

20 The Beaten Path

General description: The most popular trans-Beartooth route

Special attractions: Perhaps the best opportunity to really experience the breadth and diversity of the Beartooths

Type of trip: Shuttle

Total distance: 26 miles, not counting side trips

Difficulty: Long and strenuous, but not technically difficult or dangerous

Traffic: Heavy

Maps: USGS—Alpine, Castle Mountain, and Fossil Lake; RMS—Alpine—Mount Maurice and Cooke City—Cutoff Mountain

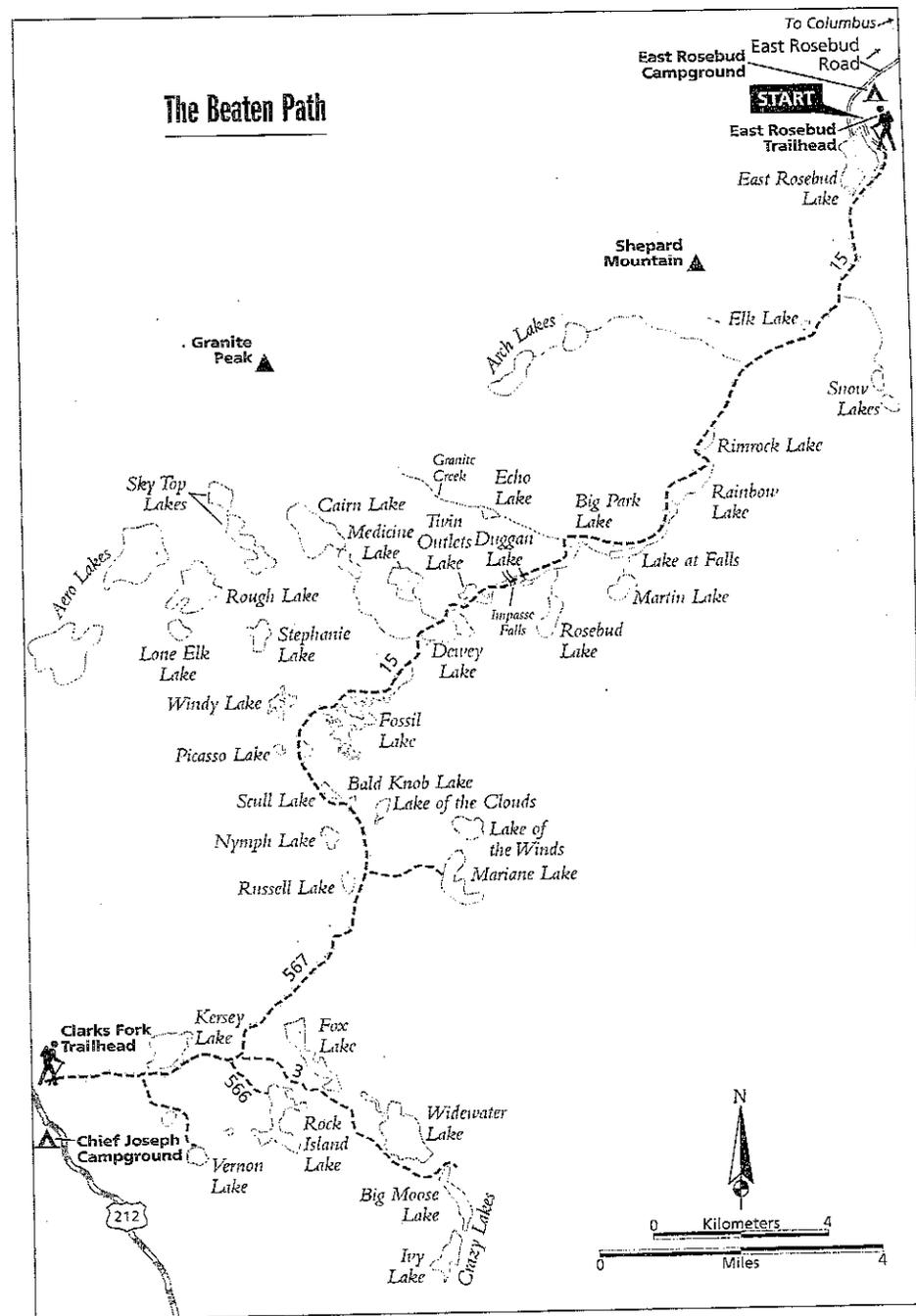
Starting point: East Rosebud Trailhead

Finding the trailhead: From Interstate 90 at Columbus, Montana, drive south 29 miles on Montana Highway 78 to Roscoe. Drive through this small ranching community, being careful not to stop at the Grizzly Bar—until the return trip, of course, when you'll be really ready for the famous Grizzly Burger. At the north end of Roscoe, the road turns to gravel and goes about 14.5 miles to the East Rosebud Trailhead. About 7 miles from Roscoe, the road crosses East Rosebud Creek and forks. Take a sharp right and continue south along the creek. The road is mostly gravel, except for a 4-mile paved section near the end.

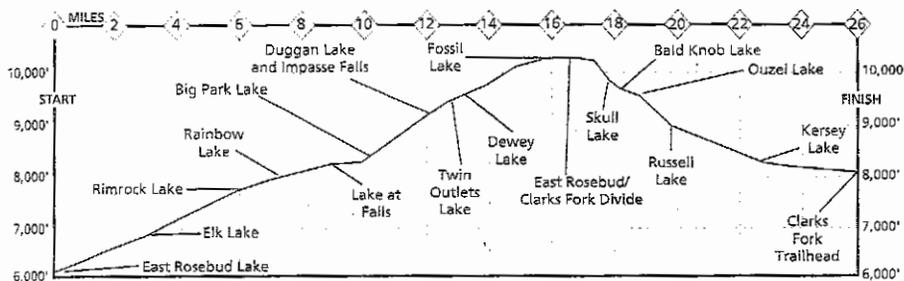
Parking and trailhead facilities: A huge parking lot at the trailhead with room for large horse trailers; toilet; also has a campground nearby.

Key Points

3.0	Elk Lake.
6.0	Rimrock Lake.
7.0	Rainbow Lake.
9.0	Lake at Falls.
9.9	Big Park Lake.
10.2	Junction with trail to Echo Lake; turn left.
11.8	Duggan Lake.
12.0	Impasse Falls.
12.8	Twin Outlets Lake.
14.0	Dewey Lake.
16.0	Fossil Lake.
16.8	East Rosebud/Clarks Fork Divide.
