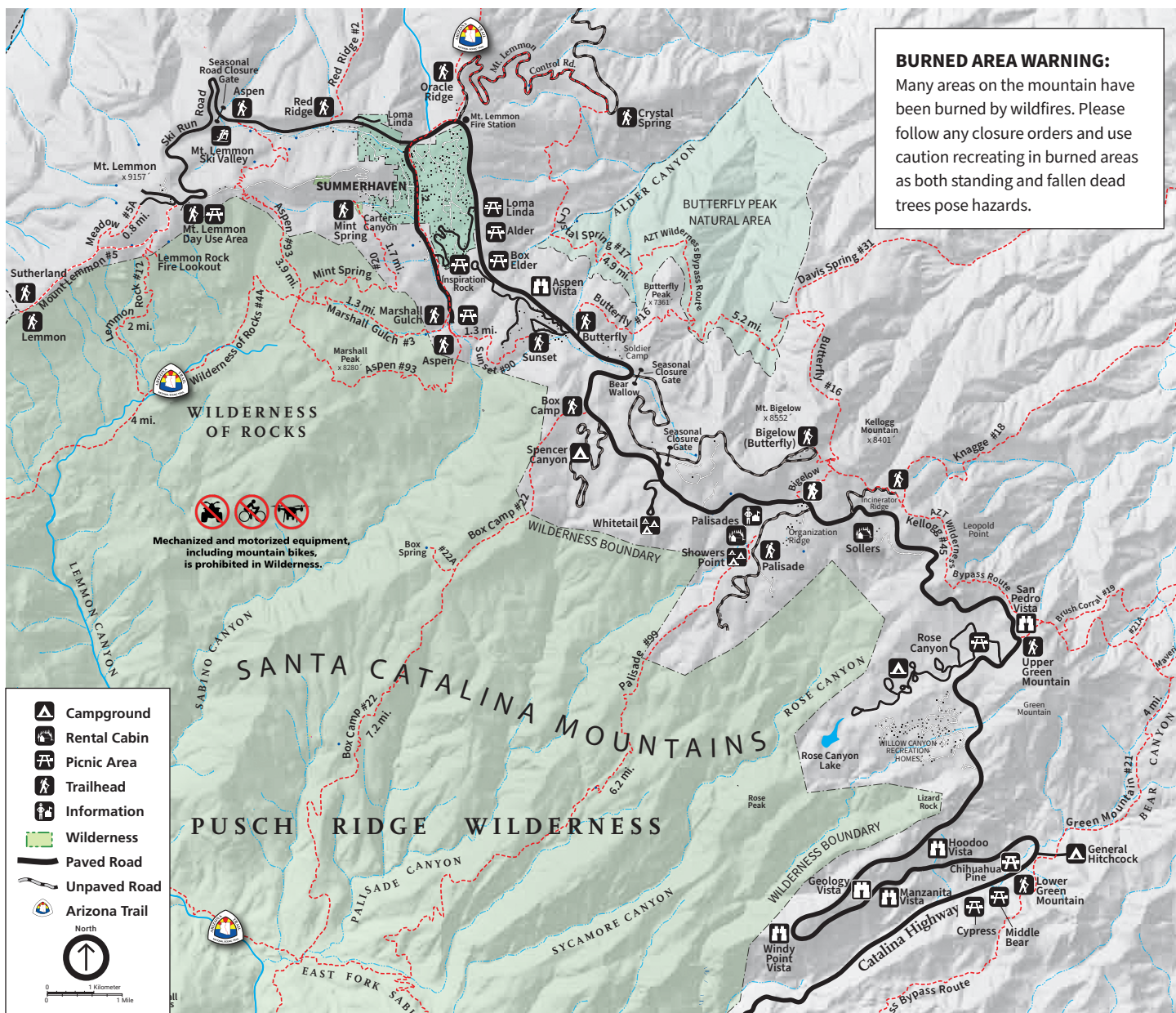
He coordinated prison labor and housed them at Prison Camp, which was built in 1937. By 1939, the highway was paved to Molino Basin. During WWII, due to [Executive Order 9066](http://ExecutiveOrder9066), Gordon Hirabayashi and other Japanese-Americans were interned at the site, now named in his honor.

The 1940s saw the growth of Summerhaven as a community and tourist destination, with local lumber still being used to build cabins, restaurants, and hotels. In 1951, the Hitchcock Highway was paved all the way to the top of the mountain. Today, the route—more commonly called the Catalina Highway—provides access to unlimited opportunities for recreation.

