

Minam River Lodge



Trail and Hiking Guide

By
Douglas Lorain



Literally surrounded by the protected lands of the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area, Oregon's largest and arguably its most spectacular designated wilderness, the Minam River Lodge is an ideal location for hikers and backpackers to set up shop and enjoy their favorite sport. In every direction there are magnificently scenic destinations including tranquil mountain meadows, inviting riverside pools, dramatic canyon viewpoints, wildflower-covered alpine ridges, and sparkling mountain lakes. This hiking guide details the best of the many wonderful options for those looking to explore what this mountain paradise has to offer. Ranging from lazy strolls along the river to rugged backpacking adventures that explore the remarkable beauties of the Wallowa Mountains, there is something for every taste. So lace up your boots and ENJOY!

Note: Free permits are required for wilderness travel. These are available at Moss Springs Trailhead (if you walked or rode in) or Reds Horse Ranch.

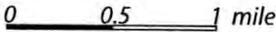
A Few Obligatory Words About Safety

If you're careful and properly equipped, hiking is both fun and quite safe. Still, personal safety is an important concern with any outdoor activity, so any guest who chooses to hit the trails needs to recognize that personal conditioning and experience varies from person to person, and weather and trail conditions constantly change, thus, the fact that a hike is listed in this guide does not mean that it will be safe for all users at all times.

- A few of these routes require cross-country travel or follow trails that are infrequently used and receive only irregular maintenance. You should expect some faint sections of trail, deadfall, washouts, and other hazards.
- Although the water in wilderness lakes and streams looks clean and pure, nasty little microorganisms may live there, which have the ability to make you very sick (take this former *giardia* victim's word for it). Filter or otherwise treat all water before drinking it.
- Crossing larger streams, especially in spring and early summer, can be cold and hazardous. If a crossing looks unsafe, DO NOT ATTEMPT IT.
- In general, wild animals in the Wallowa Mountains pose no danger to human beings. Black bears are a potential exception, so never approach any bear (especially a "cute" cub, when mama is probably nearby and won't be happy about your intrusion) and, when backpacking, hang your food at night well out of reach of hungry bruins. Bull elk may also be aggressive during the rutting season in September.
- Mosquitoes are numerous around the high lakes and meadows in July, so be prepared.
- Always employ that sometimes rarest of virtues, *common sense*, by being honest about your conditioning and experience levels and not attempting hikes that are beyond your ability.
- Carry extra food, water, a first aid kit, warm clothes, and waterproof matches just in case. And forget the cell phone – you won't get service anyway.
- Let a responsible person know where you are going and when you expect to return.

In short, have a great time, but please don't do anything dangerous or that a disinterested third party might uncharitably describe as "stupid."

Map Legend

	Featured Trail		North Arrow
	Featured Cross-country Route		Backcountry Campsite
	Major Alternate Trail		Building/Other Landmark
	Other Trail		Bridge
	Mileage (between arrows)		Viewpoint
	Map Scale		



Eagle Cap from Carper Pass (The Grand Backpacker's Tour)

Cover Photos (clockwise): meadow and barn at Minam River Lodge (your front porch), Standley Cabin (Trip 12), Steamboat Lake (Trip 15), Granite Butte from headwaters of Elk Creek (The Grand Backpacker's Tour)

Great Hikes from Minam River Lodge

(with Five ★ Scenery Rating)

Short Strolls Near the Lodge:

- 1 *Minam River Loop* ★★★
- 2 *Reds Horse Ranch* ★★

Half-Day Rambles and Shorter Day Hikes:

- 3 *Reds "Horseshoe" Bend Swimming Hole* ★★
- 4 *Reds Lake (aka Lake 3685)* ★★
- 5 *Backbone Ridge* ★★★★★
- 6 *Little Minam Meadow* ★

Full-Day Hikes or One-night Backpacking Trips:

- 7 *Land Ranch* ★★
- 8 *Jim White Ridge* ★★★★★
- 9 *Minam River Trail downstream to Little Minam River* ★★★
- 10 *Peak 4692* ★★★★★
- 11 *Minam River Trail upstream to Big Burn* ★
- 12 *Standley Cabin* ★★★★★

Short Overnight Trips:

- 13 *Big Sheep Ridge – Lower Minam Loop* ★★★★★
- 14 *Washboard Ridge – North Minam Loop* ★★★★★★
- 15 *North Minam Meadows* ★★★★★
- 16 *Lackeys Lake – Jim White Ridge Loop* ★★★★★

The Grand Backpacker's Tour: ★★★★★

A magnificent week-long loop of unparalleled beauty, this trip explores the many towering peaks, alpine lake basins, and sprawling canyons of the western Wallowa Mountains. Among other wonders, the basic loop route visits North Minam Meadows, Steamboat and Swamp Lakes, West Lostine River, and Minam Lake, then traces the Minam River from its source at Blue Lake back down to the Lodge. Magnificent side trip opportunities abound.

1 Minam River Loop ★★★

Type: Short half-hour walk

Rating: Easy

Round-trip distance: 0.7 mile

Round-trip elevation gain: 80 feet

Highlights: A 'must-do' for every lodge visitor, this gentle loop is good for guests of any ability level. A great way to visit the river, wade in the water, fish, or simply relax.

Considerations: Bring wading shoes/sandals to splash in the water and to visit a small beach on an island in the river.

Description: From the lodge, wander down the road heading south-southeast to a junction beside the barn. Go left past the garden, then fork left once again to the wind sock along the landing strip. About 20 yards later fork right onto a two-track trail that heads east across the edge of the meadow to the river. You'll reach the beautiful clear waters about 125 yards later near the upstream tip of a shrub-covered island.

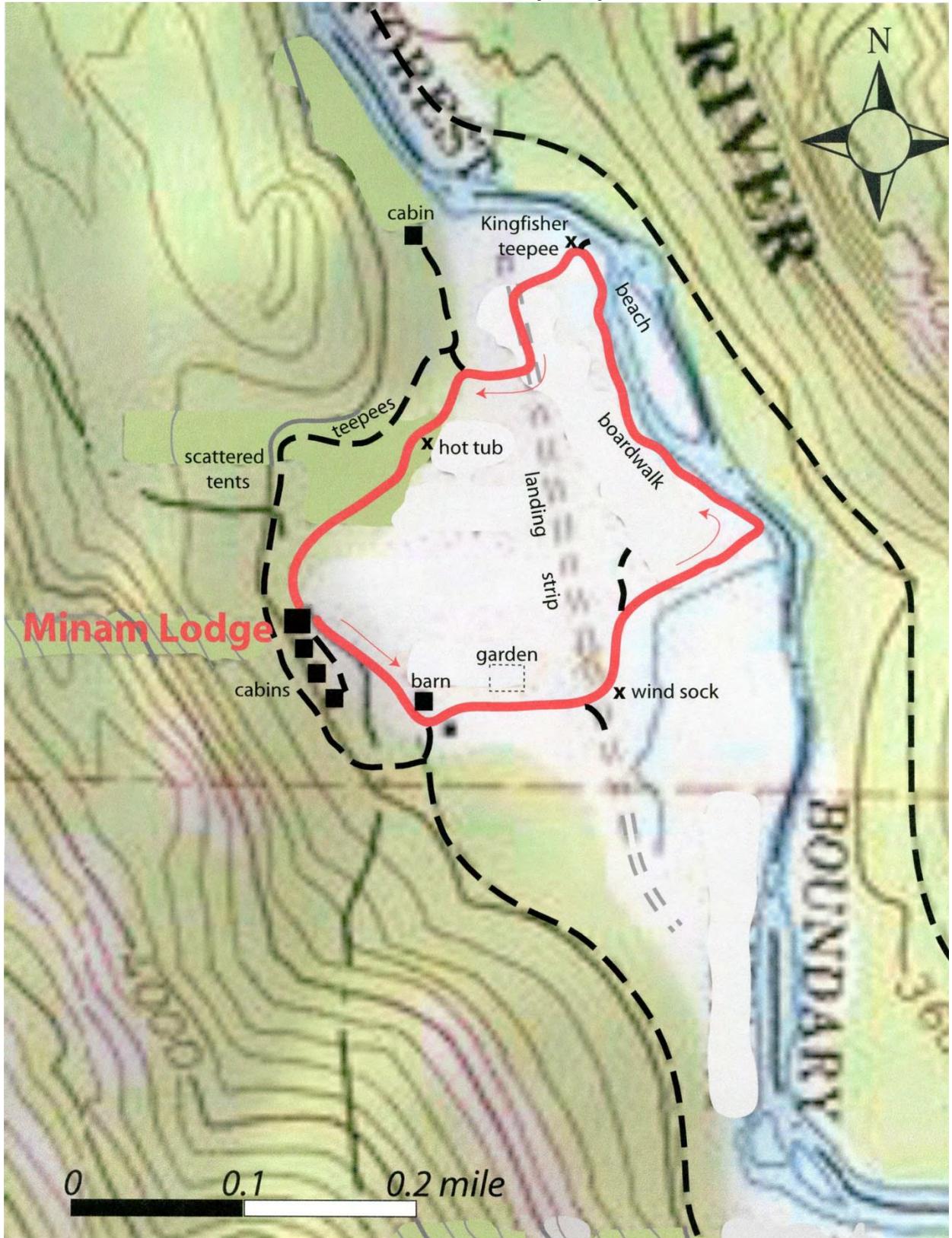
You turn left (downstream) and follow the river bank on a path that is initially indistinct until it enters a woodsy area and you walk on a plank boardwalk. Watch for dippers, spotted sandpipers, Canada geese, and various songbirds along this enchanting stretch of river. The path follows steps made from wooden rounds through wet areas and lush riparian vegetation to a small wooden bench, from which it is easy and quite refreshing to wade across a narrow section of the river to a small rocky beach at the downstream tip of the island.

Just beyond the bench the trail emerges from the woods at the edge of the meadow near the lodge's Kingfisher teepee. A small wooden bench is right beside the river just a few yards to the right of the teepee.



To return to the lodge, take the grassy two-track that goes left just before you get to Kingfisher teepee and soon come to the north end of the landing strip. Turn left and follow the runway for about 180 yards until an obvious jeep track goes uphill to the right. Turn onto this road, cross a plank bridge, and climb to where the road makes a sweeping turn to the right. Leave the road, turning left onto a foot path that leads past the lodge's wood-fired hot tub, passes several more teepees, all named after birds, and then reaches the main lodge building.

Minam River Loop Map



2 *Reds Horse Ranch* ★★

Type: Gentle 1-hour stroll

Rating: Easy

Round-trip distance: 1.7 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 100 feet

Highlights: A lazy forest walk to a large meadow with an historic Forest Service facility.

Considerations: Don't forget to bring your love of both horses and history

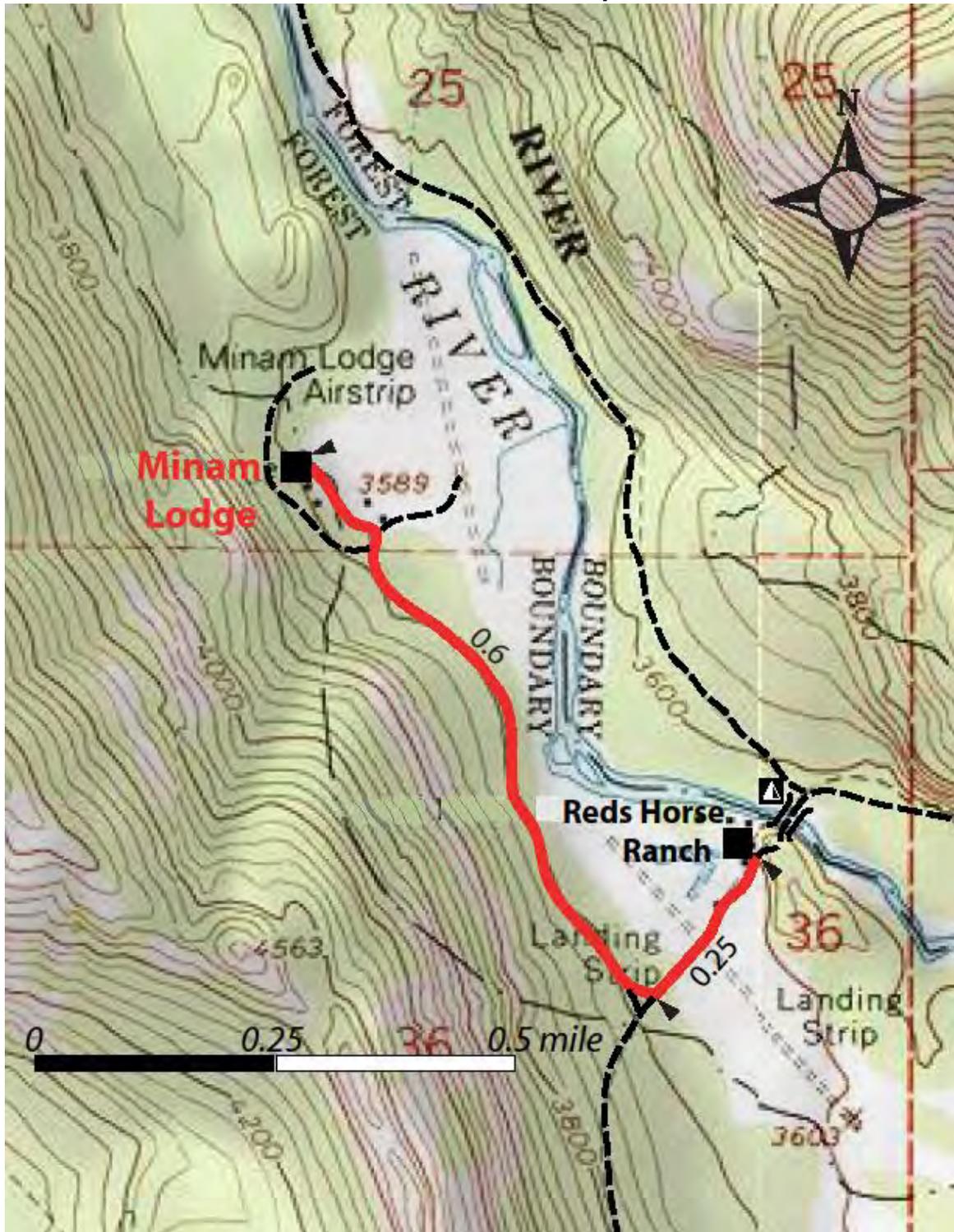
Description: From the lodge, follow the road downhill to the south-southeast to a junction beside the barn. Turn right and very soon thereafter turn left onto the gentle trail heading south through the forest. This path has only minor ups and downs and is nicely shaded under large conifers, so the hiking is both pleasant and easy. There are a couple of muddy places, but it is easy to bypass these on paths on either side that are constructed from raised wooden rounds. The relatively lush forest is composed of a mix of Douglas firs, grand firs, Engelmann spruces, and some ponderosa pines. The understory has numerous shrubs and grasses, as well as a wide variety of wildflowers. In early summer mosquitoes are sometimes a problem.

