



Hiker Heather Scott heads for the summit of Abercrombie Mountain, eastern Washington's second-highest peak. Deep forests, high peaks, lonesome trails, and desert shrub-steppe are all within easy reach of Spokane.

Hiking the Inland Northwest

Day hikes and overnight trips in Spokane's backyard

BY CRAIG ROMANO

Residents of Spokane often like to boast to their western Washington counterparts about what makes their city such a livable place. They'll cite affordable housing, good schools, extensive parks and bike trails, and a strong sense of community. And if they're hikers, they'll also point out that they live smack-dab in the middle of some of the most beautiful and diverse landscapes in the Northwest; a region often referred to as the Inland Northwest.

Sure, Seattle has Puget Sound, and close proximity to the Cascades and the Olympics. But Washington's second

city sits in the transition zone where the rolling golden Palouse hills, the desert steppe and basalt canyons of the Channeled Scablands, and the lofty green Selkirk Mountains all converge. And Spokane straddles a roaring river—also named Spokane—whose origin is from nearby Coeur d'Alene Lake, one of northern Idaho's great lakes.

Nowhere else in Washington can you drive one hour in each direction and

end up in such diverse ecosystems. And nowhere else in the Evergreen State do you have such a wide choice of places to hike. And although the trails of the Inland Northwest lag behind Western Washington in quantity, they lag behind in the quantity of hikers, too. It's not uncommon here to complete a hike without encountering another trail user.

The Inland Northwest's trails aren't crawling with hikers, but the lands those trails traverse teem with a wide array of flora and fauna. The Selkirk Mountains is one of the few places in the Continental United States where you can run into five members of the deer family: white-tail deer, mule deer, moose, elk,

and woodland caribou are all found here. These mountains are also one of the few places in Washington where you're likely to spot a grizzly or wolf.

Ponderosa pines blend with Douglas fir in this mile-high range. The northern slopes of the Selkirks often harbor thick forests, while southern slopes are graced with sage. Groves of ancient western red cedars, rivaling those found in the Cascades, can be found in some of the cool valleys. On the open slopes, desert flowers intermingle with blossoms familiar to the Cascades and Rockies. Birch and aspen forests thrive here too—guaranteeing outbursts of color, come autumn.

In the Palouse and Scablands, you may not find dense forest, but in spring you'll be treated to a show of flowering plants. These somewhat forbidding places explode with color in the springtime. Look for bitterroot, camas, buttercups, yellow bells, shooting stars, larkspur, geraniums and balsamroot. And if the array of wildflowers and desert blooms isn't enough to satisfy your senses, there's an aviary assortment here that'll keep you flocking to the region each spring and fall. You may be fortunate to witness trumpeter swans, bluebirds, grebes, falcons, sandhill cranes, avocets, phalaropes, nighthawks, tanagers, orioles and quails.

And while some of the best places to hike in the Inland Northwest lie 50 to 100 miles outside of Spokane, there are a handful of wonderful locales to explore by boot within minutes from downtown. Places like Mount Spokane State Park, with its 14,000 acres and 50

Hiking the Inland Northwest



CRAG ROMANO

Chatcolet Lake, along the Indian Cliff Trail in Idaho's Heyburn State Park. This 7,800-acre park offers miles of pleasant lake and riverside hiking.

Eastern Washington Wilderness?

Despite the fact that large tracts of undeveloped land remain east of the Cascades, very little of it is protected within wilderness. Only 39,000 acres (3.5 %) of the Colville National Forest's 1.1 million acres is classified as wilderness. The forest's only wilderness, the Salmo-Priest, is too small to support its populations of grizzly and caribou. Large tracts of old-growth forest abut the wilderness in both Washington and Idaho, and would make suitable additions. The nearby 10,000-acre Grassy Top Roadless Area should also be considered for wilderness inclusion.

Some of the largest tracts of roadless areas and prime habitat in the Colville National Forest include the lands that encompass the Kettle Mountains. Over 100,000 acres in the Kettles have been identified by conservation groups as wilderness candidates. The 32,000-acre Abercrombie-Hooknose Roadless Area should also be classified as wilderness.

Suitable lands abutting the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness in the Umatilla National Forest have also been suggested by wilderness advocates for inclusion in the wilderness system.

Several conservation groups have taken an active role in trying to secure protection for these lands. Among the most active is the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, 1208 Bay Street #201, Bellingham, WA 98225, (360) 671-9950, www.ecosystem.org.

miles of trails. The 500-acre Dishman Hills Natural Resources Conservation Area, contains 10 miles of trails. And right within the city limits, you'll find Riverside State Park, a 9,000-acre greenbelt with over 25 miles of trails.

You can spend a lifetime exploring the trails that surround Spokane. Over the years I've been fortunate to hike hundreds of miles in Washington's eastern frontier and Idaho's panhandle. Here are some of my favorites.

The Palouse

Who says the Palouse is all wheat and lentil fields? Okay, there's WSU's Rogers Field too. But there are also some great hikes here tucked among the rolling loess hills of southeastern Washington.