16.8	Gallatin/Custer National Forest boundary.
17.1	Windy Lake.
17.8	Skull Lake.
18.4	Bald Knob Lake.
18.8	Ouzel Lake.
20.0	Russell Lake.



- 22.0** Junction with trail to Fox Lake; turn right.
- 22.2** Junction with Crazy Lakes Trail No. 3; turn right.
- 23.0** Junction with Trail 566 to Rock Island Lake; turn right.
- 24.5** Kersey Lake.
- 24.7** Junction with trail to Vernon Lake; turn right.
- 25.2** Junction with trail to Curl Lake; turn left.
- 26.0** Clarks Fork Trailhead, U.S. Highway 212.



Recommended Itinerary

Twenty-six miles is not a bragging distance, and a strong hiker could do the entire trip in a day. However, to really make this a best backpacking vacation, you should plan on taking at least four days. If you get a late start, you might want to stay the first night at little Elk Lake, but most hikers go at least as far as Rainbow Lake before pitching a tent. For the second night, you have a choice of hundreds of campsites. Pick a good one and stay two nights, spending the second day experiencing the heart of the Beartooth Plateau around Fossil Lake. You can hike all the way out to the Clarks Fork Trailhead from Fossil Lake in one day, but if you prefer a less demanding schedule, there are also many campsites along the way. Russell Lake is a logical choice, but everybody else has that idea, too, so this lake is always crowded and shows signs of overuse. Strive for an alternate campsite. Many backpackers search for that idyllic base camp somewhere on the plateau and stay several nights before leaving paradise. Be sure to read the most current Forest Service camping regulations at an information board at the trailhead.