After 0.6 mile you arrive at a junction. Turn left, walk through a gate, and cross a large meadow with a landing strip to the cluster of log buildings at Reds Horse Ranch.

Visitors are welcome to tour this historic facility and it is well worth your time. The recorded history of this place goes back to the 1800s and some of the buildings were erected as early as 1918. Before being purchased by the Forest Service in 1994, this place was used for a variety of purposes, including as an isolated hideout for stolen horses. More legitimate purposes included a livestock ranch, a base camp for logging operations, and, starting in 1931, a dude ranch. The most famous owner was "Red" Higgins, who bought the place in 1946 and ran it as a family-owned business that often catered to the rich and famous. Notable guests over the years included actors like Lee Marvin and Burt Lancaster, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and once, the entire Los Angeles Rams football team. Volunteers now staff the place through the summer and they are happy to answer questions, show you historic artifacts, and let you read numerous newspaper articles about the facility.



Reds Horse Ranch Map



3 Reds “Horseshoe” Bend Swimming Hole ★★

Type: Half-day hike

Rating: Easy

Round-trip distance: 3.6 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 120 feet

Highlights: An excellent late-summer swimming hole. If you’d rather stay dry, it’s also a nice fishing spot with pretty views across the water to the surrounding ridges.

Considerations: Once the water warms up in mid-to-late summer, this is one of the nicest swimming holes along the Minam River. Bring your swimsuit!

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left, walking through a gate, and cross the meadow toward Reds Horse Ranch for about 0.1 mile to where the trail crosses the facility’s grassy landing strip. Turn right and walk almost 0.3 mile to the end of the landing strip then veer left into a strip meadow (not the meadow that goes straight from the end of the strip). After less than 100 yards you’ll pass a campsite on your right shortly before you reach Millard Cabin, a small log building owned by the Forest Service. (N 45° 20.584’ W 117° 37.267’)

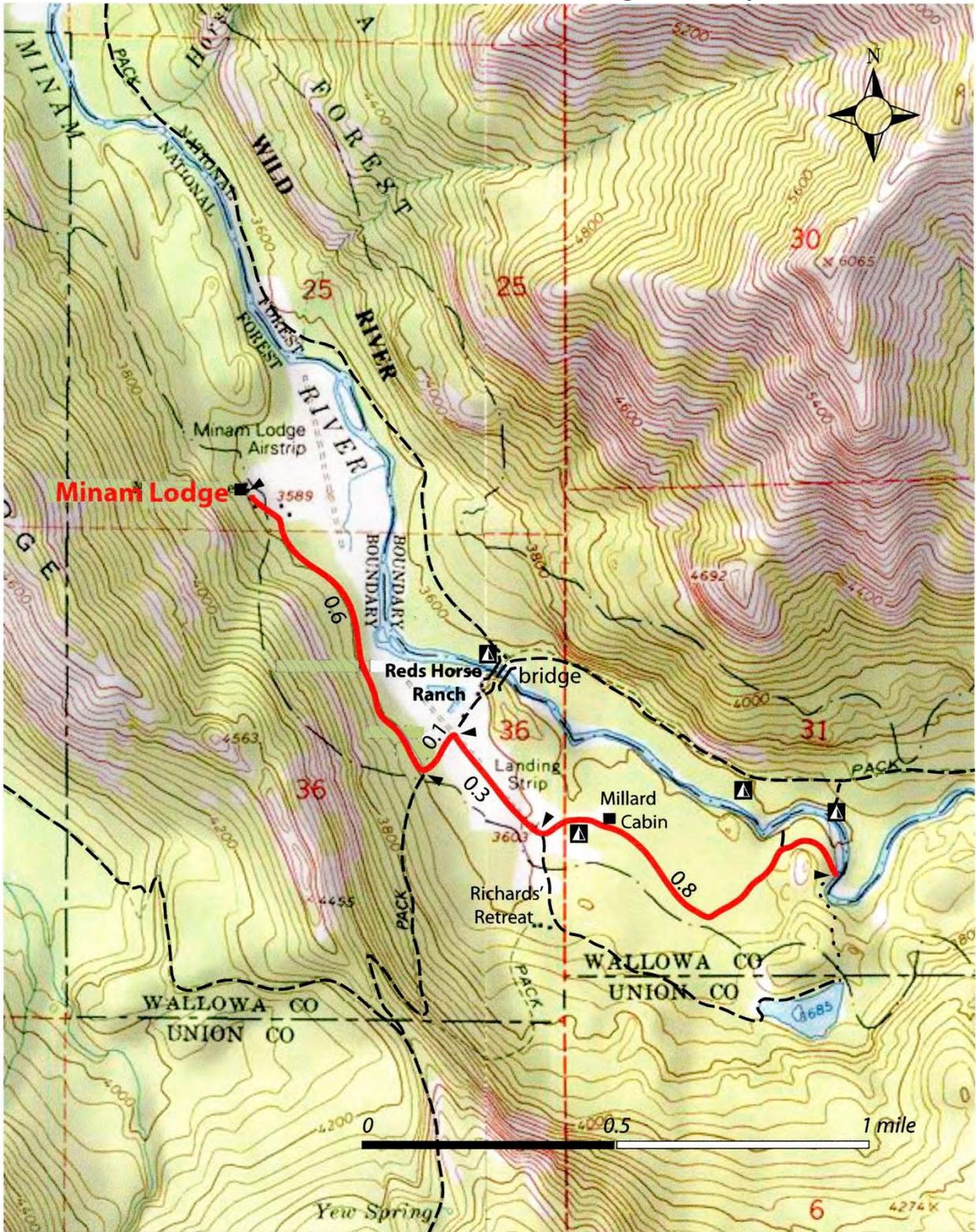
About 40 yards to the right of Millard Cabin (and about 25 yards behind a horse hitching post), is a wooden gate. Go through this gate and pick up a distinct trail that winds its way through forest for about 0.25 mile, then turns to the left and crosses a seasonal creek. From there it’s another 0.15 mile to an unmarked junction. The trail going straight ahead reaches the river in less than 100 yards at a small beach. To reach Reds (also known as “Horseshoe”) Bend, turn right at the junction and travel through forest for about 0.15 mile until you reach a small open area about 15 feet above the water overlooking a sweeping bend in the river. On the outer curve of the bend is an outstanding swimming hole that just begs for you to jump in. Even if you prefer to stay dry, however, this is also an excellent fishing or picnic spot.



Reds Bend

Note: A rugged and sometimes faint use trail goes around the outside of the river bend before curving right and steeply climbing over a rocky divide to Reds Lake.

Reds "Horseshoe" Bend Swimming Hole Map



4 *Reds Lake (aka Lake 3685)* ★★

Type: Half-day hike

Rating: Easy

Round-trip distance: 3.6 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 200 feet

Highlights: A shallow, forest-rimmed lake that is a good place to observe wildlife (deer, beaver, and waterfowl) and with nice views over the water to the forested slopes of Jim White Ridge.

Considerations: Bring binoculars and plan to visit early in the morning or late in the evening for the best wildlife-viewing.

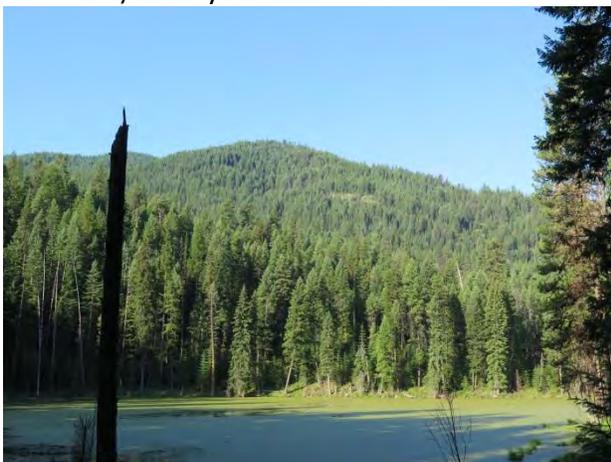
Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left, walking through a gate, and cross the meadow toward Reds Horse Ranch for about 0.1 mile to where the trail crosses the facility's grassy landing strip. Turn right and walk almost 0.3 mile to the end of the landing strip where you veer right onto a use trail that starts near a stake with an orange marker on top. Follow this route uphill for about 150 yards, pass through a gate, and continue southwest into the forest where the trail becomes more distinct. Soon you'll go through a fenceline with signs identifying this as private property, but that visitors are welcome. This small private inholding is called Richards' Retreat.

The trail splits immediately after the fence. Keep straight, heading toward a cabin, and then cut to the left on an obvious trail that passes to the right of a small corral just before you reach the cluster of tiny cabins. This well-established trail (someone even cuts out the deadfall) is easy to navigate as it crosses elk paths and gradually climbs through relatively dense conifer forests. About 0.4 mile from Richards' Retreat you arrive at the southwest tip of the lake.

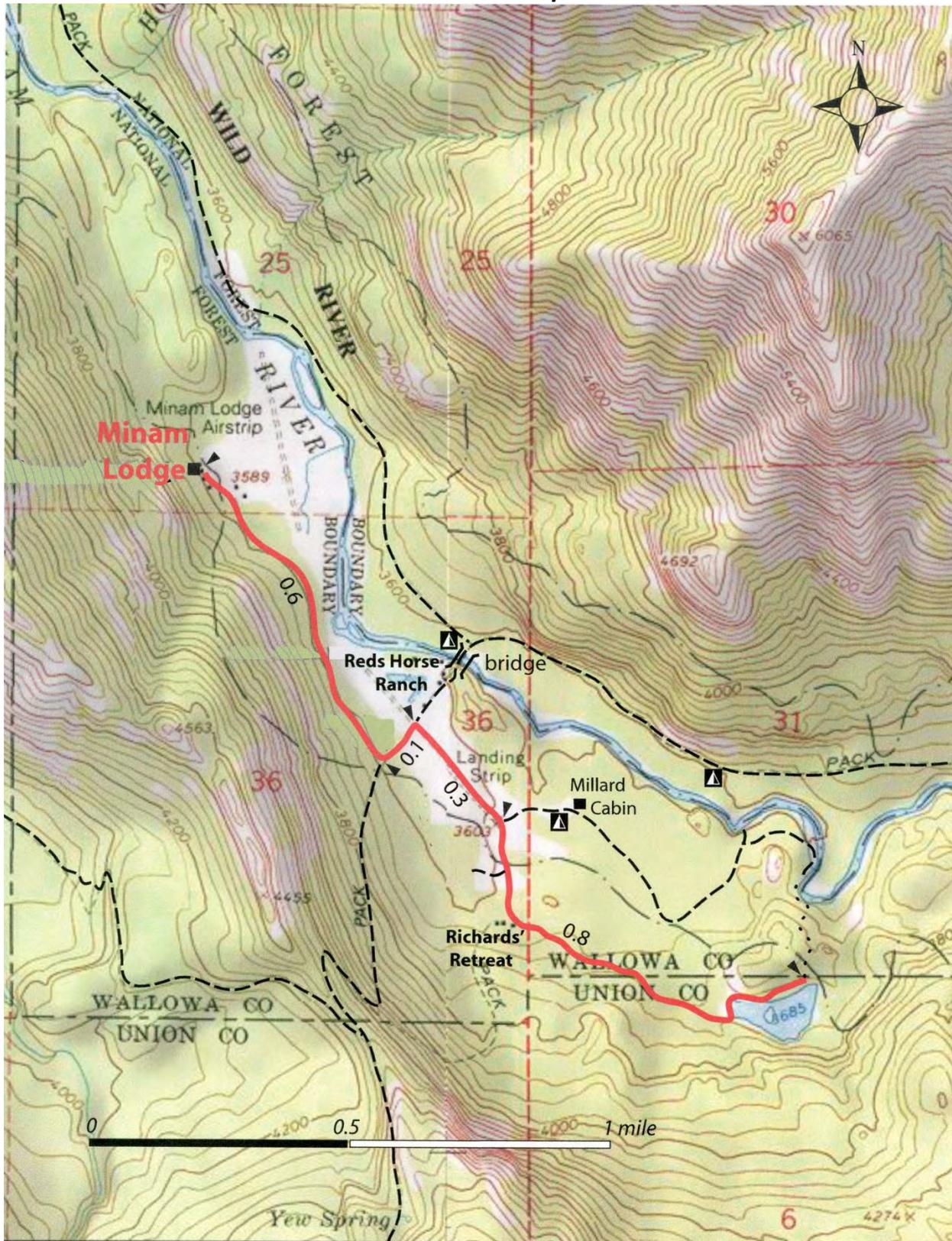
This lake, which is formed by an old beaver dam, goes by various names including Reds Lake, Lake 3685 (for its elevation), Millard (sometimes "Maylard") Pond or, more prosaically just "The Pond." The lake's shallow waters are usually covered with green algae through the summer. Sometimes large trout live here, but the shallow waters are susceptible to winterkill.

If you are very careful, you can pick your way over the rotting beaver dam to a trail that goes along the north side of the lake. (Alternatively, you can bushwhack across the creek below the dam.) Here you'll find the best views across the lake to forested Jim White Ridge.



Note: For adventuresome types, a rough and not-always-easy-to-find use trail goes over a rocky divide north of the lake and drops to Reds "Horseshoe" Bend along the Minam River.

Reds Lake Map



5 Backbone Ridge ★★★★★

Type: Full-day hike

Rating: Moderate to Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 6.2 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 1500 feet

Highlights: A relatively short but dramatic hike along the view-packed ridge west of Minam River Lodge. If you have time for just one day hike from the lodge, I'd recommend this.

Considerations: It's often windy along the ridge, so a light jacket may come in handy.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction beside the meadow at Reds Horse Ranch.

