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Mount Baker from the Artist Ridge Trail. An easy 1-mile loop, this trail is one of the most scenic short hikes in the state.

Photo by Pam Roy

Easy Alpine Highs

Best short hikes to get your fix of alpine high country

Got a glitch in your hitch? A cranky knee? Have a young family of would-be hikers with short legs? If your dreams of alpine splendor have been replaced by sessions with an ice pack, the physical therapist or giving piggy-back rides to reluctant kids, don't despair. Here are a few easy hikes guaranteed to deliver inspiring alpine scenery with a minimum of effort. Most of these can be completed in a half-day trip, or for those of us who need an all-day mountain fix, there's plenty to take in to make a full day of it.

Let's start up north. Artist Point at the end of the Mount Baker Highway has got to be one of the most scenic spots in the state for amount of exertion required. The Artist Ridge Trail is a 1-mile lollipop loop with an elevation gain of a mere 170 feet. Happy knees! Starting at an elevation of 5,250 feet, hikers may find themselves a bit winded, but it's a small price to pay for such a show. Follow the paved trail for about 50 yards to a viewpoint. It's a truly incredible viewpoint! After that, the trail turns to gravel with a bit of easy ups and downs as it continues along Kulshan Ridge and then winds through a slope of talus, ending at Huntoon

Point. This is a splendid spot to lunch, or hunker down on a boulder to spend the afternoon appreciating the views. Check on trail conditions prior to the hike as snow can linger as late as August. To beat the crowds, start early in the morning, or late in the afternoon and enjoy the sunset.

While recovering from injuries from a car accident, I found myself looking for roads that would get me to places that my recuperating body could not. An easy choice was the road to Paradise in Mount Rainier National Park. Climbing out of the car at 5,400 feet, one realizes how apt the name Paradise is. From the parking lot, trails take off in several directions to meadows filled with wildflowers. Above it all, Mount Rainier's immense presence fills the skyline. From late July until late September, the trails are usually snow-free and flowers are in abundance. Early in the summer, melting snow is replaced by fields of avalanche lilies. Later in the season, look for lupines, Indian paintbrush, arnica, asters and Sitka valerian, to name a few. Choose from trails ranging from 1 to 5 miles in length. Head out from the Myrtle Falls trailhead on a paved trail leading to a lovely overlook of



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Myrtle Falls. Cross the bridge after the Myrtle Falls turnoff for a classic view of Mount Rainier with fields of wildflowers in the foreground. Across the Paradise Valley to the south are the rugged peaks of the Tatoosh Range. This may not be the place for solitude, but it's hard to resist a yearly visit. Start your hike between 8 and 9 a.m., or take the Deadhorse Creek Trail (near the old visitor center) for a little more solitude. Early morning or late afternoon on a weekday can be quieter. Autumn is also a good time to visit—you'll see fewer crowds and great swaths of gold and burgundy on the hillsides. There's a good chance of seeing deer, marmots, fox and maybe even black bears in the area. Visit the new ranger station for maps of the trails.

How about an easy ridge walk? The Tonga Ridge Trail has been called "the easiest ridge walk on the west side of the Cascades" (Ira Spring and Harvey Manning, *102 Hikes in the Alpine Lakes*). This hike has long been a favorite of huckleberry enthusiasts. The trail starts out on an old fire trail, then winds through forest at a gentle grade, soon reaching the ridge in meadows of flowers during summer and colorful foliage in fall. At 1.5 miles, the trail leaves the ridge, contouring around Mount Sawyer and dropping slightly to Sawyer Pass. The delightful trail can satisfy a ridge seeker—however, a scramble up Mount Sawyer beckons anyone looking for a bit more of a workout.

Another great road for legs that need an assist is the road to Hurricane Ridge in the

Top: Fresh huckleberries on the Tonga Ridge Trail, a great short trail not far from Stevens Pass.

Bottom: Mount Rainier and fields of wildflowers from the Myrtle Falls loop out of Paradise. This paved trail is only 1.5 miles round-trip.

Photos by Pam Roy





Lupines on the Tonga Ridge Trail. You don't need to hike dozens of miles to get a taste of Washington's fantastic alpine country.

