



THE SAWTOOTHS

South Fork of the Boise River to Stanley

Overall Mileage: 97.7 miles

As a cheeky nod to their Wyoming neighbors, locals have been known to affectionately refer to the Sawtooth Mountains as “the Tetons without handrails.” For years, the Sawtooths have quietly been revered as an Idaho gem and are often referred to as the “crown jewel” of Idaho. With picturesque mountain peaks, colorful wildflower meadows, ample high mountain lakes, and the amenities to support the steadily increasing crowds of vacationers, the Sawtooths offer one of the most complete mountain experiences in Idaho.

The Sawtooth Wilderness occupies a part of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA), protecting a rugged landmass that encompasses hundreds of jagged, heavily-glaciated granite peaks, 50 of which top out at over 10,000 feet. This scenic wilderness was first identified for protection as a “primitive area” in 1937, but wasn’t officially designated as wilderness until 1972.

The ICT crosses four different watersheds throughout the Sawtooths, and even though much of the trail follows natural contours within these drainages, getting from one to another is accomplished by passing over mountains. These higher crossings account for, both directly and indirectly, the two real challenges posed by attempting the trails of this region too early: safe passage through snow at higher elevations and crossing swollen snowmelt creeks and rivers.

Section 1 – Ross Peak Area: Willow Creek to Atlanta

This section begins along Willow Creek, climbing toward Ross Peak, the high point of the entire ICT. Much of the trail passes through the footprint of the 2008 Barker Fire, which is recovering admirably. Below Ross Peak, the trail forks to the left toward Atlanta and right toward the Ross Fork Basin (the original ICT). Part of the appeal of the Centennial Trail is understanding and appreciating Idaho's wild and rugged history, which was steered by the early influences of trapping, hunting, and mining culture. For this reason, we recommend an alternate to visit the historic mining town of Atlanta, one of the most remote and unapologetically rustic towns in all of Idaho.

Getting There: Willow Creek Campground – See resupply locations, page 67.

Access Points: There are no mid-section access points.

Water Considerations: Water is plentiful within the drainages.

Special Considerations: Anticipate the snowpack levels and its associated snowmelt, which can make water crossings treacherous.

Resupply Locations:

- **Atlanta (#1):** From Boise, Idaho, take Hwy-21 north to FR-384 (18 miles northeast of Idaho City at the Edna Creek Campground). Turn right and travel 13.5 miles to an intersection with FR-327. Turn left and travel approximately 13 miles to FR-268. Turn left and travel 13.3 miles to Atlanta.
- **Atlanta (#2):** From Boise, Idaho, take Hwy-21 north to the turn-off for Arrowrock Reservoir along the Middle Fork Rd. (FR-268). Travel east for approximately 65 miles. This road is infamous for being a rough, narrow, washboard dirt road with some blind corners, and it gets worse as the summer progresses. Drive slowly and cautiously.
- **Beaver Lodge (in Atlanta):** The only service-related business in town, boasting a full bar and a restaurant that offers breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily (except Mondays). It also has cabins for rent, offering the opportunity for a shower and a real bed. Contact them to inquire about holding a resupply package.
- **Powerplant Campground:** From Atlanta, travel east along the Middle Fork Rd. (a.k.a. Powerplant Rd.) for approximately 4 miles.

Best Time of Year: Late June – early October

Trail Distance: 26.3 miles

Suggested Itinerary:

Leg 1 - Willow Creek (15.5 miles)

Leg 2 - Decker Creek (10.8 miles)

Maps:

MVUM (online):

Sawtooth NF, Fairfield and Ketchum RDs

Boise NF, Idaho City RD (East Side)

Sawtooth NF map

1:100,000 Quad – Idaho City

Land Managers: Boise and Sawtooth National Forests

Camping: The Forest Service maintains the Willow Creek and Powerplant campgrounds. Dispersed camping opportunities within the Willow Creek and Decker Creek drainages are occasionally limited by the steepness of their slopes, although both offer a few well-established hunter camps.