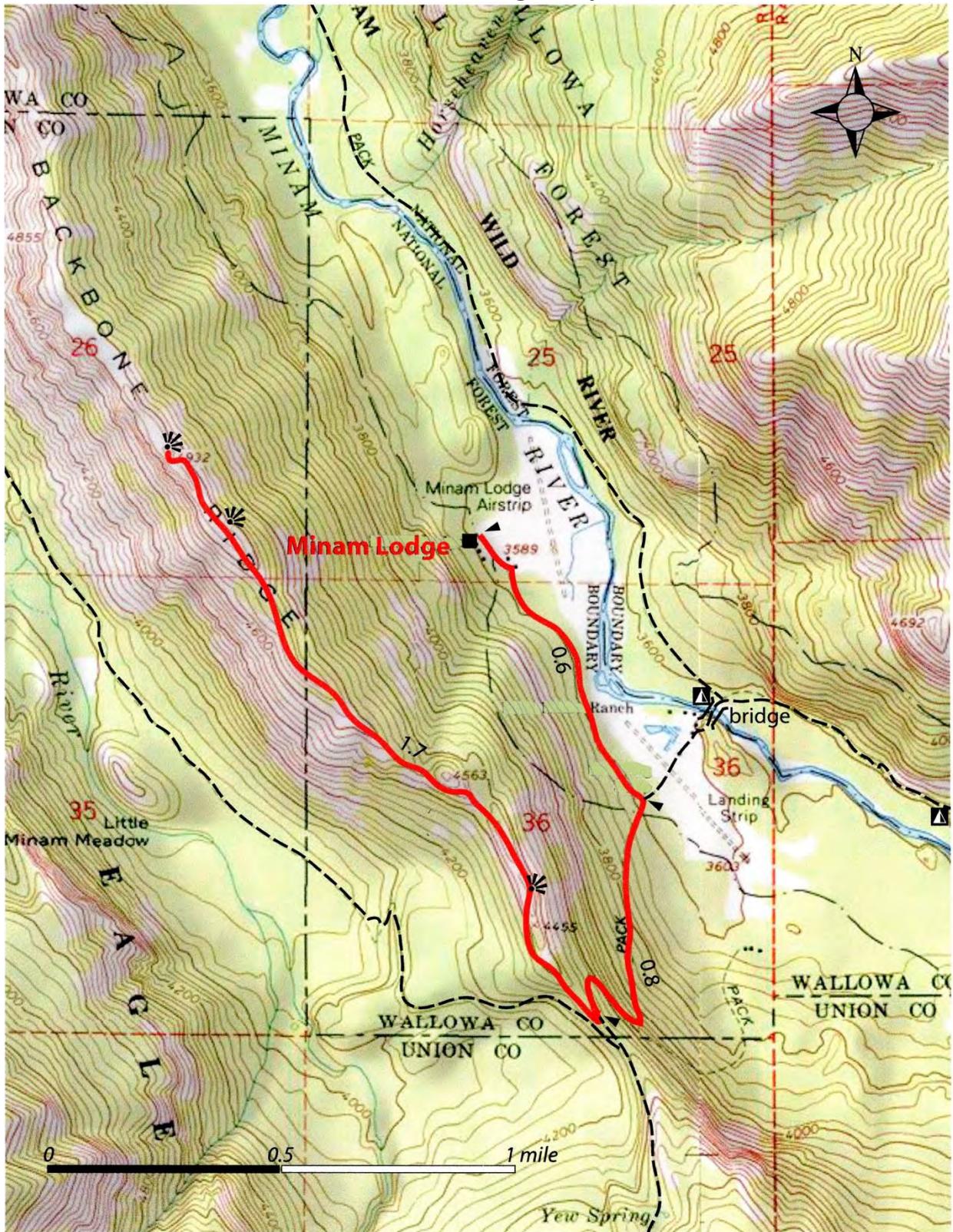
Turn right on a wide and heavily used horse trail and steadily ascend this woody route up the east side of the ridge. After about 0.5 mile you make two switchbacks and reach the top of the ridge. Just before you cross the divide, turn right on an unsigned but obvious elk and boot path. Although not an officially maintained Forest Service trail, this route is very distinct and easy to follow. Even if you temporarily lose the path, it is pretty much impossible to get lost as you simply follow the narrow ridge and you're fine.

Initially the trail goes along the west (left) side of the divide, but after about 0.4 mile it more closely hugs the top of the ridge. The views into the Minam River Canyon with Reds Horse Ranch below and Little Sheep Ridge behind are excellent. Also nice are the vistas to the west across the narrow chasm of the Little Minam River to the ridge holding Point Prominence with its skinny lookout tower. If you can tear your eyes away from the views, Backbone Ridge has some interesting flora such as scraggly mountain mahogany, and late June to mid-July wildflowers like Clarkia, sulphur-flower, stonecrop, balsamroot, and yarrow.



The use trail cuts to the left to go around a ridgetop knob, then keeps following the mostly ascending ridgeline. The ridge is never really narrow enough to bother anyone with a reasonable fear of heights and the fine views help to pull you along. You should expect to see turkey vultures, common nighthawks, violet-green swallows, and other birds soaring on the rising thermals coming off Backbone Ridge. Probably the most logical turnaround point is Point 4932, a prominent rocky high point in a large open area about 1.7 miles from where you left the official trail. The views are well worth the effort, although the final 0.1 mile is over steep and rocky terrain that will probably frighten those with mild acrophobia.

Backbone Ridge Map



6 *Little Minam Meadow* ★

Type: Day hike or overnight

Rating: Moderate to Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 6.4 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 1250 feet

Highlights: A tiny but pretty mountain meadow with access to a stream with good fishing. Deer, elk, and grouse are sometimes seen here, especially early in the morning.

Considerations: This is a great spot for a picnic along the stream, so bring your lunch. You could also spend the night here enjoying the solitude and good small-stream fishing.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction beside the meadow at Reds Horse Ranch.

Turn right on a wide and heavily used horse trail, and steadily ascend this woody route up the east side of the ridge. After about 0.5 mile you make two switchbacks and reach the top of the ridge. The trail then switches to the west side of the divide and about 100 yards later reaches a signed junction.

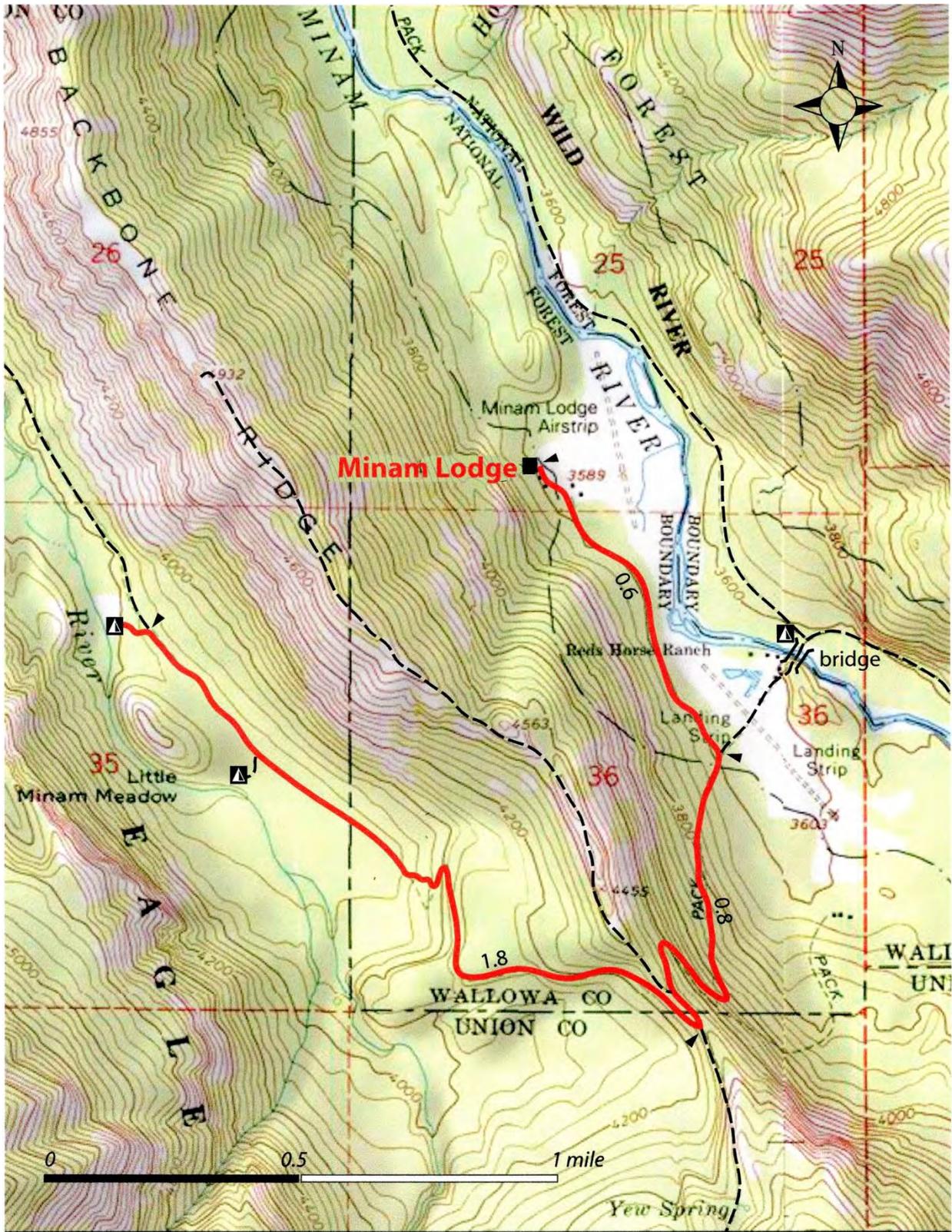
Turn sharply right, following signs to Little Minam River, and for the next 0.1 mile go up and down just below the ridgetop. From there you begin an extended downhill mostly in viewless forest. After a couple of short switchbacks, you come to a much flatter and open area from which you can easily hear (but not see) the rushing waters of Little Minam River on your left. About 0.3 mile later is an unsigned use trail dropping to the left. This leads to a little willow-choked open area with very difficult access to the river, but a possible place to camp.

For a more satisfying destination, continue on the main trail for about 0.25 mile then look for a very faint trail dropping to the left. (N 45° 20.904' W 117° 39.135') This initially obscure path descends about 40 feet in 85 yards to a much more attractive little meadow. This inviting spot features much easier access to the stream and also offers a possible place to set up your tent for the night.



Little Minam Meadow

Little Minam Meadow Map



7 Land Ranch ★★

Type: Long day hike or short backpack **Rating:** Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 14 miles **Round-trip elevation gain:** 1800 feet

Highlights: A long but lovely walk through forests along the Little Minam River to the remains of a long-abandoned guest ranch beside a large meadow.

Considerations: This is a long hike, so get an early start. You could turn this into an overnight backpacking trip if you prefer a more leisurely pace.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction beside the meadow at Reds Horse Ranch.

Turn right on a wide and heavily used horse trail and steadily ascend this woody route up the east side of the ridge. After about 0.5 mile you make two switchbacks and reach the top of the ridge. The trail then switches to the west side of the divide and about 100 yards later reaches a signed junction.

Turn sharply right, following signs to Little Minam River, and for the next 0.1 mile go up and down just below the ridgetop. From there you begin an extended downhill mostly in viewless forest. After a couple of short switchbacks, you come to a much flatter and more open area from which you can easily hear (but not see) the rushing waters of Little Minam River on your left. The trail gets brushy in a few spots, but generally offers easy hiking as it makes intermittent downhills while it hugs the hillside above the stream. About 3.5 miles down from Backbone Ridge you reach the flats by the small river, where you'll have easier access to the water. In spring and early summer you may encounter a male blue grouse strutting around while putting on an impressive display designed to attract the feathered ladies. If he is successful, by July you may see hens leading around bands of fluffy little chicks.



male blue grouse

At 5.25 miles from Backbone Ridge you cross Little Minam River on a sturdy-looking wooden bridge. About 150 yards later you pass an inviting campsite on your right then hop over tiny Bluch Creek and come to an easy-to-miss junction (look for a small wooden sign on your left) with Trail 1928 to the Rock Springs Trailhead.

To visit Land Ranch, go straight and soon come to the edge of a large meadow where you'll find a spacious campsite on your left and the badly broken-down remains of the lodge building at long-abandoned Land Ranch on your right. (N 45° 23.932' W 117° 40.515') It's fun to poke around the rotting lodge building and smaller adjacent cabins. You can also make your way over to the Little Minam River for some fishing or explore the adjacent meadow with its nice views of Trippier Point and Little Sheep Ridge to the east. The trail continues straight across the meadow and in 0.6 mile comes to a bridgeless crossing of the Minam River. If you can get across, a loop would be possible on the Minam River Trail back to Minam Lodge. Unfortunately, before late summer this ford is too dangerous for hikers, so it's better to turn around and head back the way you came.



