

Carson Pass to Winnemucca Lake (and perhaps beyond)



This is probably the most used trail in the Silver Lake to Carson Pass area. We often refer to it as the interstate 5 trail. That's because, on the weekends, there are a lot of people and dogs to be found along this trail. We go during the week.

The trailhead is next to the Eldorado National Forest Interpretive Association (ENFIA) cabin at Carson Pass. There is ample parking but it costs. Make sure you stop at the ENFIA cabin to check out the maps, books, t-shirts and postcards (and buy some water if you don't have some) and ask the friendly docents where the flowers are best. Use sunscreen and bug repellent before you go and take water with you. It is unsafe to drink untreated lake and stream water in the Sierras. If you go during the middle part of the day, take some light rain gear even if it doesn't look very cloudy. It comes on very fast.

Among the reasons this hike is so popular is that it's easy to get to, the hike is not too long, being about 2 miles in, the elevation change is not severe and there's ample variety of flowers and forested areas along the way. The trail runs roughly south-south-west to Winnemucca Lake. So, for photographers, the sun will be on your left if you start in the morning and on your right in the afternoon. The flora and fauna, of course, change often as the season progresses.

The first part of the hike is in a forested area (mosquitoes like this) with occasional tree-framed views of Round Top Mountain. About ½ mile into the hike, you will come upon Frog Lake on your left and will have encountered most of the hike's elevation gain. On the hillside to the west of the lake you can sometimes find a few Wood Roses low to the ground. This is the only place in the area where we've found them. If you circle around to the east side of the lake, you might find a large field of wild iris. Another field of iris can be found immediately north-west of Winnemucca Lake. These iris plants look good for about a two week period so timing is everything.

Just past Frog Lake, there is a well marked fork in the trail. The left fork is the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and, unless you are prepared for a REAL trek, stick to the right fork toward Winnemucca Lake. From this point to the lake, you are in an open area. Scarlet gilia, Indian paintbrush, blue flax, occasional sierra lilies and a myriad of other small flowers are everywhere. The trail skirts along the western flank of Elephant's Back which looks like a carefully arranged pile of rocks. Further along, you might encounter a flowing stream or wet area and see some small blue butterflies known as Melissa Blues. Columbine, monkey flower and Lupine also can be found in these damp areas.

When you reach Winnemucca Lake and have taken a break for a snack or lunch, you might want to do a bit of exploring. On the south side of the lake is Round Top Mountain, the tallest mountain in the area at 10,380 feet. While round at the top, it's north face falls vertically right into the lake so exploring around that side is limited. There is a trail that goes part-way along the north side of the lake. This area is almost completely covered with large boulders and traversing through here is a real rock scramble. The previously mentioned iris field is just to the north-west of the lake.

Once you're done exploring around the lake, you have several choices; 1) turn around and go back the way you came in; 2) take the trail that goes to Wood's Lake about two miles away; or 3) go another mile mostly uphill to Round Top Lake and then back to Winnemucca and Carson Pass or on to Wood's lake. Several caveats are in order here. The elevation change from Winnemucca to Wood's lake is significantly more than from Winnemucca to Carson Pass. You probably don't want to walk UP from Wood's to Winnemucca. If you do the Carson Pass to Winnemucca [to Round Top Lake] to Wood's hike, make sure you have some transportation available at Wood's Lake. Parking is limited there. The hike from Winnemucca to Round Top Lake is mostly uphill and, after the two miles to get to Winnemucca from Carson Pass, may be more than you'll want to take on (remember, you still have to walk back out).

Your choice of which hike is best for you depends upon why you are hiking. If you are looking for a specific wildflower then you would choose a hike where that wildflower often occurs (iris on this hike or sierra lilies on the Meiss hike or shooting stars at Emigrant Lake). If you are just looking for a hike that has great views, a variety of wildflowers, is relatively easy to traverse and can easily be done in a few hours depending upon your capability, the Carson Pass to Winnemucca hike is top notch and by far the most popular hike in the area.

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