- First night: Rainbow Lake 7
- Second night: Somewhere around Fossil Lake 9
- Third night: Same campsite
- Fourth night: Russell, Fox, or Rock Island Lake 7

The Hike

Many people who know the Beartooths say the East Rosebud is the most scenic valley of all. It's filled with lakes and waterfalls that would be major tourism attractions

anywhere else. Here, there are so many, most don't even have names. The cutthroat-filled lakes bring a smile to any angler's face, and climbers love the place because of the endless array of rock faces. Families and friends frequently choose The Beaten Path for that long-planned wilderness adventure. Consequently, the East Rosebud Trailhead is probably the most heavily used in the Beartooths. Adding even more use to the area is the small community of summer homes called Alpine right at the trailhead. The summer homes extend up both sides of the lower sections of East Rosebud Lake, closing off much of the lake to public use.

This backpacking trip showcases all the beauty, austerity, emptiness, and majesty of the Beartooths. It's a great introduction to the region's richness, diversity, and starkness, traveling through the lowest bottomlands and the highest plateaus. Along the way the route skirts dozens of trout-filled lakes and stunning waterfalls. It penetrates rich forests and wanders the treeless, lichen-covered Beartooth Plateau. This trail touches the true essence of the Beartooths.

This is the land of rushing water. Waterfalls and frothy, cascading streams are everywhere. There's no such scenery in Yellowstone National Park. Nonetheless, we should all be elated to have the park so near, because it sucks up most of the visitors and leaves places like the East Rosebud for us.

Still, this trail receives relatively heavy use compared to other routes in the Beartooths. Amazingly, however, The Beaten Path does not seem crowded. Even though hundreds of people may be somewhere along the 26-mile trail at any given time, most hikers would never know it. It's always a surprise to meet another party on the trail, and quiet spots to camp abound.

For uninterrupted solitude, and to really enjoy and experience the Beartooths, do make an effort to get off The Beaten Path. This trail has dozens of options for off-trail adventures—which is one reason the Beartooths can swallow up hundreds of people and leave the trail seemingly abandoned.

Don't take this trip lightly. It requires a minimum of four nights out, but avid explorers could stay two weeks and not see anything twice. This trail description assumes a minimum of four nights out.

It's also hard to make good time on this trail. There are simply too many distractions—too many scenic vistas, too many hungry trout, too many fields of juicy berries. Plan on traveling about a mile per hour slower than normal.

Also, be sure to plan this trip carefully. The first big issue is transportation. The best option is to arrange with another group of hikers to do the trip at the same time. Each party starts at opposite ends of the trail, meeting at a campsite midway along the trail. Spend a day or two together, then head out and drive each other's vehicle home. Or leave a vehicle at one end of the trip and drive around to the other trailhead, or arrange to be picked up.

The entire 26 miles of trail is well maintained and easy to follow, so even a beginning backpacker can master it with ease. However, getting off The Beaten Path requires advanced wilderness skills.

The first 3 miles into Elk Lake are well-traveled and go by quickly. Expect to see lots of people on this popular stretch of trail. But every step of the way beyond Elk Lake is a step deeper and deeper into the wilderness, and it really seems like it. Elk Lake has a few campsites, but Rainbow Lake (7 miles in) is a better choice for the first night out if there's enough daylight left to get there.

Just after Elk Lake, the trail passes through an area where wild berries are as abundant as anywhere in the Beartooths, so browsers beware. Progress can slow to glacial speed. For about a mile a kaleidoscope of berries beckons from trailside, with huge crops of most species found in the Beartooths in abundance, especially huckleberries, thimbleberries, and wild raspberries, all nicely ripe in mid-August.