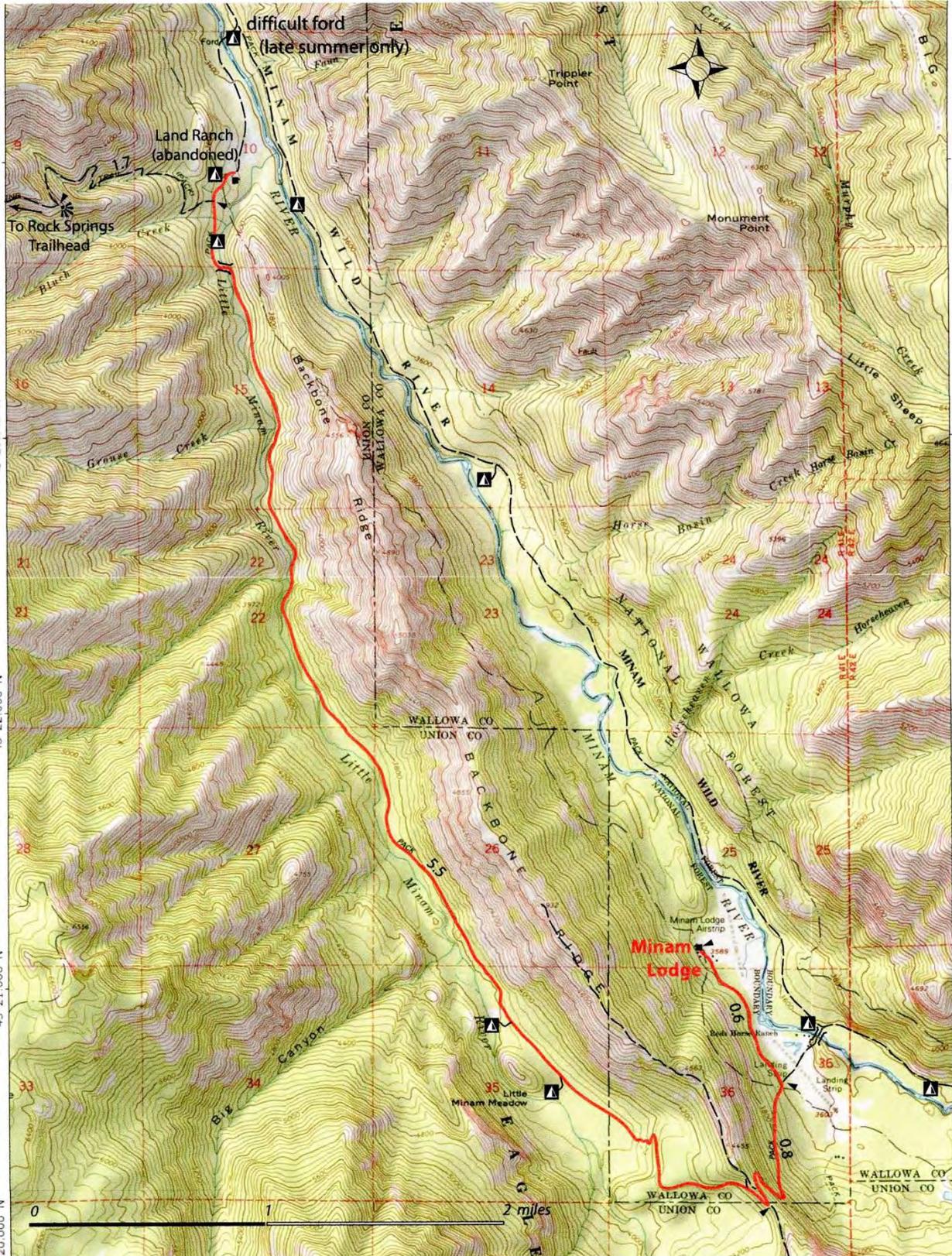
Broken-down remains of Land Ranch



Little Sheep Ridge over Land Ranch Meadow

Note: For the best views in this area, take the Rock Springs Trail and follow this forested path up a series of irregularly spaced switchbacks. As you gain elevation, the slopes become more open with increasingly excellent views of the Minam River canyon country. At 1.7 miles, and 1000 feet up, there is a particularly fetching vista up the Minam River Canyon to the distant snowy crags of the high Wallowa Mountains.

Land Ranch Map



8 *Jim White Ridge* ★★★★★

Type: Very long day hike or short backpack **Rating:** Very strenuous

Round-trip distance: 17.6 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 3900 feet

Highlights: A long, woodsy climb leads to expansive views of the Minam Canyon and the snowy peaks of the Wallowa Mountains. The ridgetop meadows are covered with wildflowers in July.

Considerations: This trail includes an extended, rather steep uphill with little water, so carry plenty. Trail maintenance is irregular, so expect occasional deadfall along the way and some minor route-finding skills may come in handy. Get an early start to do the climb in the cool and shade of the morning hours. You could make this a backpacking trip, if you prefer.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction beside the meadow at Reds Horse Ranch.

Turn right on a wide and heavily used horse trail and steadily ascend this woodsy route up the east side of the ridge. After about 0.5 mile you make two switchbacks and reach the top of the ridge. The trail then switches to the west side of the divide and about 100 yards later reaches a signed junction.

Go straight and climb to difficult-to-discern Yew Spring, which is best identified by the patch of scraggly Pacific yew trees growing just below the route. From here the trail remains nearly level as it passes through densely forested terrain until you meet up with the lovely Little Minam River and follow it upstream for 0.3 mile to a junction just before a bridge.

Turn left on the Jim White Ridge trail and make a short, steep climb. The trail then eases off for about 0.5 mile as you travel above unseen Boulder Creek and come to a pretty little meadow with an excellent campsite. From here you leave Boulder Creek and the serious climbing begins. A few twists and turns over the next 0.6 mile leads to the crossing of a tiny creek with a campsite immediately beyond. Several more switchbacks and continuous rather steep uphill in forest will test your leg muscles and stamina as you tackle the long, mostly viewless climb. The scenery improves near the 6500-foot level where the trail levels off in an old burn zone now repopulating with thousands of small trees.

Just past this section is a waterless campsite, after which you climb through another burn area where you are likely to see several species of woodpecker. You climb to another forested high point offering nice views to the south of Young Ridge, and then gradually descend to a saddle. You briefly switch to the north side of the ridge dropping steeply to a mediocre campsite on your left. About 25 yards to the east from this camp is a barely trickling spring. It's not much, but it's the only water on Jim White Ridge, so take advantage of it.

The climbing isn't quite over yet, as you ascend through high-elevation forests of mountain hemlock, lodgepole pine, and subalpine fir increasingly interspersed with small meadows. You make a pair of switchbacks on a sometimes faint tread, and then a final climb in forest takes you to the summit.

This is one of the least visited but best grandstand seats in the western Wallowa Mountains. Young Ridge dominates the view to the southwest while to the east and southeast you'll see the huge gash of the Minam River Canyon and the snowy crags of the central Wallowa Mountains. Stop, rest, and enjoy this wonderful and hard-earned view. If the scenery

isn't enough, pull out the wildflower guide, because in July the summit meadows are carpeted with a wide array of blossoms including lupine, daisy, mariposa lily, yarrow, and gilia.



Young Ridge from Point 7442 on Jim White Ridge

Note: If you are somehow still bursting with energy (and, if so, I am truly impressed) great ridge walking on a sometimes sketchy trail continues for several more miles to the south.



9 Minam River Trail downstream to Little Minam River ★★★

Type: Day hike or short backpack

Rating: Moderate

Round-trip distance: up to 12.6 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 500 feet

Highlights: A long but gentle trail offering frequent access to the rushing Minam River with lots of views to the surrounding ridges and potential spots to match wits with the local trout.

Considerations: You can go as far as you want along this river trail, stopping whenever the mood dictates. Backpacking is also possible for those who want to stay awhile.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow toward the various buildings that comprise Reds Horse Ranch. The path veers to the right away from the ranch, passing through a gate with a nifty horseshoe latch on it, then comes to the substantial trail bridge over the clear Minam River. At the junction immediately after the bridge, turn left (downstream) and walk past a spacious campsite then some nice viewpoints looking across the water to a pair of quaint cabins that are part of Reds Horse Ranch.

The extraordinarily gentle route wends its way through open forest for 0.4 mile to a nice open area with excellent views across the river to the meadow and buildings of Minam River Lodge. Backbone Ridge provides a scenic backdrop. This makes a good turnaround point for a very easy hike with a roundtrip distance of just 2.6 miles.



Minam River Lodge from east side of Minam River

The distance goes by rapidly as you continue on the wide trail, which has only minor ups and downs. At 1.25 miles from the bridge you hop over small Horseheaven Creek then wander along for another 0.6 mile to a point right across from a lovely little island.

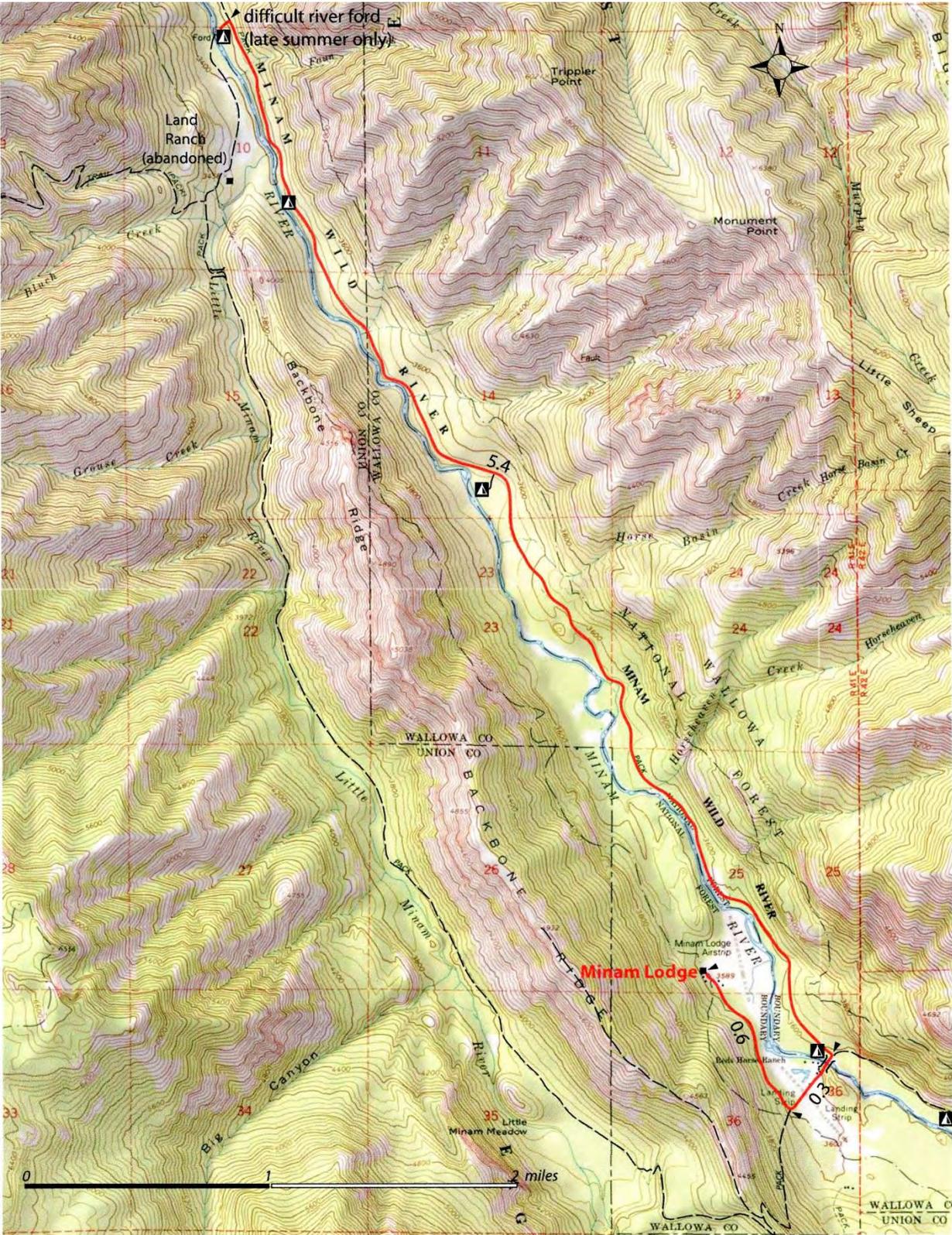
From here the trail detours inland for the next mile, making its way over a low rise before descending back to river level and coming to an unmarked but obvious spur trail that accesses a nice riverside campsite. The route then keeps to an elevation about 50 feet above the river remaining in forest and grassy areas with several places where you could scramble down to the water for a picnic or to wet your line in search of trout. You reach an excellent campsite beside the river at about 5.2 miles, then 0.2 mile later pass the point where the Little Minam joins the larger main stream.

The trail then takes you to a hop-over crossing of tiny Faun Creek and comes to a junction. Take the trail to the left to reach a fine little meadow by the river with a good campsite and a river ford. If you can get across, a loop would be possible returning past Land Ranch on the Little Minam Trail. Unfortunately, before late summer this ford may be too dangerous for hikers, so it's better to turn around and head back the way you came.



Minam River below the confluence with the Little Minam River

Minam River Trail Downstream to Little Minam River Map



10 Peak 4692 ★★★

Type: Day hike

Rating: Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 4.1 miles (as a loop) **Round-trip elevation gain:** 1150 feet

Highlights: For experienced off-trail travelers only, this is a steep and strenuous scramble to a peak with unique and dramatic views of the lodge and its surroundings.

Considerations: Although fun for experienced hikers, this off-trail trip is not for everyone. The route is very steep and you'll need to negotiate some rocks, downed trees, and other obstacles. Only attempt this trip if you are competent with cross-country travel and good on steep terrain.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow toward the various buildings that comprise Reds Horse Ranch. The path veers to the right away from the ranch, passing through a gate with a nifty horseshoe latch on it, then comes to the substantial trail bridge over the Minam River. At the junction immediately after the bridge turn right (upstream) and hike on a gentle trail through woods for about 0.4 mile to a nice campsite on your right. Shortly thereafter the trail climbs a little hill gaining about 100 feet before topping out. (N 45° 20.592' W 117° 36.614')

This is where you leave the official trail to begin the assault on Peak 4692. Head northwest through open forest with some areas of brush and downed trees, generally staying to the left of a little dry gully. After 0.2 mile you'll enjoy occasional glimpses of Peak 4692 ensuring that you are on course. The climb is quite steep with lots of slippery pine needles, so watch your step. About 0.7 mile from the trail you make your way around the right side of the cliffs rimming the top of the peak and you're there! (N 45° 20.983' W 117° 36.946')