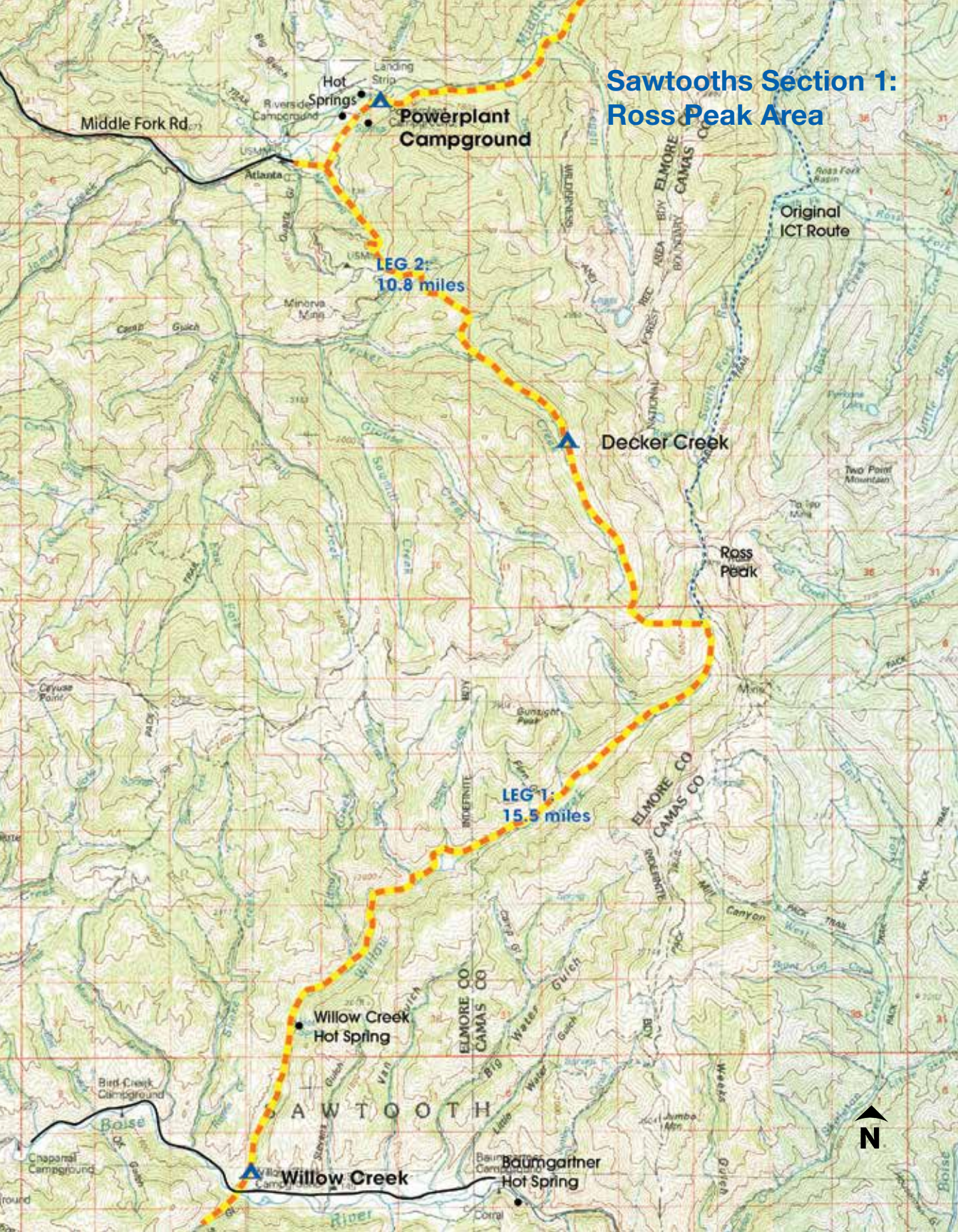
Hot Springs:

Willow Creek Area: Baumgartner (page 69) and Willow Creek (page 78)

Atlanta Area: Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Greylock (see pages 80, 81)

Fishing: SF Boise River, Willow Creek, MF Boise River

Sawtooths Section 1: Ross Peak Area



Deviations from the Original ICT: We recommend a worthwhile diversion to the historic mining town of Atlanta, which was first incorporated into Gry Folge's thru-hiking route in 2019. There are few places in Idaho that retain a sense of remoteness and ruggedness as completely as Atlanta. This alternate will appeal to those wanting to lighten their pack weight by resupplying in Atlanta or those who enjoy natural hot springs. Using the Decker Creek drainage also affords easier snow travel early in the season. If you opt to follow the original ICT route, which offers a more remote, single-track backpacking experience, Atlanta can still be reached as a side trip along the Middle Fork Trail.