**The Palisades Visitor Center is managed in partnership with the Public Lands Interpretive Association.**

Produced by the Public Lands Interpretive Association [www.publiclands.org](http://www.publiclands.org)





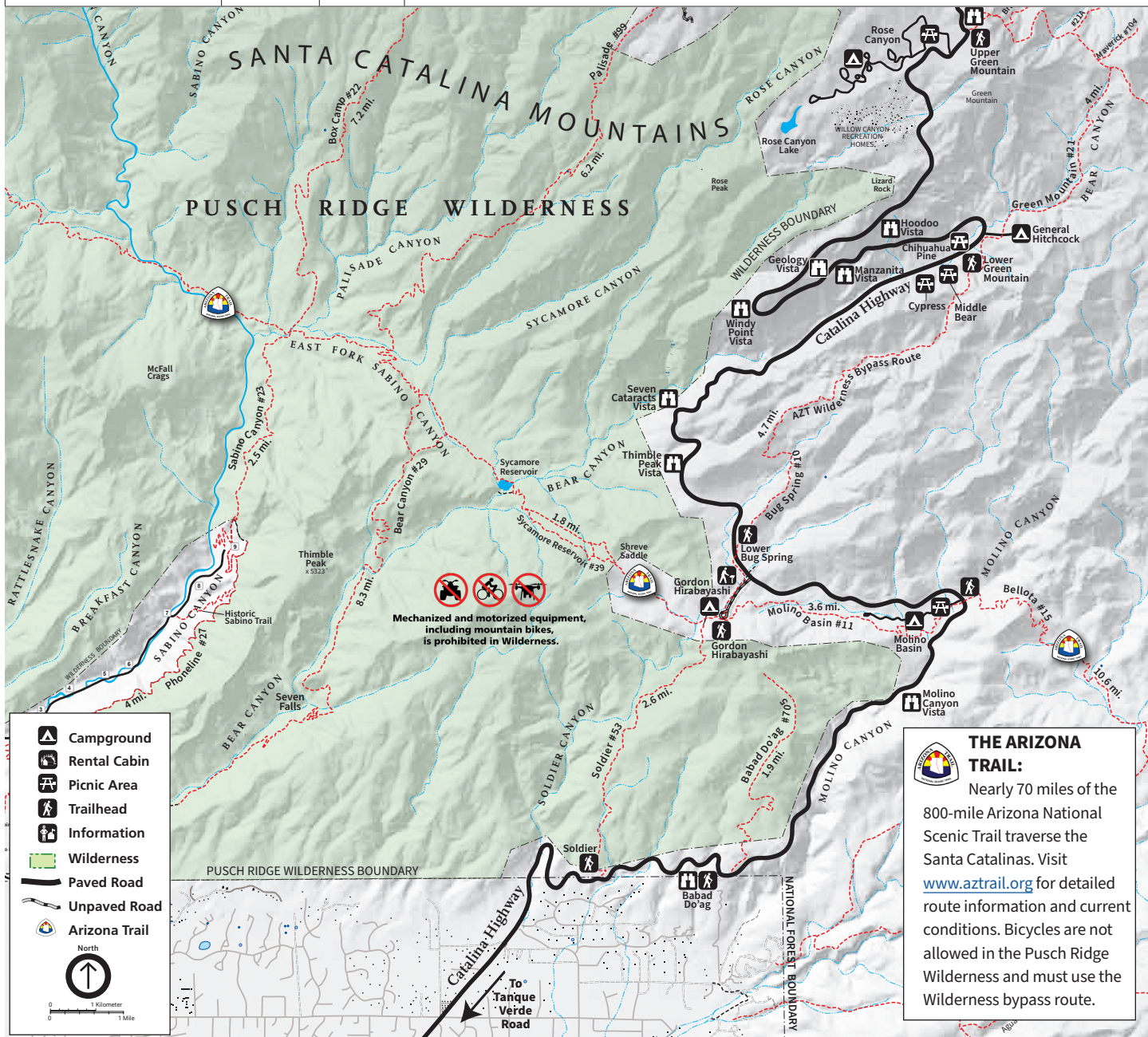
## Upper Mountain Trails

<b>Palisade #99</b>	Moderate	6.2 mi. one way	Take Organization Ridge Road (just below the Palisades Visitor Center) for 0.25 mi. to access this trailhead. The forested trail descends Palisade Canyon to the Sabino Basin. <b>Use:</b> Light
<b>Box Camp #22A</b>	Difficult	5.5 mi. one way	The first 2 mi. of this trail roll through ponderosa pine forest. The trail then begins a steep and rugged descent to the Sabino Basin. Great views. <b>Use:</b> Heavy near trailhead
<b>Butterfly #16</b>	Moderate	5.2 mi. one way	Access this trail from the Butterfly or Mt. Bigelow Trailheads. The trail traverses the eastern slopes of the range and offers great views of the San Pedro Valley. Hike out and back any distance. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Sunset #90</b>	Easy	1.3 mi. one way	After passing through a residential area, this forested trail follows the ridge above Sabino Creek and on to Marshall Gulch. Great views. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Aspen #93</b>	Moderate	3.9 mi. one way	Start this trail at Ski Valley or Marshall Gulch. The upper trail has great vistas of the Wilderness of Rocks. The lower segment winds around Marshall Peak and offers nice views of upper Sabino Creek. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Mt. Lemmon #5; Meadow Loop #5A, and Lemmon Lookout #12</b>	All levels	5 mi. one way	Access these trails from the Mt. Lemmon Day Use Area beyond Ski Valley. Make an easy 1.8-mi. loop connecting the Mt. Lemmon and Meadow Trails or continue on the Mt. Lemmon Trail to the Lemmon Lookout or Wilderness of Rocks Trails. Great views. Access road closed in winter. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Mint Spring #20</b>	Easy	1.7 mi. one way	This trail starts at the end of Carter Canyon Road. Climb through an area burned by the Aspen Fire on the way to Mint Spring and Marshall Saddle. Great views of Summerhaven. <b>Use:</b> Moderate