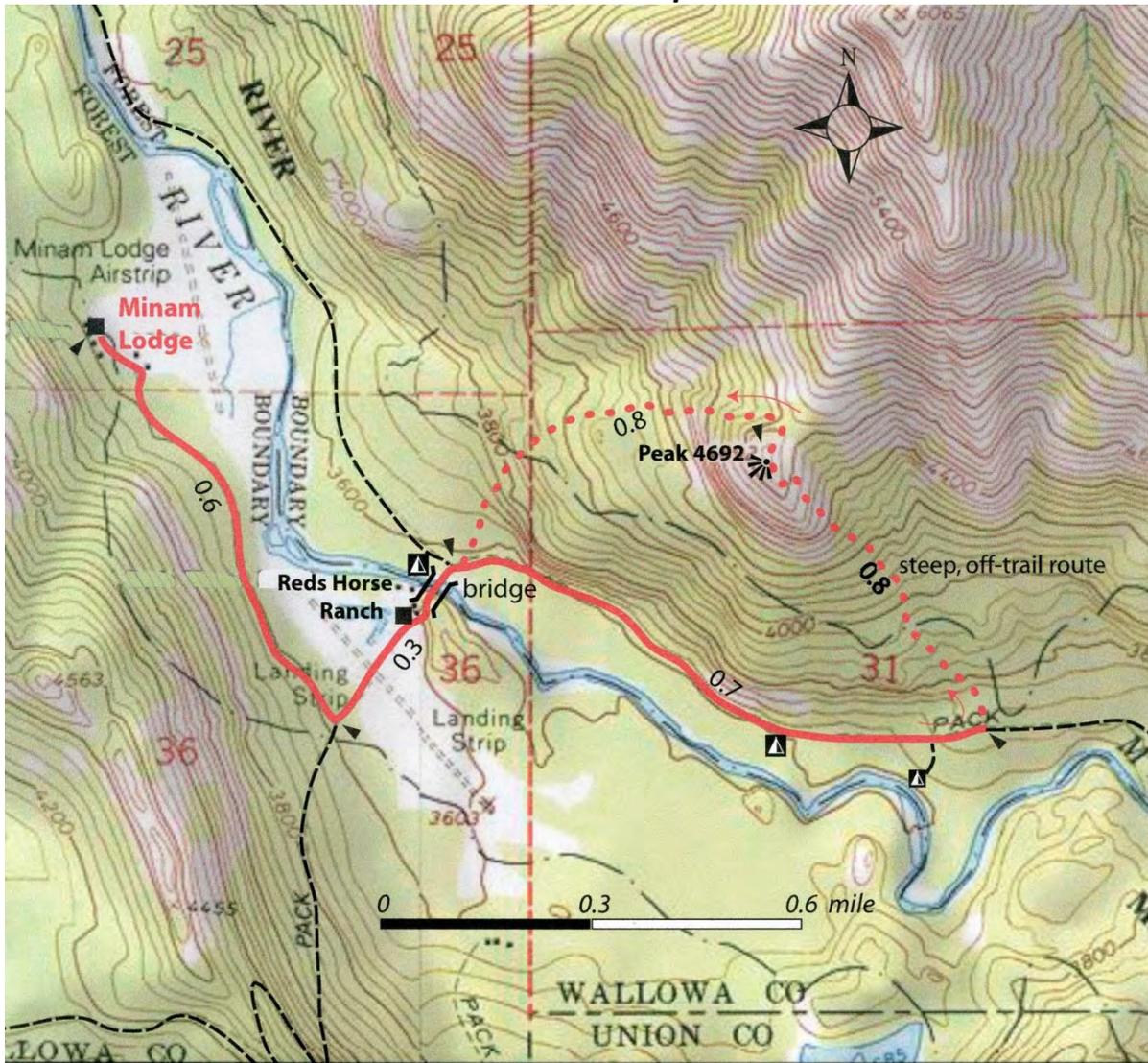
The views up the Minam River Canyon to Washboard Ridge are great, but you'll likely be more interested in the vista looking down to the meadow and cabins of Minam River Lodge, your wilderness home away from home, some 1100 feet below. Stay awhile and enjoy the view. You've earned it. You have also earned the right to talk to other guests, point up at the high peak you can see from the lodge and say, "I was just up there, and it was great."

You can turn this into a loop by dropping to a saddle just northeast of the summit then descending the north side of Peak 4692 following the left side of a gully. After steeply losing about 600 feet, you keep to the right of some cliffs then finish the downhill, reaching the Minam River Trail very near the bridge you crossed earlier in the day.



Atop Peak 4692 (meadow at Reds Horse Ranch behind)

Peak 4692 Map



View down to Minam Lodge



Looking downstream from Reds Bridge

11 *Minam River Trail upstream to Big Burn* ★

Type: Long day hike or short backpack

Rating: Moderate but fairly long

Round-trip distance: 13.4 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 700 feet

Highlights: This easy, woody trail traces the course of the Minam River upstream for as far as your ambition takes you. Access to the river is infrequent, but you'll still want to bring the fishing gear.

Considerations: You can turn this into an overnight trip with the nice campsite at Big Burn.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through the forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek and then a junction.

The trail to Standley Cabin goes left, but you keep straight, staying on the Minam River Trail, then make a brief climb that ascends along a tributary of Chaparral Creek. After 0.2 mile you make an easy crossing of this small creek before coming to a crossing of the main branch of Chaparral Creek and a small campsite. From here the trail remains in forest well away from the unseen Minam River for another couple of miles. You hop over two small feeder creeks before finally working your way back to the banks of the Minam River. Here the river has more of the look and feel of a high mountain stream with its rushing water passing through lush forests. Look for cheerful little dippers, small gray birds that live along fast-flowing mountain streams.

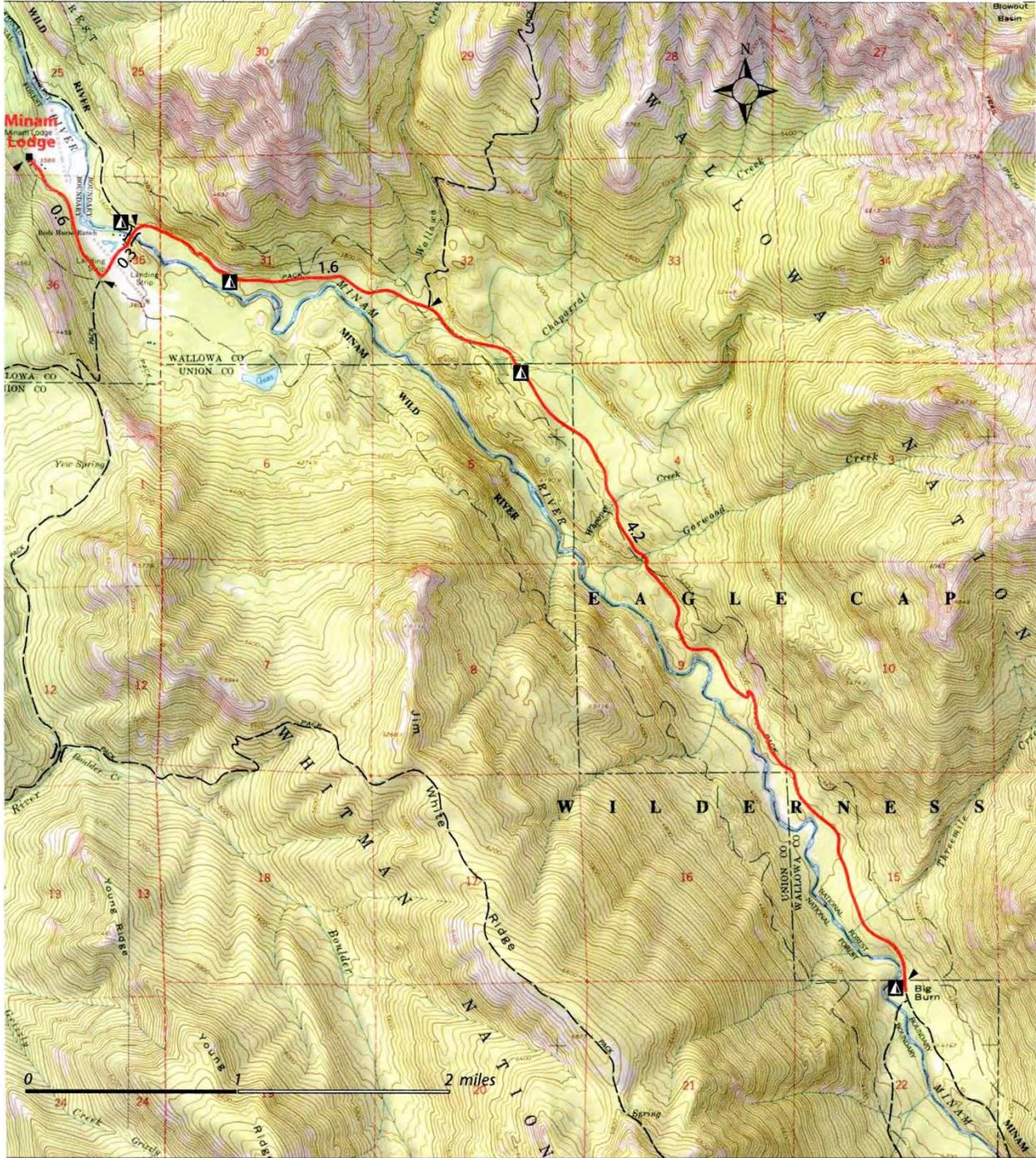
Just 0.3 mile after renewing your acquaintance with the lovely Minam River, you part ways once again as the trail makes a couple of short switchbacks and keeps gradually climbing through stately forests. Eventually you drop to a rock-hop crossing of Threemile Creek before coming to a small meadow with a large campsite that even boasts its own tiny sandy beach.

This camp is at the lower end of a site called Big Burn, where the maps show a trail junction, although there is no evidence of this on the ground. Also near here is the site of an old "splash" dam. During the Minam's logging days, water was stored here. Then, upon a signal from downriver, it was released downstream to carry sawlogs to mills down the river.



Minam River at Big Burn

Minam River Upstream to Big Burn Map



12 *Standley Cabin* ★★★★★

Type: Very long day hike or short backpack **Rating:** Very strenuous

Round-trip distance: 15 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 3750 feet

Highlights: A long climb past a string of superb canyon viewpoints to a quaint log Forest Service cabin. The lush meadows nearby are a wildflower bonanza in July.

Considerations: This hike involves a lot of climbing, so be in shape for it. After leaving the Minam River there is no reliable water until you reach the springs a little before Standley Cabin, so carry plenty. This makes a superb one-night backpacking trip.



Dramatic clouds over meadow west of Standley Cabin

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through the forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek and then a junction.

Turn left, following a small wooden sign to Standley, and settle in for a long uphill. The trail is never unbearably steep, but it is relentless with precious few opportunities to catch your breath. You'll wind your way through increasingly open forests, mostly of ponderosa pines for the first couple of miles, offering only occasional glimpses of the canyon country and ridges all around. As you slowly reach higher elevations, you'll notice a different mix of wildflowers, with the meadows sporting varieties such as western flax, stonecrop, penstemon, coneflower,

mariposa lily, gilia, and sulfur-flower. You are also likely to see elk, since these large animals congregate on the higher meadows and ridges during the summer.

The first really good view arrives as you top a minor spur ridge, which is dotted with mountain mahogany trees, at about 2.1 miles up from the Minam River. From here there are superb vistas looking southeast up the Minam River Canyon to a cluster of high peaks, south-southwest to Jim White Ridge, west to Dunns Bluff (the summit of which is surrounded by tall cliffs of columnar basalt), and southeast to the long narrow line of Washboard Ridge with Bald Mountain as the highest point.

After the first viewpoint, you ascend past a series of ever-higher vantage points where the vistas are never less than very good and often absolutely outstanding. As you slowly approach the top, you'll pass beneath some small but impressively rugged rock formations covered with colorful lichens. You pass a final high viewpoint then enter a noticeably wetter forest environment that includes many subalpine firs and some lodgepole pines. Less than 0.1 mile later you reach a junction, 4 miles and fully 3100 feet up from the Minam River.

The Big Sheep Ridge Trail goes left, but to reach Standley Cabin you go straight, continuing uphill across open slopes carpeted with subalpine wildflowers in July. Expect to see Sitka valerian, American bistort, Jacob's ladder, bluebells, false hellebore, larkspur, wild carrot, buttercups, asters, and dozens of others. These open slopes also feature seasonal spring-fed trickles and long views to the north down Big Sheep Ridge and west to the distant crags of the Elkhorn Mountains.

After 0.8 mile, and about 150 yards before the trail starts to level out atop the divide, look to your left about 75 yards and you may notice a four-foot-tall monument. If you investigate this feature, you'll find that it is a memorial to Arthur W. Sampson (1884-1967) whose ground-breaking scientific studies on livestock grazing in subalpine ecosystems began here and led to his title of "The Father of Range Management."

Almost immediately on the other side of the divide is a junction with the Washboard Ridge Trail, which goes sharply right and is marked with cairns. You keep straight and walk very gradually downhill for a little over 0.1 mile through moist little meadows filled with early-July blooming buttercups, to the quaint log Standley Cabin. Nearby flat areas offer outstanding campsites with a small spring-fed creek providing water. (No camping is allowed within 50 yards of the spring.) The cabin is usually locked so you can't go inside, but it sits in a very attractive location and is well worth visiting.

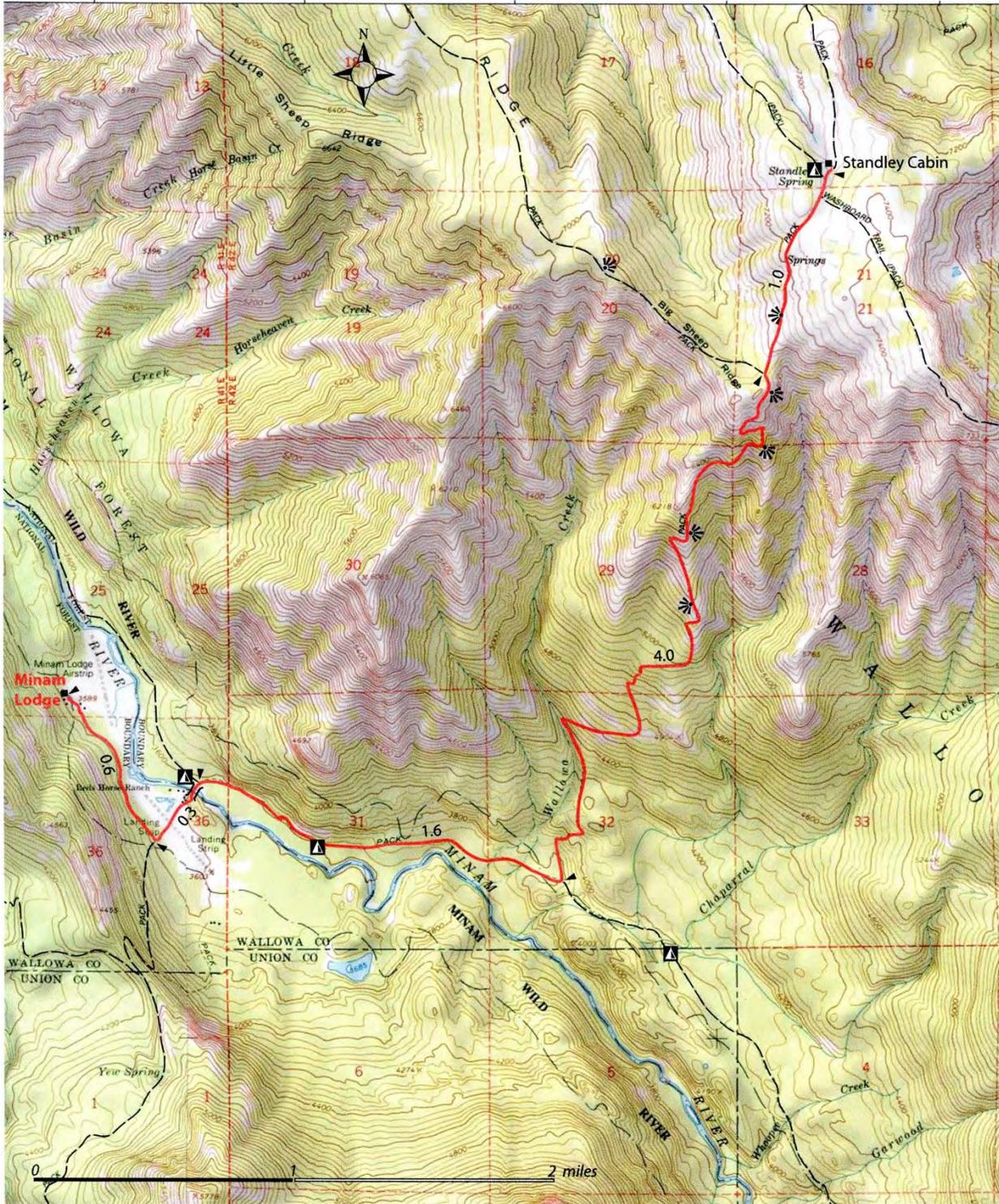


Looking southeast to Washboard Ridge



Standley Cabin

Standley Cabin Map



13 Big Sheep Ridge – Lower Minam Loop ★★☆☆

Type: Two- or three-night backpack

Rating: Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 31.9 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 5200 feet

Highlights: A wonderful ridge walk with nearly constant views on a little used and sometimes faint trail followed by a long, gentle walk up the Minam River.