From berry heaven the trail breaks out of the forest and climbs about 800 feet through a monstrous rock field to Rimrock Lake. For a mile or so below the lake, East Rosebud Creek is little more than a long set of rapids. Apparently a big rockslide formed a natural dam and backed up Rimrock Lake. Take a rest on the rock field and look around at the trail to marvel at how it was constructed. Building a trail here was no small feat, especially negotiating the steep slopes around Rimrock Lake.

The trail crosses East Rosebud Creek on a sturdy wooden bridge at the outlet. Then it skirts above the west side of the lake, the tread expertly etched out of the rock face. After the climb to get here, camping at Rimrock Lake might seem like a good idea. But campsites are limited here, so it's better to drag on for another mile to Rainbow Lake for the first night out.

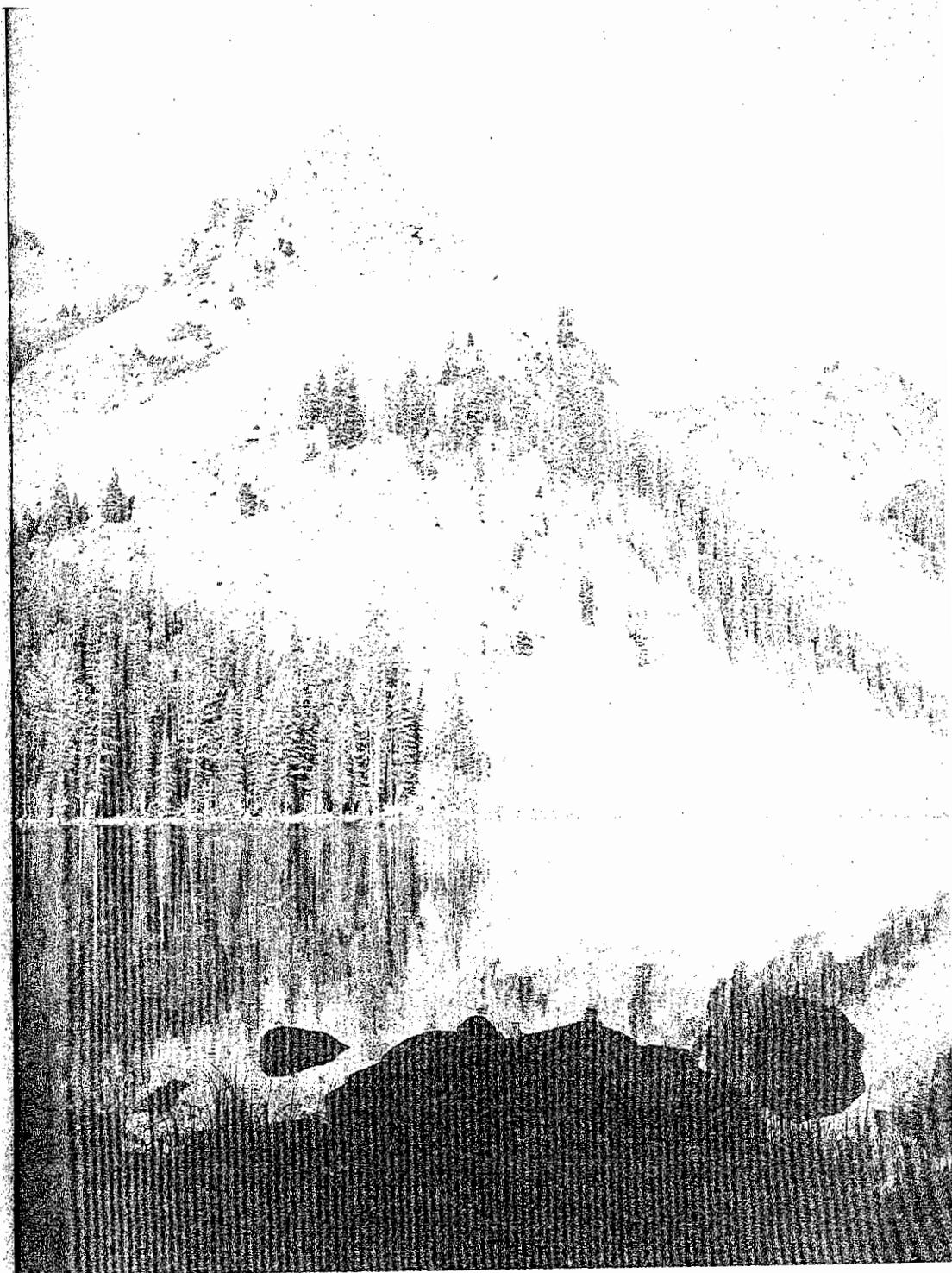
Both Rimrock and Rainbow Lakes display a beautiful blue-green color (often called "glacier milk") indicative of a glacier-fed lake. Camping at Rainbow Lake affords a great view of Whirlpool Creek as it falls into the lake after tumbling down from Sundance Glacier on 12,408-foot Castle Rock Mountain.

