

Oregon / Steens Mountains

Wildhorse Lake

DISTANCE: 2.5 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1200 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

Spectacular hike below the summit of Steens Mountain. In an arid landscape, Wildhorse Lake shimmers high in a glacial cirque, nestled among views you can't get enough of. The dramatic landscape is the work of uplifted lava flows, sculpted by ice and time here in the southeast corner of Oregon.

From a parking area just below the summit of Steens Mountain, this 2.5-mile hike (1.25 each way) descends 1200 feet into a cirque at the head of Wildhorse Canyon to the shores of Wildhorse Lake. The stunning geography of Steens is on display the entire way, with views over the Alvord Desert at the trailhead and a sweeping vista down the canyon below the lake. The area surrounding the lake is prime for backcountry exploring, just one small corner of the Steens Mountain Wilderness. Go for a swim, admire the work the of a long-gone glacier, and drink in the beauty of a side of Oregon that most people don't get to see.

The trail is steep and rocky, and the return journey is obviously the more challenging portion of the hike as you regain all the elevation you gave up to reach the lake. If you're confident in your backcountry navigation skills and want to turn this into a loop hike, head to the summit first, then drop down to the lake off trail, picking your way among the scree and scrub (at your own risk, of course). It's easy to keep your way, as the lake is visible almost the entire way down, depending on the route you take.

To access, take either the north or south entrance to the Steens Mountain Loop Road near Frenchglen, Oregon. The gravel road winds its way up along the glacial gorges on the western slopes of the mountain til it approaches the rim. Follow the signs towards Wildhorse Lake and Steens Summit and follow the road til it dead ends at a parking area in front of a steeper gated road (this is the trail to the summit). You've just driven on Oregon's highest road! The trail heads off to the right of the gate, and your first view of Wildhorse Lake comes quickly. Keep an eye out for bighorn sheep.