Considerations: Water is very limited along the ridge, with only one realistic campsite by a spring. Expect wildlife, wildflowers, and (often) wind. Fishing gear will come in handy on the river section. Good route-finding instincts are useful along the ridge.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction at the start of your loop. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek then a junction.

Turn left, following a small wooden sign to Standley, and settle in for a long and tiring uphill. You'll wind your way through increasingly open forests, mostly of ponderosa pines, for the first couple of miles, then climb past a series of terrific viewpoints on wildflower-covered ridges. As you slowly approach the top, you'll also pass beneath some small but impressively rugged rock formations covered with colorful lichens. After a final high viewpoint, you enter a noticeably wetter forest environment that includes many subalpine firs and some lodgepole pines. Less than 0.1 mile later you reach a junction, 4 miles and fully 3100 feet up from the Minam River. About 1 mile away on the trail that goes straight is Standley Cabin, which is well worth a visit if you have the time. It also has a nearby spring-fed creek and makes an excellent and very scenic location for your first night on the trail.



The Big Sheep Ridge Trail goes left (north) at the junction west of Standley Cabin and goes up and down through high-elevation forest. At regular intervals you come to open areas or lovely ridgetop meadows with fine views looking east to Cougar Ridge. After about 3 miles the trail descends, then crosses a spectacular open area carpeted with wildflowers in July. At the north end of this open area you re-enter forest and about 0.1 mile later, come to a place where it appears that the main trail angles fairly sharply downhill to the left. The actual official trail, which is a bit faint, curves to the right and 50 yards later comes to a signed junction with the practically abandoned trail down Murphy Creek.

What looks like the main trail going left and downhill is really just the access trail to Hideaway Spring. Since this is the only reliable water along Big Sheep Ridge, you'll want to stop here. To find the spring, follow the spur trail down for about 80 yards to a switchback, then stay high as the trail traverses back to the south for about 0.2 mile (much farther than indicated on the USGS map) to the spring. Here you'll find a comfortable outfitter's camp and a nice flow of refreshing water that fills a tank where stock can drink.



Mount Moriah from near Collusion Point

North of Hideaway Spring, the Big Sheep Ridge Trail gets very little use and is often quite faint, so decent route-finding instincts will come in handy. Fortunately you don't really need the tread most of the time since if you just stay with the relatively narrow ridge you'd have a hard

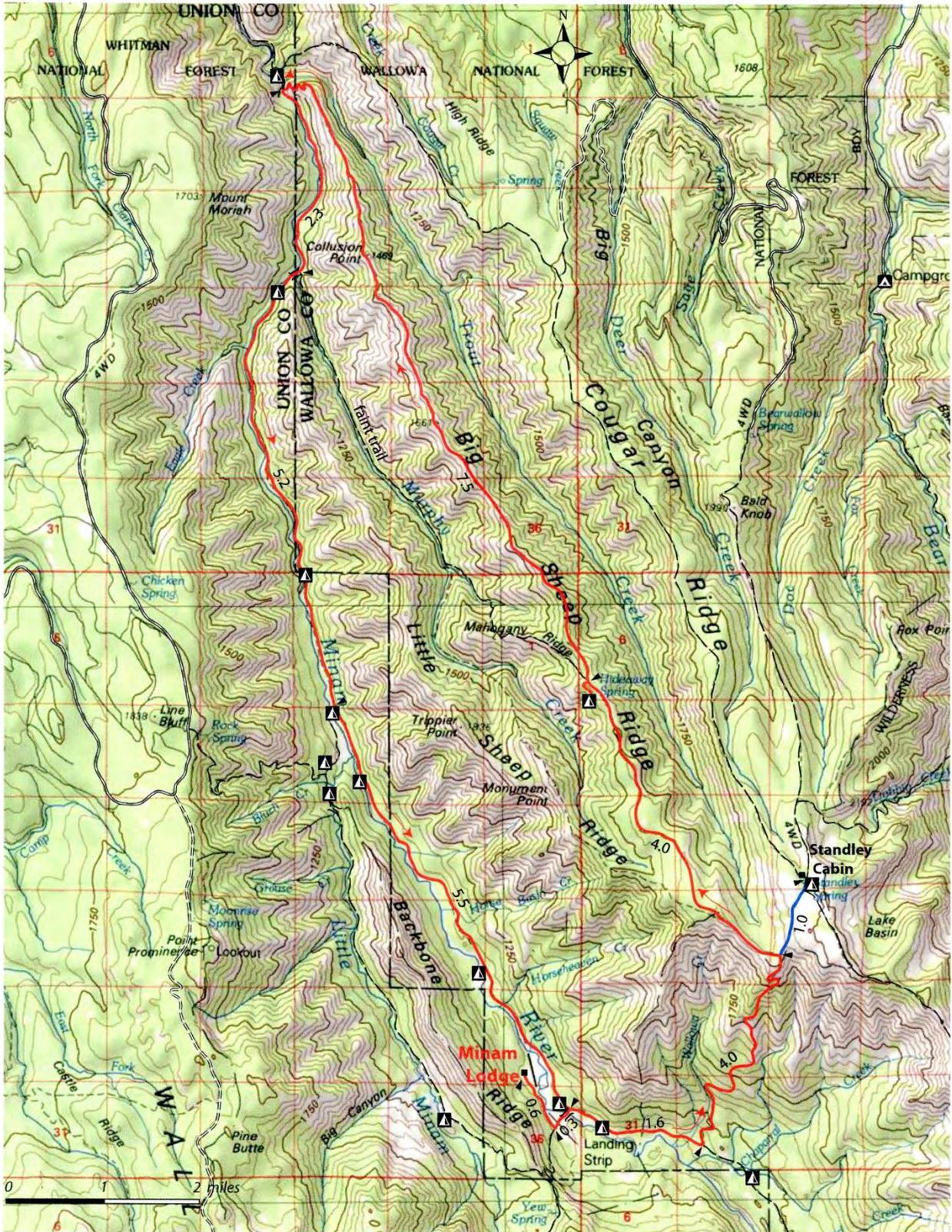
time getting lost. When it's not atop the ridge, the trail tends to prefer the left side of the divide, so views to the west dominate. Immediately below you on this side is the deep canyon of Murphy Creek with the larger drop of the Minam River Canyon beyond. Above both of these is a tall ridge with high points stretching from Dunns Bluff to the south to Mount Moriah to the north. As you get further north along Big Sheep Ridge the country gets lower, drier, and more open so the views just get better and better. This is some of the wildest and least visited terrain in Oregon, so take some time to enjoy both the scenery and the solitude.

As you continue north the intermittent track takes you over or around a series of ridgetop highpoints all with great views. Although there is plenty of up and down along the way, overall you lose more elevation than you gain as the ridge slowly peters out. Collusion Point, the last significant high point, is about 6 miles north of Hideaway Spring. After that the trail follows the ridgecrest for about another mile then turns sharply downhill and to the west as a series of steep switchbacks take you down to a junction with the Minam River Trail. There are pleasant camps in this vicinity, making this a good place to rest your tired muscles and spend the second night of the trip.

The return route to Minam Lodge involves a long, mostly gentle trek up the Minam River Trail, which follows the east side of its namesake feature through a deep, forested canyon. Although it pulls away from the water from time to time, the trail generally stays close to the amazingly clear river so anglers have countless opportunities to try their luck. Views across the river canyon are often good up to the partly forested ridges that rise thousands of feet from the water, so even if you aren't doing any fishing the scenery is nice to look at. After 2.3 miles you pass a cairn marking the unsigned junction with the nearly abandoned Murphy Creek Trail. The main trail then crosses a wooden bridge over Murphy Creek and, 0.3 mile later, passes a small but serviceable campsite on the left. You pass another campsite about 3.8 miles from Murphy Creek then it's another 1.4 miles to a signed junction with the Little Minam Trail, which goes right. Less than 0.1 mile down this trail is a nice grassy meadow and a possible camp. Crossing the river here to reach Land Ranch on the other side requires a ford that is dangerous for hikers before late summer.

Keep straight on the gentle Minam River Trail, soon hop over small Faun Creek amidst a tangle of alders, and then pass a point where you can see the waters of Little Minam River joining the main stem of the Minam. About 0.2 mile later is an excellent campsite right by the river. From here the trail continues to gradually gain elevation, generally staying less than 100 feet from the water, so you can scramble over to it at almost any point. After passing a spur trail down to a good riverside campsite about 2.3 miles from the Little Minam turnoff, the trail detours inland for about a mile as it goes over a low rise. You return to river level beside a lovely little island, and then some 0.6 mile later, hop over small Horseheaven Creek. Beyond this you pass a couple of terrific viewpoints looking west across the river to Minam River Lodge before reaching the bridge at Red Horse Ranch and the close of your loop. Turn right (crossing the bridge) to return to the lodge.

Big Sheep Ridge – Lower Minam Loop Map



14 Washboard Ridge – North Minam Loop ★★★★★

Type: Two- or three-night backpack

Rating: Strenuous to very strenuous

Round-trip distance: 33.9 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 6250 feet

Highlights: A magnificent and diverse trip that includes one of the finest high-elevation ridge walks in Oregon and a visit to a large and spectacular mountain meadow. Short side trips lead to outstandingly scenic mountain lakes.

Considerations: This can easily be turned into a longer trip with all the great scenery along the way. The trail along the ridge is rugged and sometimes faint, so good conditioning and hiking experience will be helpful. Those afraid of heights should avoid the traverse along Washboard Ridge.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek then a junction.

Turn left, following a small wooden sign to Standley, and settle in for a long and tiring uphill. You'll wind your way through increasingly open forests, mostly of ponderosa pines for the first couple of miles, then climb past a series of terrific viewpoints on wildflower-covered ridges. As you slowly approach the top, you'll also pass beneath some small but impressively rugged rock formations covered with colorful lichens. After a final high viewpoint, you enter a noticeably wetter forest environment that includes many subalpine firs and some lodgepole pines. Less than 0.1 mile later you reach a junction, 4 miles and fully 3100 feet up from the Minam River.

The Big Sheep Ridge Trail goes left, but you keep straight continuing uphill across open slopes carpeted with subalpine wildflowers in July. These slopes also feature seasonal spring-fed trickles and long views to the north of Big Sheep Ridge and west to the distant crags of the Elkhorn Mountains. After 0.9 mile, you level out atop the divide and come to a junction with the Washboard Ridge Trail, which goes sharply right and is marked with cairns is the continuation of the recommended loop. But first, just 0.1 mile away on the trail that goes straight is Standley Cabin, which is well worth a visit. It also has a nearby spring-fed creek and makes an excellent and very scenic location for your first night on the trail.

For this loop you turn right (south) at the junction just west of Standley Cabin, following signs to Upper Bear Creek, and head south-southeast toward the top of Washboard Ridge. Over the next 10 miles you'll closely follow this up-and-down ridge, never dipping below 7300 feet the entire distance. The views are continuously outstanding both to the west of the yawning depths of the Minam River and the distant Elkhorn Mountains and to the southeast of the jumbled high peaks of the Wallowa Mountains. Wildflowers are abundant, peaking in mid-July, and wildlife is also common with everything on the warm-blooded spectrum from huge Rocky Mountain elk (Oregon's largest wild mammals) to tiny calliope hummingbirds (one of the world's smallest birds). On the downside, the trail often fades away, especially in the meadows, making good navigation instincts a requirement. You can also expect plenty of steep ups and downs on a rugged and narrow tread. Thus, this route should be left exclusively for

experienced hikers, in good condition, and who aren't afraid of heights. All of that said, every step is grandly scenic and a joy!

The ridge walk's first mile is marked by large cairns as it ascends an enormous meadow. Once at the top, you'll spend a couple of fun but sometimes scary miles on the west side of the divide tracing a very narrow track across steep ledges. The views are superb, if you can tear your eyes away from negotiating the narrow tread at your feet. Things get easier as you wander through long, grassy saddles and across ridgetop meadows to a tiny spring just below the trail about 100 feet before reaching a junction with the Minor Basin Trail.



Washboard Ridge above Minor Basin

Keep straight, cut across the open slopes of Bald Mountain, and then traverse another large meadow where the tread disappears. You could simply follow the ridgetop, but the official course stays on the west side of the divide, traversing above a long basin to Sturgill Saddle. Returning to distinct tread on the east side of the divide, you descend into a wildly scenic alpine basin with small creeks for water and outstanding camping possibilities.