The terrain at the upper end of Rainbow Lake flattens out and offers plenty of good campsites. Other parties probably will be camped here, but the area is big enough to provide ample solitude for all campers. Horse campers use this place heavily, but the Forest Service has required horses to stay above the trail, leaving several excellent campsites below the trail for backpackers only.

After the great scenery at Rimrock and Rainbow Lakes, you might think that it can't get much better. Guess again. Plan on lots of camera stops on the trip from Rainbow Lake to Fossil Lake. Also watch for the mountain goats that inhabit this section of the East Rosebud drainage.

If the falls on Whirlpool Creek was impressive, the two falls from Martin Lake that drop into well-named Lake at Falls are awe inspiring. Yet another mile or so up the trail, be prepared for perhaps the most astounding sight of the trip, massive Impasse Falls, which plunges about 100 feet into Duggan Lake. Travelers get great views of the current from both below and above as the trail switchbacks beside the falls.

From Impasse Falls, the trail goes by two more large, unnamed waterfalls before arriving at Twin Outlets Lake. And the short stretch between Twin Outlets Lake and Dewey Lake features another series of waterfalls.



Dewey Lake.

With all this scenery (and all the film you'll put through your camera) on the second day of this trip, it's hard to hold a steady pace. Each person's mileage and time on the trail will vary widely. It's 9 miles from Rainbow Lake to Fossil Lake. Figuring four nights from trailhead to trailhead, there are two options for the second night's camp. Either camp somewhere along the trail or push on to Fossil Lake and stay two nights here.

From the standpoint of available campsites, it's slightly better to forge on to Fossil Lake. Even though the scenery is great along this stretch, it lacks a good selection of campsites. The most serviceable sites are at Big Park Lake, Twin Outlets Lake, or Dewey Lake and along the stream above Big Park Lake. Lake at Falls and Duggan Lake offer virtually no campsites.

Twin Outlets Lake is just below timberline, and it's the last place along this trail where the Forest Service allows campfires. Campfires are prohibited in the Fossil Lake area too, which is at about 10,000 feet in elevation, but this should take nothing away from the grand experience of spending a few nights in the absolute core of the Beartooths.

