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GREEN MOUNTAIN STATE FOREST: Gold Creek, Beaver Pond, and Wildcat Trail Loop



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 7.7 miles for entire loop;
4 miles round-trip to summit

CONFIGURATION: Loop or out-and-back

DIFFICULTY: Moderate–difficult

SCENERY: Summit views west to the Olympic Mountains and east to Seattle over Puget Sound; ponds and marshes, and wildflowers

EXPOSURE: Mostly shaded (a few exposed sections)

TRAFFIC: Moderate (note that trail is open to bikes, horses, and motorcycles, though seldom seen)

TRAIL SURFACE: Dirt

HIKING TIME: 3–7 hours

ACCESS: Hikable year-round; no fees for parking or park access

MAPS: USGS Wildcat Lake

FACILITIES: Restroom at trailhead; no drinking water available

IN BRIEF

The Kitsap Peninsula has numerous hiking options, but there is only one Green Mountain, a prominent high point in the middle of a mostly flat and low-lying landscape. Luckily, the second-highest peak in the region provides plenty of good reasons to visit, other than just its exclusivity, including an extensive network of trails and great summit views.

DESCRIPTION

The Kitsap Peninsula is full of recreation opportunities, with a host of campgrounds, boat launches, and parks. Many Seattle residents keep waterfront cottages on the shores of the Hood Canal or on any of a number of popular lakes and flock across Puget Sound each weekend in the summer for the chance to get away. Despite the undeveloped landscape outside Bremerton, public trails that climb to significant peaks on Kitsap are few and far between.

Directions

From downtown Seattle: Take the ferry across Puget Sound to Bremerton. After exiting the ferry, drive west on WA 304 and follow signs to WA 3. Turn right (north) on WA 3 and take the Chico Way exit. Turn left onto Chico Way, then turn right onto N Lake Way. In 0.25 miles, turn right again onto Seabeck Highway and continue just more than 3 miles to Holly Road on the left. Follow Holly Road for more than 4 miles, then turn left onto Tahuya Lake Road (signed Tahuyeh), which eventually becomes Gold Creek Road. After passing Tahuya Lake look for the Gold Creek trailhead parking lot on the left. From Tacoma: Travel on WA 16 (west) across the Tacoma Narrows bridge and continue all the way to WA 3 (north); then follow the directions from Chico Way above.