Decker Pass (8,733 feet) vs. Ross Pass (9,161 feet). That's a difference of over 400 feet, which means there will be about a two-degree difference between the two passes on any given day. That can be significant. Additionally, while the snowmelt rate is determined partially by ambient temperature, it's also affected by radiant heat from the sun. The north slope of Ross Peak sits in the shade for much of the day and maintains its snowpack for much longer.

Leg 1 – Willow Creek: Willow Creek Campground to Junction Camp on Decker Creek

After the trauma of consistent water-stress in the desert and reaching a mental breaking point around mile 160, the first day in the Sawtooths renewed me and I rediscovered a deep appreciation for a simple creek, for a field of grass, for the abundance of life that can be found in the mountains.

—Giff Walters, 2015

Single-track follows Willow Creek to its headwaters just below Ross Peak. Over the course of about 11 miles, trail users are slowly introduced to the trademark granite peaks of the Sawtooths. Much of the Willow Creek drainage was involved in the South Barker Fire in 2008, and the aftermath of that wildfire can still be observed. From the junction below Ross Peak, break away from the original ICT and travel down Decker Creek to accommodate a visit to historic Atlanta.

Recreational Interest: Wildlife, scenery

Travel Distance: 15.5 miles

Elevation Gain/Loss: +4,137 ft. / -1,414 ft.

High/Low Points: 8,772 ft. (Decker Connector) / 4,923 ft. (Willow Creek)

Whether breaking camp after completing the High Plains section or arriving fresh via a shuttle drop, make your way about 1.5 miles up Willow Creek Rd. to the transfer camp and trailhead at its end. From the trailhead, travel about 0.8 mile to reach Willow Creek Hot Springs. Depending on the season, the hot springs may or may not be useable. If useable, they can be a great soak with at least one soaker pool sitting amid an open, wooded valley. In the forest west of the trail, there are flat spots to camp out of view.

Continue up the trail, which crosses Edna Creek in about 1.5 miles. Ignore the faint trail that heads up the creek. For its proximity to the trail, Willow Creek is often not easily accessible due to brush obstructions or the steepness of the terrain, but the trail conveniently crosses several small creeks offering ample water access. Shortly after Edna Creek, Willow Creek Canyon narrows, and the trail traverses a landslide section that seems to grow slightly larger every year and may require some brief scrambling.

The trail improves, tracing the footprint of cliffs above, and follows Willow Creek east. Cross Haypress Creek in just over 0.5 mile, noting the appearance of an ever-elusive ICT marker, and continue on, soon crossing Badger Creek before coming to a well-established trailside hunting camp. This camp marks about

the midpoint of the drainage, so if you started the day late or if you spent extra time soaking in the hot springs, it would make a great spot to camp. It incorporates some rustic wood furnishings, and there's a well-weathered plaque nailed to a tree that's too illegible to read. Possibly "James' Camp."

After the hunting camp, the trail crosses an unnamed stream and passes through Fern Gulch, which may have water. Continue climbing, crossing Gunsight Creek and then Heather Creek, which offers a nice shady spot to rest and refill water. If you're hiking in the early summer, it's likely the trail will be wet from runoff from this point forward. If you find snowmelt running straight down the trail, avoid the temptation to make your own path or to walk the shoulders of the trail. Doing so just furthers erosion and widens the trail. It's best to just own it and embrace it. The trail eventually passes a good camp spot in the shade of the trees and then enters a steep climb to Ross Peak that's moderated by several switchbacks.

At the trail junction, divert from the original ICT route by taking a left onto the Decker Connector Trail (#228) and follow the meandering switchbacks upward. The trail passes a scenic overlook of the Willow Creek drainage and then continues over the pass. Depending on the season, the shaded part of the trail might still have snow covering it and require some minor route-finding. At the top, the trail dips down momentarily to cross the upper end of a wide, flat, mostly treeless bowl and then passes to a rocky saddle atop the Decker Creek drainage, marking the descent route to Atlanta.