<b>Marshall Gulch #3 (Arizona Trail)</b>	Easy	1.3 mi. one way	This beautiful wooded trail follows the creek up Marshall Gulch to Marshall Saddle. Hike out and back any distance or link with the Aspen Trail at Marshall Saddle to make a great 4-mi. loop. <b>Use:</b> Heavy



## Low to Mid-Mountain Trails

<b>Soldier #53</b>	Moderate	2.6 mi. one way	Climbs from the highway up into desert grassland following the route of an old powerline to what was once a prison camp. Hike out and back any distance or take the trail to Gordon Hirabayashi. <b>Use:</b> Light
<b>Babad Do'ag #705</b>	Moderate	2.2 mi. one way	Park at the Babad Do'ag Vista. Use caution crossing the highway to access the trailhead just east of the parking area. Switchback up the saguaro-studded slope for some great views. <b>Use:</b> Moderate
<b>Bellota Trail #15</b> (Arizona Trail)	Easy	10.6 mi. one way	Access this trail from the Molino Basin parking area. Trail starts on the east side of the highway. Hike out and back any distance or continue all the way to Reddington Road. <b>Use:</b> Light
<b>Molino Basin #11</b> (Arizona Trail)	Easy	2.5 mi. one way	Access this easy trail that rolls through desert grassland from Molino Basin or Gordon Hirabayashi. Popular with mountain bikers. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Sycamore Reservoir #39</b> (Arizona Trail)	Easy	2.4 mi. one way	Access this trail from Gordon Hirabayashi. The trail follows a wash before climbing up to Shreve Saddle and then descends to the reservoir. <b>Use:</b> Moderate
<b>Bug Spring #10</b> (AZT Wilderness Bypass)	Moderate	4.6 mi. one way	Access this trail from the Bug Spring parking area or trailhead near the Middle Bear Picnic Area. Popular with mountain bikers. <b>Use:</b> Heavy
<b>Green Mountain #21</b> (AZT Wilderness Bypass)	Moderate	4.2 mi. one way	Access this trail from General Hitchcock Campground or the Green Mountain Trailhead. Hike out and back any distance or link with other trails. <b>Use:</b> Moderate



**THE ARIZONA TRAIL:**  
Nearly 70 miles of the 800-mile Arizona National Scenic Trail traverse the Santa Catalinas. Visit [www.aztrail.org](http://www.aztrail.org) for detailed route information and current conditions. Bicycles are not allowed in the Pusch Ridge Wilderness and must use the Wilderness bypass route.