GPS Trailhead Coordinates

UTM Zone (NAD27) 10T

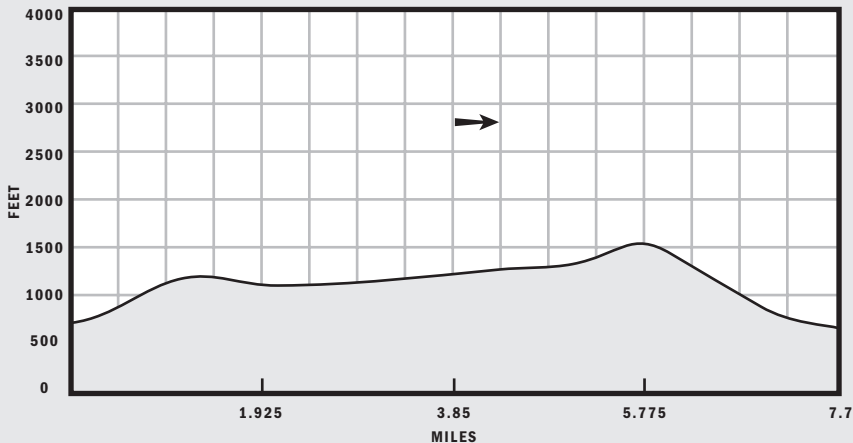
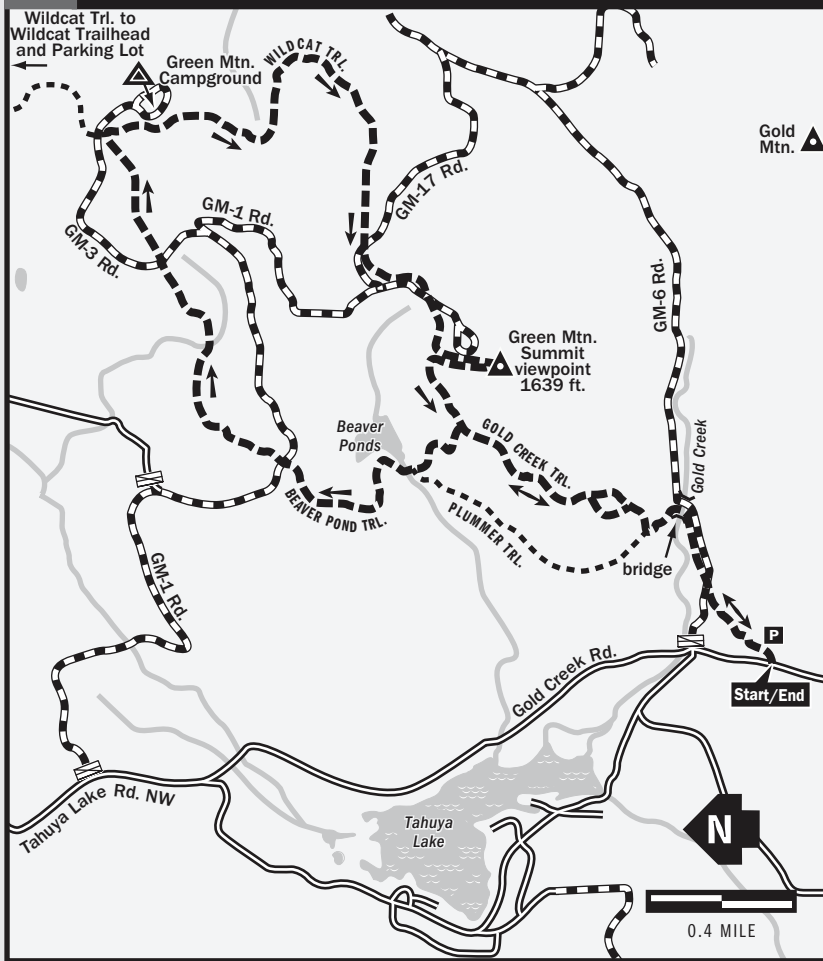
Easting 0513083

Northing 5266246

Latitude North 47° 33.078"

Longitude West 122° 49.642"

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Summer sky from Green Mountain summit

The obvious exception is Green Mountain State Forest, a managed woodland run by the Washington Department of Natural Resources. At the heart of the 6,000-acre forest are the twin summits of Green and Gold mountains, the two highest points on the peninsula. Gold might hold a slight edge in altitude, but Green is the one to visit, the latter featuring an extensive network of multi-use trails, a central campground, and wide-ranging views from the summit. If you're looking for a hike on Kitsap, this is the place to go.

The slopes of Green Mountain are still considered a "working forest," so selected stands of trees are periodically harvested for timber. This is not a protected wilderness area; its trails serve a range of recreational users, including hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers, and even all-terrain vehicle riders and motorcyclists. The mountain is sufficiently large and spread out, that conflicts between groups are rare, and natural geographic segregation helps to keep human-powered visitors separate from engine-powered ones most of the time.

The new Gold Creek trailhead sits about a 0.25 miles from the site of the old one; it was reborn as part of a grand improvement plan initiated in the mid-1990s to combat the vandalism, abuse, and neglect that were then plaguing the state forest. The spacious parking lot is now well maintained, providing room for plenty of vehicles and a latrine. A radio tower on the ridge to the northeast marks the destination of the hike on the mountain's summit.

The dusty trail begins at the northern end of the parking lot through the

stumps of a former clear-cut, elevation 650 feet. Foxgloves, daisies, and many other wildflowers fill the field with color in the summer as the path runs through several forks in the low brush. Follow a series of blue and white “Trail” signs to find the best way. Turn right on abandoned gravel road GM-6 (which leads up from the old trailhead), and soon cross chattering Gold Creek on a sturdy footbridge with railings.