Kamiak Butte

The second highest point in Whitman County, this 3,641-foot peak boasts far-reaching views that include three states. But the real thrill to this hike is its spring floral show. It's absolutely stunning. Expect to find calypso orchids, desert bluebells, desert shooting stars, starflower, yellow bells, and larkspur. Hikers of all ages and abilities can enjoy the 3.5 mile loop over the Butte.

Channeled Scablands

This region's unique geography was formed when a gigantic ice-age lake burst. This caused massive flooding that scoured the Columbia Plateau—leaving behind some pretty impressive canyons.

Palouse Falls and Canyon

In my opinion, Palouse Falls is the absolute prettiest waterfall in the entire state. Stand mesmerized at the edge of a broad basalt canyon watching the Palouse River thunder 198 feet into the dark chasm. You'll share the view with resident marmots. Hike an easy half mile to a vertigo-inducing point right

Hiking the Inland Northwest

above the falls. For a real adventure, scramble down into the canyon—but be aware that this is rattlesnake heaven.

Idaho's "Great Lakes"

Idaho's panhandle is a land of rugged mountains and big, sprawling lakes. Coeur d'Alene, Pend Oreille and Priest form the core of Idaho's "great lakes." Scenic trails grace their shores, leading to quiet beaches and stunning overlooks.

Indian Cliff

The Indian Cliff Trail in Heyburn State Park offers one of the finest views of Idaho's river-within-the-lake. When Lake Coeur d'Alene's outlet was dammed, it caused the water level to rise, spilling over and incorporating Round, Benewah, and Chatcolet Lakes into it. All that remains to delineate these lakes is the levee of the St. Joe River—creating the illusion of a river within a lake. The hike from Hawley's Landing Campground makes for a nice 5.4-mile loop. There are plenty of other options too, in this 7,800 acre park.

Priest Lake

Priest is the prettiest and most remote of northern Idaho's great lakes. The Lakeshore Trail travels 7.6 miles along Priest's pristine northwestern shoreline. It's a nearly level, well-groomed trail, accessible at several points and perfect for all hiking abilities. Enjoy quiet coves, sandy beaches, cool forest shade, beautiful views of Idaho's craggy Selkirks, and the possibility of spooking a moose or bear.

The Selkirks

Offering the highest summits in Washington east of the Cascades, the Selkirks offer exceptional hiking opportunities. Lofty ridges, old-growth forest, sprawling meadows, abundant wildlife and solitude along the trail are what you can expect here.

Grassy Top Mountain

This is an easy 8-mile round trip ridge hike through a quiet corner of the Selkirks. Maintaining a mean elevation of around 6,000 feet, the trail to Grassy Top delivers exceptional views of the Salmo-Priest Peaks, nearby Hall Mountain, and the wild Upper Priest River Valley. The trail traverses meadows carpeted with wildflowers.

Little Snowy Top and the Salmo-Priest Loop

One of the finest loop hikes in all the Northwest, this trip to Idaho's isolated Little Snowy Top Mountain takes you through some of the wildest country in eastern Washington. Most of this 20-mile hike runs through the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, the only federal wilderness in the Colville National Forest. Home to grizzlies and caribou, the Salmo-Priest also contains some of the finest stands of old-growth cedars this side of the Cascades. The views from Shedroof Divide—spanning from B.C.'s Kootenay Pass Peaks all the way to Mount Spokane—are breathtaking.

Other Great Destinations

Within a three hour drive of Spokane are even more top-notch hiking destinations.

Kettle Mountains

Washington's forgotten mountains; the Kettles form an imposing barrier in the Okanogan Highlands. A 42-mile trail runs along the crest, skirting all of the high summits. Plenty of side trails feed into the crest allowing for day hikes. The meadows along the Marcus Trail to Copper Butte (at 7,135-feet, highest point in the range) are among the finest in the state.

Blue Mountains

Tucked in southeastern Washington and spilling over into Oregon are the Blue Mountains. Defined primarily by deep broad canyons, these peaks may be unimposing, but the landscape is

wild and lonely. A good portion of the Blues is protected within the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness, home to one of the largest elk populations in America. Nice hikes can be made through the forests that line the Tucannon River or high ridges leading to Mount Misery and Oregon Butte.

Abercrombie-Hooknose Roadless Area

Forming the high divide between the Columbia and Pend Oreille Rivers in northeastern Washington, the Abercrombie-Hooknose Roadless Area is dominated by Abercrombie Mountain—at 7,308 feet, it's eastern Washington's second highest summit. A short and steep trail leads to the rocky summit, where you'll be greeted with far-reaching views that span from British Columbia to the Columbia Plateau. ♦

Craig Romano is author of Best Hikes with Dogs Inland Northwest (Mountaineers Books). An avid hiker, runner, and paddler, his works can also be read in Northwest Runner, Canoe and Kayak Magazine, and Outdoors NW. He is co-creator of Hikeoftheweek.com, a trail resource for the Olympic Peninsula.

Great Resources

100 Hikes in the Inland Northwest by Rich Landers (Mountaineers Books)

Best Hikes with Dogs in the Inland Northwest by Craig Romano and Alan Bauer (Mountaineers Books) Emphasis is on canine-friendly hikes, but a good source for all hikers. The most inclusive trail guide on the Kettle Mountains.

Trails of the Wild Selkirks (South of the Canadian Border) by Dennis Nicholls (Keokee Books)