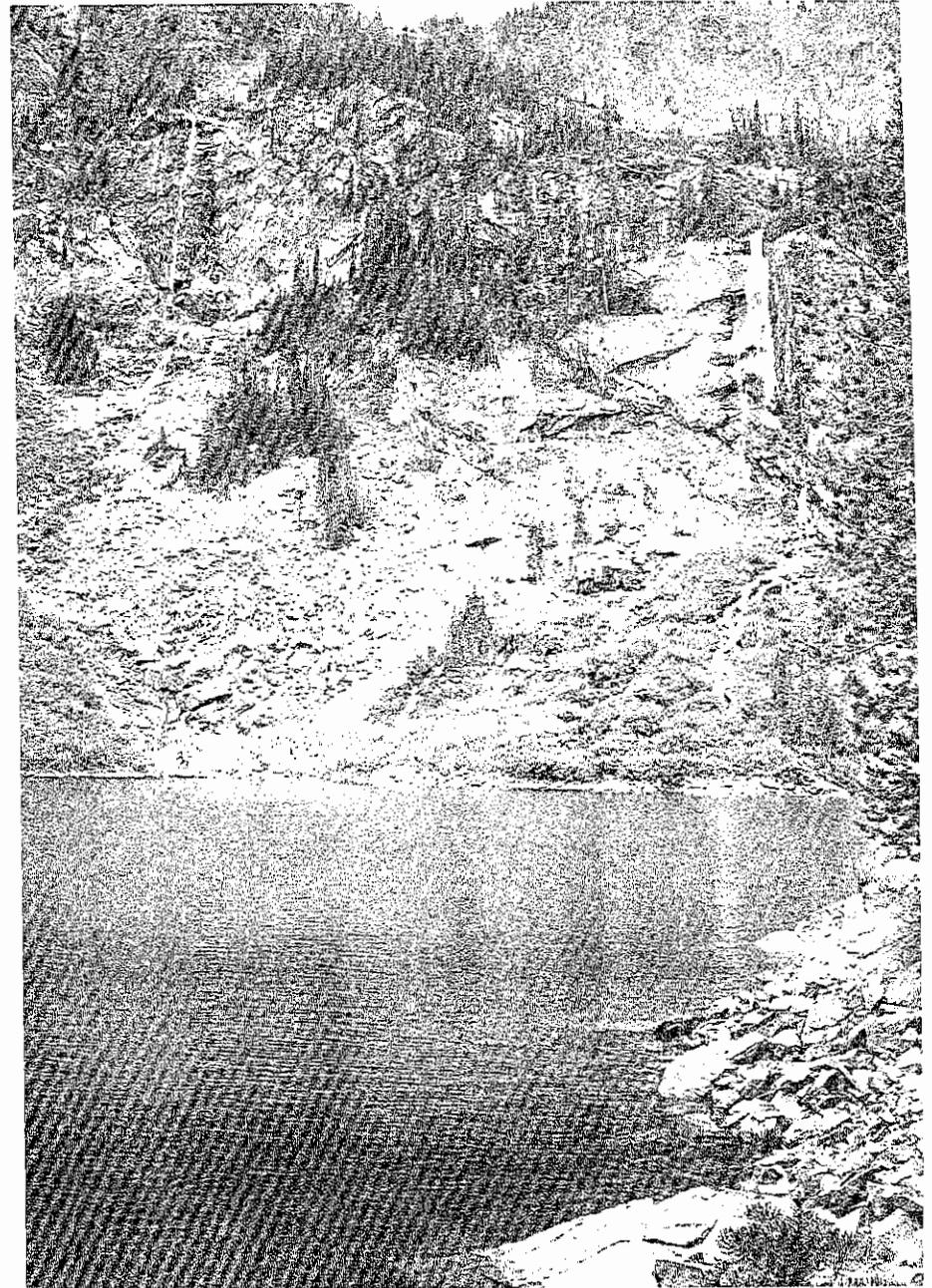
One more choice for the second campsite is Echo Lake, which entails a 1-mile side trip. The trail breaks off to the west from the main trail above Big Park Lake and just before the bridge across Granite Creek. This isn't an official trail, but it's easy to follow. Watch for mountain goats on the slopes on the south side of Echo Lake.

Count on spending at least one night in the Fossil Lake area. Arriving fairly early on the third day allows extra time to search for that flawless, dream campsite. If you can't find that ideal campsite at Fossil, try nearby Windy, Bald Knob, or Mermaid Lake.

The Fossil Lake area is the beating heart of a great wilderness, and much of the spirit of this top-of-the-world environment seems to flow from it, just as East Rosebud Creek does. You'll really be missing something if you just pass through it.