Immediately over the bridge, make a sharp left onto Gold Creek Trail and climb a short rise. The trail is marked with a low vertical post in the ground, typical for the area. As part of the recent rehabilitation, many unofficial trails have been blocked off and closed; they’re visible as you continue ascending on the dry, sandy tread. Stay right to remain on Gold Creek Trail past a junction with Plummer Trail, turn left at a small clearing, and then choose either path at a strange fork whose two branches converge again another 0.25 miles up the hill.

The surrounding ecosystem—with madrones, rhododendrons, salal, and low, scrubby trees as the norm—is quite different from a typical Cascade lowland environment. Much of the difference can be attributed to the Olympic Mountains only 20 miles to the west, which cast a substantial rain shadow over the region and keep it quite a bit drier than its latitude would generally indicate.

Near 1,300 feet, cross beneath some old power lines with a west-facing view down to Tahuya Lake and the Olympics beyond. Descend slightly to a major intersection, about 1.5 miles from the trailhead. To the right, Gold Creek Trail continues uphill and joins Vista Trail to the summit, providing a short out-and-back option. This is also the return route for the extended loop to the top, which is described below.

Turn left down the hill on Beaver Pond Trail and then head back around to the right, north. Ferns appear in the understory and small creeks flow down the mountainside, shaded by tall trees that slow evaporation. Continue straight to remain on Beaver Pond Trail past Plummer Trail and then cross a creek and turn right, heading upstream. The first beaver pond (one of two swampy, stagnant pools full of reeds, lilies, and downed logs) appears soon after.

Cross foxglove-lined road GM-1 at an elevation of just more than 1,000 feet. Despite the presence of motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles elsewhere on the mountain, the only sounds you are likely to hear in the forest are natural: birds singing, frogs croaking, insects buzzing. Follow Beaver Pond Trail for another half mile through a pleasant forest to cross road GM-3 and start climbing again on the far side.

Reach the GM-3 road a second time at a junction with Wildcat Trail from the north. Stay right on the near side of the road to join Wildcat and pass by the Green Mountain Campground in the trees. Noticeably wider and smoother than the single-track Beaver Pond Trail, the Wildcat Trail climbs a mile on the eastern side of the mountain with views out to Seattle and Mount Rainier through some gaps on the left. The radio installation on the top of Gold Mountain appears around a bend, and then the summit of Green Mountain swings into view as well.

Cross road GM-17 near 1,250 feet and then meet GM-1 just above. The trail crosses the road, then runs parallel to it on the left side for 100 yards in a clear-cut before crossing back again. After 0.25 miles through a thick, dark forest of low trees, turn left at a junction with Vista Trail. Pass along the parking lot at the end of GM-1 (it is possible to drive here when the gate near the park entrance is open, usually weekends between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., June through August) and climb another 200 feet to emerge at the 1,639-foot summit. Although this is just about 1,000 feet above the trailhead, the total vertical gain via the long loop is closer to twice that distance.

The main, rocky overlook provides views over Gold Mountain to the cranes of Bremerton to the east, with Bainbridge Island, the high-rises of Seattle, and the distant Cascades behind. On a clear day, it is possible to make out the white cone of Mount Baker far off to the north. Past some picnic tables on the western side of the summit, another viewpoint looks out through trees to the Hood Canal and some of the high peaks of the Olympic Range, often veiled by clouds.

Start down on Vista Trail and turn left at the junction with Gold Creek Trail to complete the loop in another 0.25 miles. Return to the trailhead the way you came.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Wildcat Lake County Park provides conventional recreation opportunities such as swimming, volleyball, picnicking, and fishing in a scenic lakefront setting. To reach the lake, turn right on Gold Creek Road W from the trailhead and then turn right again on Northwest Holly Road after about 3 miles. The park is another 3 miles on the right, at 9025 Holly Road. For more information, visit the Wildcat Lake County Park Web site at www.kitsapgov.com/parks/regionalparks/wildcat_lake_cp.htm.