Follow the Decker Creek Trail (#081), angling down the drainage to the right into the trees or, if there's snow still, work your way to the left and glissade down the open upper bowl, picking up the trail farther below. Decker Creek flows alongside the trail most of the way down the drainage, but it isn't always within view. The terrain flattens out briefly with some intermittent flat spots to camp. However, better options exist farther down the drainage near the junction with Senator Creek Trail. Camping opportunities diminish as the drainage narrows, so camp here and work on those food hanging skills. Remember, this is bear country!

Mileage Between Camps:

Willow Creek to Willow Creek Transfer Camp.	1.5
Willow Creek Transfer Camp to Willow Creek Hot Springs	0.9
Willow Creek Hot Springs to Edna Creek Camp	1.5
Edna Creek Camp to Hunter's Camp	2.8
Hunter's Camp to Heather Creek	3.3
Heather Creek to Switchback Camp	1.7
Switchback Camp to View Camp	0.9
View Camp to Bowl Rim Camp.	0.7
Bowl Rim Camp to Decker Basin Camp	1.0
Decker Basin Camp to Junction Camp.	1.2



Pack goats encountered near Heather Creek



Getting ready to glissade the upper bowl of Decker Creek

Alternate: The original ICT continues along Willow Creek Trail over Ross Pass and drops down into the Ross Fork Basin via the SF Ross Fork Trail (#227). Advantages of the original route include views from near Ross Peak, fishing access to Ross Fork Lakes, and a few old Forest Service cabins to explore (near the NF Ross Fork). If you choose this route, turn to page 87 upon reaching the MF Boise River.

Leg 2 - Decker Creek: Junction Camp to Powerplant Campground

Crossing our first stretch of snow over Ross Pass I hit another low as the adrenaline and resulting fatigue from being stalked by a mountain lion wore me down.

—Giff Walters, 2015

Continue down the well-established Decker Creek Trail, passing through old wildfire scars amid various stages of regrowth. The drainage becomes increasingly narrow, improving the opportunity for wildlife viewing while diminishing camp options before dumping out onto a dirt road leading to Atlanta, the MF Boise River, and a cluster of natural hot springs.

Continue down Decker Creek Trail. Initially, the drainage is wide and open with sweeping views of the steep mountain slopes surrounding it. As the trail follows the creek downstream, however, the basin gets narrower, and the trail becomes rockier. Due to the steep terrain, creek access may be difficult. It's steeper and brushier on the trail side of the creek, although the opposing slope is a great place to view wildlife, where the Trail Creek Fire burned in 2000.

When the trail crosses a foot bridge and then forks, take Flint Creek Trail (#067) to the right, which turns north briefly and contours past a lush creek bottom with some easy elevation gain. Cross an unnamed stream and climb a few switchbacks to gain the ridge. The trail begins a gradual descent, crossing Flint Creek in about a mile. There's a flat spot to camp shortly after, with the Flint Creek, Decker Creek, and Yuba River drainages all within view. Flint Creek Trail ends at a junction with several dirt roads. Take Mine Hill Rd., which is on the right and marked with an exit sign.

As you descend along the road, you'll pass by mining equipment, structures, and signage. The road continues north through an increasingly timbered landscape dotted with various cabins, many of which have been standing for generations. The road eventually intersects with Main Street (a.k.a. the Middle Fork Rd.) just east of town. Powerplant Rd. takes off to the right toward the campground. Take a left and walk through Atlanta proper. There's no longer a post office in Atlanta, so make your way to Beaver Lodge about 0.5 mile away. Stop in for some comfort food and a cold beverage.

When you have satisfactorily explored Atlanta and are ready to continue, head east out of town, backtracking along the Middle Fork Rd. Continue straight through the road junction and follow Powerplant Rd. toward the campground. For those who enjoy natural hot springs, three lie ahead:

- **Atlanta HS:** There are two dirt roads that take off to the left as you near the mile mark, the first of which may have signage identifying it as private property. Walk to the second dirt road, and immediately to the right of this junction is a vehicle pullout for the Atlanta Hot Springs, a scenic, well-built pool that's visible from the road.

Recreational Interests: Wildlife, geology, early mining history

Trail Distance: 10.8 miles

Elevation Gain/Loss: +732 ft. / -2,912 ft.

High/Low Points: 7,610 ft. (Sherman Creek Camp) / 5,352 ft. (Atlanta)