From this paradise the trail climbs to Sandy Saddle then follows a descending ridge to the east to meadow-covered Bear Pass. A large cairn marks an important junction near the low point of this wide saddle.

The main loop trail descends to the right (south). Before going that way, however, you'll want to check out nearby Bear Lake, one of the most beautiful lakes in the entire range. To find it, ignore a trail going straight and angle a bit downhill to the left (not sharply left). After about 35 yards you'll discover a distinct path that contours for a bit before climbing steeply for 0.6 mile to the 20-foot-deep lake. Fishing is good at this clear 10-acre pool and you'll find a good

campsite on the north side of the small outlet creek. If you don't mind sporting goosebumps the size of the Himalayas, swimming in the chilly waters can also be fun.



Bear Lake

Back at Bear Pass, the loop trail drops through meadows and forest in a series of long downhill switchbacks to a junction. Turn right, soon pass an unseen waterfall, and then descend long switchbacks past a series of fine viewpoints overlooking broad North Minam Meadow, an inviting green expanse at the bottom of the canyon. After 2.5 miles, you reach a junction near the northeast edge of this stunningly beautiful mountain meadow. Very good campsites are available in both directions.

You could base camp here and do some exploring (see Trip #15 for ideas) but once that is done, take the trail heading downstream as it passes a nice little cascading waterfall and makes a gradual descent through forest. A little under 3 miles down from North Minam Meadow you make an easy ford of Sturgill Creek, then continue downstream for 0.8 mile to a point where the trail is forced to cross a portion of North Minam River that has rerouted itself. You can avoid this ford by bushwhacking along the north bank for about 0.1 mile to pick up the northbound Minam River Trail.

This well-graded route goes over a low rise then descends to river level at a nice campsite at Big Burn. From there the trail mostly stays well away from the river as you cross side creeks and make your way down through heavily forested terrain to a junction with the trail to Standley where you close the loop about 4.2 miles below Big Burn.

Washboard Ridge – North Minam Loop Map - west half



Washboard Ridge – North Minam Loop Map - east half



15 North Minam Meadow ★★☆☆

Type: One- to four-night backpack

Rating: Strenuous

Round-trip distance: 25.8 miles (plus side trips) **Round-trip elevation gain:** 2000 feet

Highlights: North Minam Meadow is a beautiful location that has good fishing and excellent campsites. It is also a particularly good place to set up a base camp from which to make day hike explorations to several nearby alpine lakes.

Considerations: Bring extra food and supplies, because you'll really want to stay awhile and explore. Unfortunately, mosquitos are often very bad at North Minam Meadow in July.



North Minam Meadow

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Red Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through the forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek then a junction.

Keep straight, staying on the Minam River Trail, make a brief climb, then ascend to easy crossings of two branches of Chaparral Creek (small camp at the second). From here the trail remains in forest well away from the unseen Minam River for another couple of miles. You hop over two small feeder creeks before finally working your way back to the banks of the Minam River. Just 0.3 mile later you leave the river once again, making a couple of short uphill switchbacks and climbing through stately forests before eventually dropping to a rock-hop crossing of Threemile Creek and coming to the small meadow at a Big Burn, which features a large campsite with its own tiny sandy beach.

After this camp, the trail immediately pulls away from the river, climbing a few hundred feet over a rocky high point (decent views), then descending back to river level and coming to a ford not shown on the USGS maps. This ford is the result of much of the water of North Minam River rerouting itself away from the old channel where there is a bridge. Since you are heading

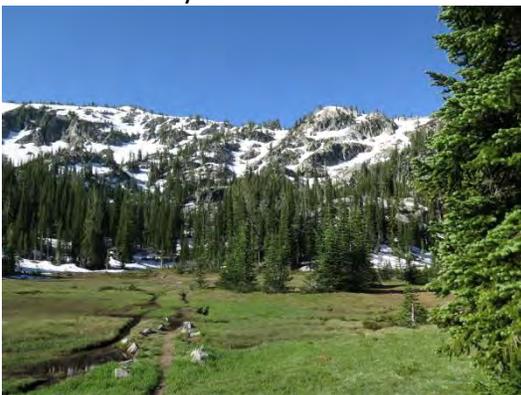
up the North Minam River, it is possible to avoid this ford by bushwhacking up the north bank for about 0.1 mile until you hit the maintained trail up this stream. Alternatively, you can ford the stream (about knee deep, but not particularly dangerous) and soon come to a signed junction. The Minam River Trail goes straight, crossing the bridge over that part of the North Minam River that remains in the old channel, and coming to a nice campsite a little beyond.

The trail you want goes left at the junction before the bridge and soon comes to a second ford of the rerouted section of the North Minam River. After this you stay dry for almost 0.9 mile until you come to good-sized Sturgill Creek and a confusing junction. Although not shown on any official map, a very official-looking trail, complete with cut logs and switchbacks, goes sharply left here (not crossing Sturgill Creek) and steeply switchbacks up toward an outfitter's camp high in the upper basin of Sturgill Creek. The trail you want, however, crosses Sturgill Creek (expect to get wet feet) and resumes on the other side about 10 yards upstream from where you began the crossing.

From here the trail goes gradually uphill through viewless forest for another 2.8 miles to a point where you pass a 10-foot-tall cascading waterfall and shortly thereafter reach the first openings of North Minam Meadow. There are fine views across these meadows looking northeast to some high dark crags. The trail then crosses several branches of an unnamed creek before passing a short spur trail going to an excellent campsite on your right.

This site is at the north end of the main marshy expanse of North Minam Meadow (expect lots of mosquitoes in July), one of the true gems of the Eagle Cap Wilderness. Surrounded by 9000-foot peaks and bisected by the clear waters of North Minam River, this place is a joy to explore or to simply sit back and look at. You can set up your tent at this first site, or choose another one just 0.1 mile further along. There are also two fine camps near the head of this half-mile-long meadow. All are worthy of an extended stay.

And an extended stay is exactly what I recommend. You can easily spend a day just relaxing, fishing, or soaking in the scenery. If you want to explore, North Minam Meadow is an ideal location for a base camp for day hikes to the many high lakes in the region. The ideal schedule is at least two full days of hiking. The first recommended destination is to hike up the long switchbacks at the head of the valley to large and absolutely gorgeous Steamboat and Swamp Lakes. The second great day hike is a loop to the west that goes over Wilson Pass and then loops around to visit Laverty, Chimney, and Hobo Lakes, perhaps with a side trip to lovely Wood Lake. From Hobo Lake, you scramble over Lookout Mountain and down the west side to Bear Lake where you return to the trail and drop back down to North Minam Meadow.

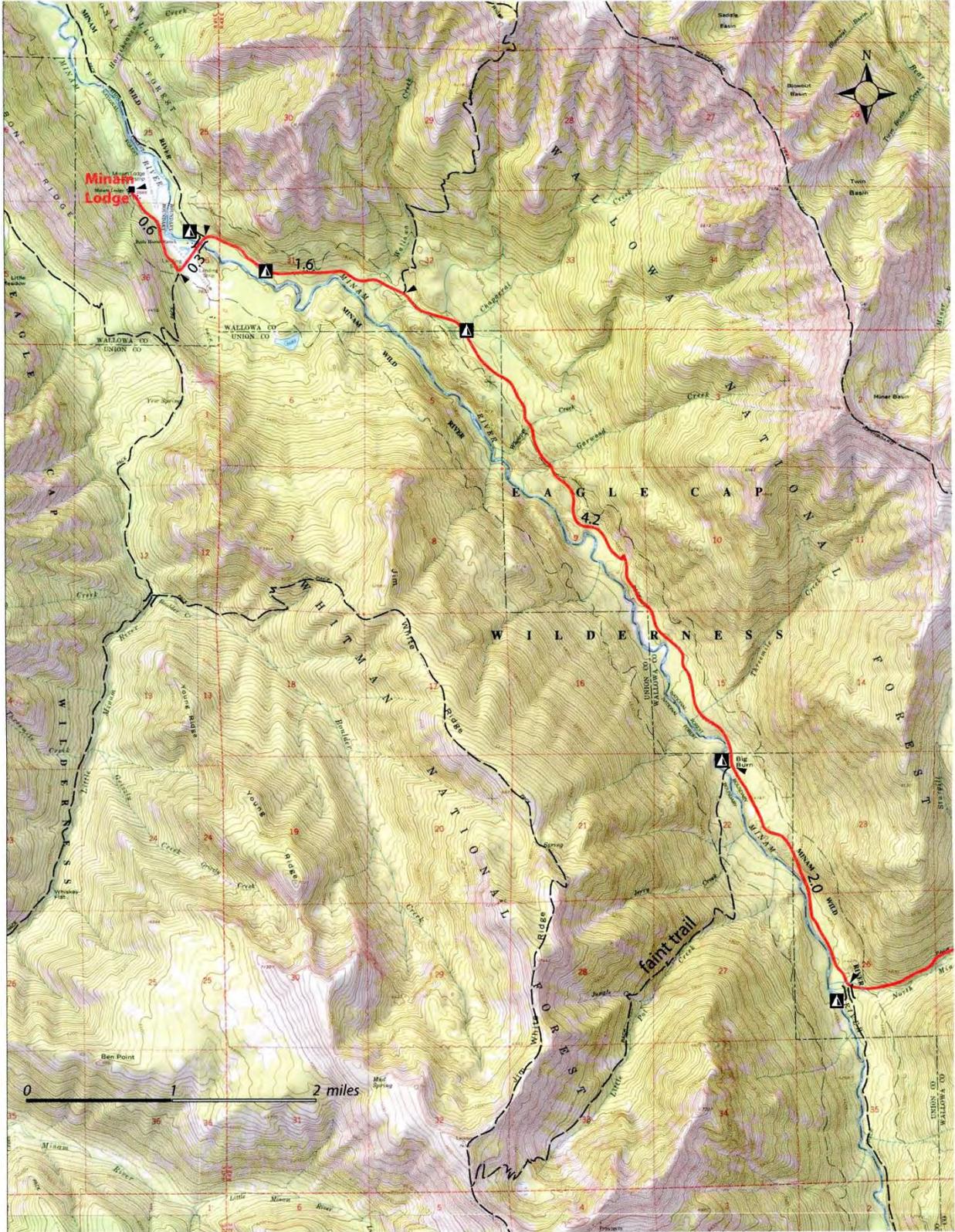


meadow above Steamboat Lake

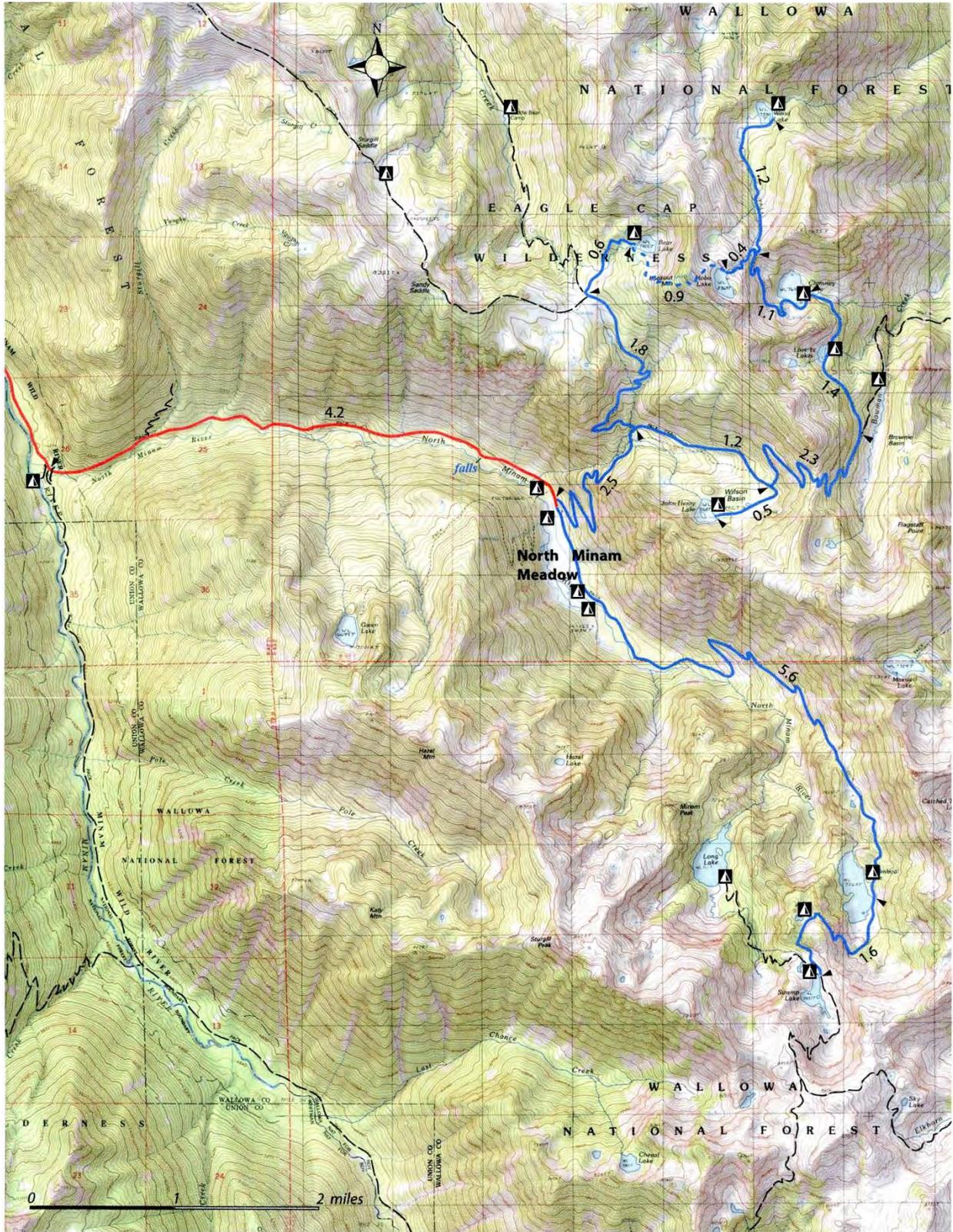


Chimney Lake

North Minam Meadow Map – west half



North Minam Meadow Map – east half



16 Lackeys Lake - Jim White Ridge Loop ★★☆☆

Type: Two- or three-night backpack **Rating:** Very strenuous

Round-trip distance: 31.4 miles **Round-trip elevation gain:** 5000 feet

Highlights: A rugged two- or three-night adventure featuring a long walk along the Minam River, a scenic little mountain lake, and superb views and wildflowers along two alpine ridges.