From a five-star base camp here, a multitude of remarkable day trips await. Always keep a close eye on the weather, and head back to camp if a storm rolls in—as they often do in this high-elevation paradise. Try to rise early and cruise around in the mornings instead of the afternoons, which is when thunderstorms rip through the Beartooths on an almost daily basis. Figure on spending a full day just to walk the perimeter of Fossil Lake.

About halfway along the trail around octopus-like Fossil Lake, a huge cairn marks the divide between two drainages (East Rosebud Creek and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River) and the boundary between Custer and Gallatin National Forests. Fossil Lake drains into the East Rosebud, and Windy Lake empties into the Clarks Fork. On the Forest Service maps, the trail numbers change from Trail 15 to Trail 567. This is also the place for cross-country hikers to break off the main trail and head over to Windy Lake, which can be seen off to the west. Windy Lake might be called Fizzle Lake on some maps, just as several other lakes in this area have different names on different maps. That's reason enough to bring along a complete selection of maps.



A scenic but unusually named area, Lake at Falls.

Leaving Fossil Lake, the trail goes by Skull, Bald Knob, and Ouzel Lakes before sping below timberline on the way to Russell Lake. Russell is nicely located for the night out. Camp at either the upper or lower end of Russell Lake. To reach the npsite at the lower end, ford the stream, which gets seriously large as it slowly ves the lake. Unfortunately, Russell Lake receives heavy use and shows it, so you ght want to camp elsewhere. Other choices for the last night out would be Fox or ck Island Lake. The trail to Fox isn't an official trail, but it's well marked.

The trail from Russell Lake is probably the least attractive stretch of the trip, but ost people would still rate it quite highly. For 6 miles, it passes through a dense lodgele forest. The 1988 fires burned the section around Kersey Lake.

With luck you'll come out on a hot day. Besides being the most scenic trailhead the Beartooths, the Clarks Fork Trailhead offers the best swimming hole. Wearing ive-day accumulation of sweat and grime, most hikers feel an overpowering tempion to jump in. Don't fight it; just do it.

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ss elevation is gained by starting this trip at the south end at the Clarks Fork Trailad, at 8,036 feet. However, since the north end is more accessible and scenic, hikes ally start from the East Rosebud Trailhead at 6,208 feet. Either way, the uphill mb isn't really severe; it's more of a gradual ascent most of the way. Perhaps the epest section is between Elk Lake and Rimrock Lake. Many backpackers choose : base camp option and stay several nights on the plateau around Fossil Lake, somees called the "top of the world," before leaving the area.

e Trips

fer to Getting Off The Beaten Path, following this hike.

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oosing a campsite is a big issue on this trail, mainly because of the heavy use this te receives. Several camping areas such as Elk and Russell Lakes show signs of seri-overuse. Other lakes, such as Rimrock Lake and Lake at Falls, may look like logl camping areas on the map but offer few if any good campsites. On the other side the coin, if you get off the trail a mile or so, you can frequently find a good campthat looks as though it has never been used. If you take this option, please make e it looks as if nobody has ever camped there when you leave in the morning. Also, sure to check current regulations for camping and campfires at the information ard at the trailhead.

Fishing

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (DFWP) knows this is the most popular trail in the Beartooths and tries hard to complement this popularity with a great fishery.

East Rosebud Lake houses a mixed bag of brown trout, brookies, rainbows, and cutthroat trout. The steep terrain keeps the browns from moving far upstream, but brookies, rainbows, cutthroats, and even a few goldens survive in various places upstream in East Rosebud Creek. Goldens were stocked in several lakes along this trail in the 1950s, but they have readily crossbred with both rainbows and cutthroats. Unless you really know trout, the golden trout characteristics are difficult to see.