Photo by Pam Roy

Essentials

No matter how short a hike, always carry the ten essentials:

1. Map and compass.
2. Sunglasses and sunscreen.
3. Fleece jacket and a waterproof shell.
4. A flashlight or headlamp.
5. First-aid kit.
6. Matches in a waterproof container and firestarters.
7. A knife or multitool.
8. Emergency food.
9. A water bottle and water filter.
10. A lightweight space blanket.

Olympics. The Sunrise Ridge Trail may give you a little more solitude if you're up to some elevation gain. This trail starts on the north side of the Hurricane Ridge parking area on the High Ridge Nature Trail (the first few hundred yards are paved). Check out the viewpoint at Sunrise Point and continue on through flowery meadows interspersed with stands of subalpine fir. Expansive views open up over the Strait of Juan de Fuca, out to Mount Baker and south to the snowy peaks of the Olympics. Mount Angeles looms in the foreground, demanding attention. For those with more energy, this can be extended to a longer trip, or retrace your steps once reaching the Mount Angeles Trail.

A popular and well-known trail that has a rich diversity of scenic highlights is the Lake 22 Trail off the Mountain Loop Highway. With 1,300 feet of elevation gain, this could be the "graduation hike" of the easy hikes to alpine splendor, and it's well worth the extra effort. Early on, the trail goes through impressive old-growth forests, and crosses a creek with rushing waterfalls. Switchbacks make the elevation gain manageable, and the trail traverses a rocky hillside that has great fall color and wide-open views. The work pays off in a short 2.7 miles, delivering the hiker to Lake 22, set in a picturesque cirque with towering walls. The relatively low elevation of the lake (2,400 feet) makes this a great shoulder-season destination. (Be sure to check avalanche conditions during the snowy months.)

Nothing here quite easy enough for you? Consider Gold Creek Pond Trail just east of Snoqualmie Pass. While you don't get much above 2,600 feet on this trail, it's set in the Gold Creek Valley under impressive peaks. There was a time while recovering from injuries that this short hike rewarded me with enough inspiring alpine scenery to send me home with a smile. ♦

Artist Point

1 mile round trip, starting elevation 5,100 feet, 170 feet of gain

To get there: Leave I-5 on the Mount Baker Highway (SR 542). Drive 58 miles to road's end at Artist point. (Glacier visitor center is 21 miles before end of road.)

Paradise Trails

1-5 miles of loops, starting elevation 5,400 feet, elevation gain to Myrtle Falls, minimal

To get there: Enter the Nisqually Entrance to Mount Rainier National Park. Continue 19 miles to the parking lot at Paradise, or take the shuttle (Call 360-569-2211 for a schedule).

Tonga Ridge

6.5 miles round-trip, Starting elevation 4,300 feet, elevation gain 400 feet

To get there: Drive U.S. 2 east from Skykomish 1.8 miles. Turn right on Foss River Road (FS 68). At 1.8 miles from the highway, keep right on Road 68. At 2.4 miles, pass under a railroad bridge. At 3.6 miles, turn left on Tonga Ridge Road (FS 6830). At 7 miles from that junction, turn right on road 310 (6830). Continue 1.4 miles to the end of the road.

Sunrise Point

5.2 miles round trip, starting elevation 5,225 feet, elevation gain 1,000 feet

To get there: Drive Hwy. 101 to Port Angeles. Follow signs to Hurricane Ridge Road and drive to the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center.

Lake 22

5.4 miles round trip, starting elevation 1,100 feet, elevation gain 1,300 feet

To get there: Drive the Mountain Loop Highway 2.1 miles past the Verlot Ranger Station. Turn right into parking lot directly off the highway.

Gold Creek Ponds

1 mile round trip, starting elevation 2,600 feet, little or no elevation gain

To get there: Drive I-90 east from Snoqualmie Pass. Take Gold Creek-Hyak exit 54 to Gold Creek Frontage Road on the north side of freeway. Follow east for 0.8 mile, crossing Gold Creek. Turn left on road 144 (4832). In 0.5 miles, turn left and follow the road to the parking area.