With the exception of Cairn and Billy Lakes, there are no brook trout above Elk Lake in this drainage. Rainbows dominate in Rimrock and Rainbow Lakes, and cutthroat trout dominate in the lakes above Rainbow Lake. Because of its popularity, Fossil Lake is stocked frequently with cutts to keep the fishing hot, although they can be hard to find because they tend to school.

If you camp at Elk Lake, you might have time for a side trip up to Snow Lakes. These lakes hold some nice rainbows, but the tough climb up the east side of Snow Creek keeps all but the most determined anglers away.

Anglers who camp near Big Park Lake might want to reserve an entire day for climbing (and it truly is a climb) into and out of Scat and Martin Lakes. DFWP is trying to establish a pure golden trout fishery there, and it may be worth the climb.

Cairn Lake would also provide a worthwhile side trip for those camping near Dewey Lake. Cairn and Billy Lakes both have brook trout well above average in size. The trout don't reproduce well here, allowing those remaining to grow larger. DFWP closely monitors these lakes—a downstream migration of brook trout would seriously harm the cutthroat/rainbow fishery down below. If you catch brookies below Billy Lake, notify DFWP.

Entering the Clarks Fork side of the pass near Fossil Lake, the fishing gets even better. There are a great many lakes in the Clarks Fork drainage, and this trail goes through the heart of this incredible fishery. Because of the easy access for horses, most of the lakes along the trail were stocked with brook trout in the first half of the twentieth century. The brookies tend to be on the smaller side but provide some great fishing and an easy meal.

Just off the trail, Leo Lake, Lake of the Winds, and Lake of the Clouds host cutthroat trout, while Gallery Lake also has rainbows. Fox Lake is one of those places that few people stop at, but many more should. It sports larger than average brookies, nice rainbows, and an occasional grayling that works its way down from Cliff Lake.

As an experiment, DFWP has stocked lake trout in Kersey Lake to prey on the brook trout population. It is hoped that by reducing the number of brookies, the remaining ones will grow larger. At last check, this seems to be working.

GETTING OFF THE BEATEN PATH To get the most out of an extended trans-Beartooth trip, try some off-trail excursions. Only those proficient with compass and topo map should attempt cross-country travel. The following list of side trips has been ranked as Human (easy for almost everybody, including children), Semi-human (moderately difficult), and Animal (don't try it unless you're very fit and wilderness-wise). Refer to the chapter Using this Guidebook for more information on ratings.

Destination	Difficulty
Snow Lakes	Animal
Arch Lakes	Animal
Echo Lake	Human
Warho Lake	Animal
Medicine Lake	Animal
Fossil Lake	Human
Cain Lake	Semi-human
Rizzle (Windy) Lake	Human
Basin (Picasso) Lake	Human
Enchirion (Mermaid) Lake	Human
Lake of the Clouds	Semi-human
Nymph (Lou) Lake	Semi-human
Looking Glass (Stephanie) Lake	Semi-human
Rough Lake, Arch Lakes	Animal
Sky Top Lakes	Animal
Gallery Lake	Semi-human
Mariane Lake	Human
Lake of the Winds	Semi-human
Fox Lake	Human
Rock Island Lake	Human
Vernon Lake	Human
Carl Lake	Human
Aquarius Lake	Animal

21 Elk Lake

General description: A moderately long but easy day trip and possible candidate for an easy overnighter
Special attractions: Elk Lake
Type of trip: Out-and-back
Total distance: 6 miles

Difficulty: Easy
Traffic: Heavy
Maps: USGS—Alpine; RMS—Alpine—Mount Maurice
Starting point: East Rosebud Trailhead

Finding the trailhead: Refer to The Beaten Path, Hike 20.

Parking and trailhead facilities: A huge trailhead parking area with room for large horse trailers; toilet; also has a campground nearby.

The Hike

This route covers the first 3 miles of the popular trans-Beartooth trail from East Rosebud to Clarks Fork, referred to in this book as The Beaten Path. The trail is well maintained and well traveled. Expect to see lots of people.



The rocky but well-constructed trail between Elk Lake and Rimrock Lake.