Considerations: One potentially tricky ford of the Minam River is required, so wading/camp shoes will be welcome. Be in good shape, because this is not an easy trip.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek then a junction.

Keep straight, staying on the Minam River Trail, make a brief climb, then ascend to easy crossings of two branches of Chaparral Creek (small camp at the second). From here the trail remains in forest well away from the unseen Minam River for another couple of miles, crossing two small feeder creeks before finally working its way back to the banks of the Minam River. Just 0.3 mile later, you leave the river once again making a couple of short uphill switchbacks and climbing through stately forests before eventually dropping to a rock-hop crossing of Threemile Creek and coming to the small meadow at Big Burn, which features a large campsite with its own tiny sand beach.

After this camp, the trail immediately pulls away from the river, climbing a few hundred feet over a rocky high point (decent views), then descending back to river level and coming to a ford not shown on the USGS maps. This ford is the result of much of the water of North Minam River rerouting itself away from the old channel where there is a bridge. You make the newly-necessitated knee-deep ford and soon come to a signed junction. The North Minam River Trail goes left, but you keep straight, cross a wooden bridge over that part of the North Fork Minam River that stayed in its original channel, and reach a nice campsite below the trail. The next few miles are a very pleasant ramble that never strays far from the crystal-clear river offering the hiker plenty of good fishing spots and views. After 4 miles you come to a junction, turn right, and in another 75 yards reach a ford of the Minam River. Expect cold water on this over-knee-deep crossing but after mid-July it usually isn't dangerous. Immediately after the ford is a nice campsite in a pretty little meadow.

The trail now begins an extended climb, ascending through forest to a bridged crossing of Rock Creek (the ancient bridge may be gone by the time you get there). From there you trudge up 19 short switchbacks to an unsigned junction. Turn right and keep gaining elevation in another dozen or so well-graded switchbacks over the next 3.5 miles. Near the top of this tiring ascent you cross small Lackey Creek a couple of times before coming to a meadow and another creek crossing just below hard-to-see Lackeys Lake. This small, marshy and very scenic

lake offers nice campsites above its eastern shore, but is too shallow to support fish.



Lackeys Lake

After a refreshing stop at Lackeys Lake, you make your way up to a saddle then ascend to the top of Cartwheel Ridge. It's been a long climb from the river to this high point, but the rewards are off the charts. From here you'll revel in the first of what will be many great views, initially looking east to the countless snowy peaks of the Wallowa Mountains towering over the deep chasm of the Minam River. After crossing a divide, those vistas shift to the southwest as you enjoy excellent views over the forests and meadows of curving Catherine Creek. The delightful but often narrow trail stays high on the southwest side of the ridge for 0.7 mile to a four-way junction in a saddle.

Go right and ascend onto the high, wildflower-covered slopes of Jim White Ridge, a non-stop scenic showcase of undulating, open, view-packed fun. After 1.1 miles you reach a signed junction with Little Pot Creek Trail, although that path is so little used it barely exists. Keep straight and just 30 yards later reach a cairn marking a fork in the trail. The well-used path to the left is an unofficial horse packer's trail. You want to take the less-well-defined trail to the right (uphill) which is marked with infrequent but helpful cairns. Follow these as the very faint tread curves to the *right* (don't go left – northwest – onto Young Ridge) and drops to a saddle before closely following the northward trending ridgetop. Dozens of species of wildflowers bloom on the open slopes here in July, making for colorful foregrounds to pictures of Young Ridge to the west and the distant peaks of the Wallowa Mountains to the east.

After several ups and downs, you make a final steep push up a rocky tread to Peak 7442, which offers unparalleled views in all directions. From here you descend through high-elevation forest, making two switchbacks before walking across a heavily forested slope to a mediocre

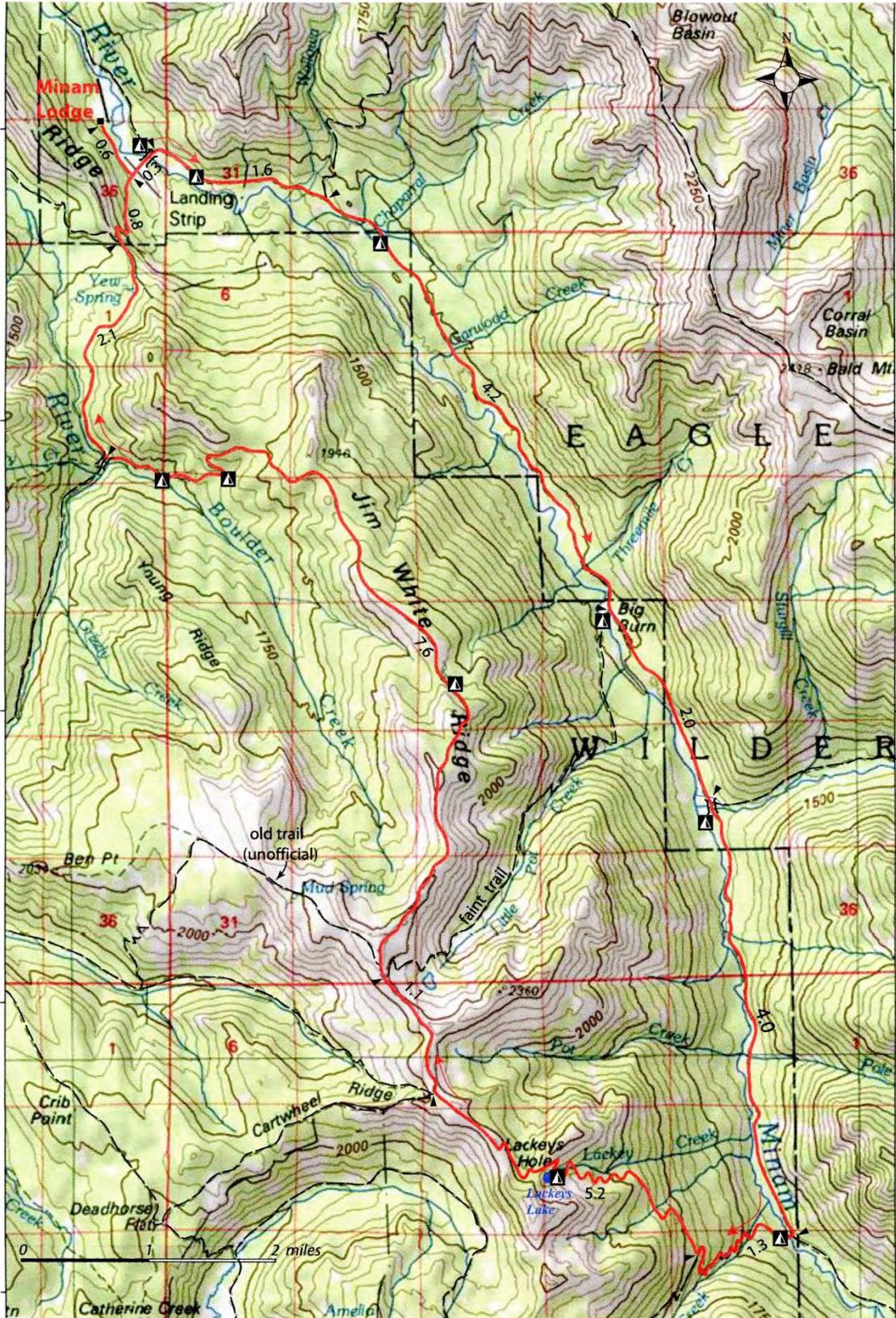
campsite on your right. About 25 yards to the east of this camp is a barely trickling spring. It isn't much, but it's the only water on Jim White Ridge, so take advantage of it.

Just beyond this camp you go left at a junction with a confusing game trail and climb briefly back up to the ridgetop. The trail then makes a gradual climb to a woody high point before beginning a long downhill. For the first mile or so you go in and out of old burns. Then it's a relentless, moderately steep descent in forests, with very few views. Eventually you make a series of short switchbacks before coming to a campsite next to a small but reliable creek. About 0.7 mile past this point, you reach a pretty little meadow along the banks of much larger Boulder Creek (nice camp here) and follow this creek downstream to a junction with the Little Minam River Trail. Turn right (downstream), following the river for about 0.3 mile before pulling away from the water and contouring through forest to obscure Yew Spring. A short downhill leads to a junction near the top of Backbone Ridge. Turn right and descend for 0.8 mile to the junction beside Reds Horse Ranch just 0.6 mile from Minam River Lodge.



Wildflowers atop Jim White Ridge

Lackeys Lake – Jim White Ridge Loop Map



The Grand Backpacker's Tour ★★★★★

Type: Week-long backpacking adventure

Rating: Very strenuous

Round-trip distance: 43 to 68 miles

Round-trip elevation gain: 5600 to 12,600 feet

Highlights: This is one of the great long backpacking trips in Oregon, or, for that matter, anywhere in the American West (and I literally wrote the books on the subject, so I know). The trip boasts everything a mountain-loving hiker could desire. You'll visit idyllic mountain lakes, eye-popping alpine viewpoints, deep river canyons, and gorgeous mountain meadows. Side trips allow you to extend this outing for as many days and to as many wonders as time permits.

Considerations: Bring plenty of food and try to dream up excuses to your boss for the extra vacation days – you won't regret it.

Description: From the lodge, follow the road down to the barn, turn right and soon pick up the gentle trail that heads south through the forest for 0.6 mile to a junction.

Turn left and walk across the meadow, passing Reds Horse Ranch, to the Minam River Bridge and a junction. Turn right (upstream) and hike this gentle path through the forest for 1.5 miles to a crossing of usually dry Wallowa Creek then a junction.

Keep straight, staying on the Minam River Trail, make a brief climb, then ascend to easy crossings of two branches of Chaparral Creek (small camp at the second). From here the trail remains in forest well away from the unseen Minam River for another couple of miles crossing two small feeder creeks before finally working its way back to the banks of the Minam River. Just 0.3 mile later you leave the river once again, making a couple of short uphill switchbacks and climbing through stately forests before eventually dropping to a rock-hop crossing of Threemile Creek and coming to the small meadow at a Big Burn, which features a large campsite with its own tiny sand beach.

After this camp, the trail pulls away from the river, climbing a few hundred feet over a rocky high point and then descending to a ford not shown on the USGS maps. This ford is the result of much of the water of North Minam River rerouting itself away from the old channel where there is a bridge. Since you are heading up the North Minam River, you can avoid this ford by bushwhacking up the north bank for about 0.1 mile until you hit the maintained trail up this stream. Alternatively, you can ford the stream (about knee deep, but not particularly dangerous) and soon come to a signed junction. The Minam River Trail goes straight, crossing the bridge over that part of the North Minam River that remains in the old channel, and coming to a nice campsite a little beyond.

The trail you want goes left at the junction before the bridge and soon comes to a second ford of the rerouted section of the North Minam River. After this you stay dry for almost 0.9 mile until you come to good-sized Sturgill Creek and a confusing junction. An unofficial outfitter's trail goes left (not crossing Sturgill Creek) but your trail crosses the creek (expect wet feet), resuming on the other side about 10 yards upstream from where you began the ford.

From here the trail goes gradually uphill through viewless forest for another 3 miles to the first openings of North Minam Meadow. There are fine views across these meadows looking northeast to some high dark crags. The trail then crosses several branches of an unnamed creek before passing a short spur trail going to an excellent campsite on your right.

This site is at the north end of marshy North Minam Meadow (expect lots of mosquitoes in July), one of the scenic gems of the Eagle Cap Wilderness. The trail soon splits and you take the right fork, following signs to Cougar Creek and passing more excellent campsites as you round the east side of half-mile-long North Minam Meadow. Above the nearly flat meadow you go through a boggy area then ascend forested slopes northeast of the river. Starting about 1.9 miles above the meadow you begin the ascent to Steamboat Lake. There are several widely spaced switchbacks along the way, while for scenic interest you can enjoy increasingly good views of pointed Minam Peak across the canyon and several waterfalls both right beside the trail and across the canyon. The main climb ends as you finally enter a gorgeous subalpine meadowland with small ponds reflecting images of an array of snowy peaks to the southwest.



Swamp Lake

Beyond this slice of paradise, the next 0.7 mile takes you over a low rise and then down to large and stunningly beautiful Steamboat Lake. Snow-streaked crags surround this fish-filled gem and there are fine campsites near the lake's north end (campfires prohibited). The trail rounds the east side of the lake, crosses its inlet at the upper end of a lovely meadow, and then ascends open slopes with tremendous views looking down on Steamboat Lake. After a half dozen switchbacks, you pass a couple of tarns (possible camps) before reaching Swamp Lake. With a row of tall, white granite cliffs backing this location, Swamp Lake is yet another superb beauty spot in the Wallowa Mountains. There are camps tucked away in nooks and crannies near the outlet, not far from where a poorly signed side trail departs for Long Lake.

The trail rounds the east side of Swamp Lake before passing the large marshy area at the lake's south end that gave the place its name. From here the trail climbs a steep hillside on well-graded switchbacks up to a fork in the trail atop a windswept alpine plateau. **Note:** Before late July snow may cover this slope making it dangerous to cross.

If time constraints force you to cut your trip short (and what a tragedy that would be), you can take the right fork onto Granite Trail. In 5 miles this route goes through a high pass, descends across a steep slope on a rocky tread, contours around the forested slopes of an unnamed peak, and then steeply descends 24 short switchbacks to a junction with the Minam River Trail. This places you about 8 miles above the junction with the North Minam Trail.

The longer recommended loop goes left at the plateau junction and descends to the east across sandy and rocky terrain. You pass above tiny Sky Lake, which is easy to miss, and then a more extended downhill leads to a gorgeous strip meadow along Elkhorn Creek. This meadow offers not only superb scenery but also acres of wildflowers including such colorful varieties as owl's clover, pink heather, and Cusik's speedwell. From there a series of switchbacks lead down to a larger meadow along Copper Creek with some fine campsites. The next few miles follow this lovely creek downstream making two unbridged crossings where you should expect cold water and potentially difficult conditions in July. Eventually you'll pass a campsite in a pretty meadow and make a chilly ford of West Fork Lostine River just before a junction with a heavily used trail.



Brown Mountain over Minam Lake



Blue Lake (the source of the Minam River)

Turn right (upstream) and begin a well-graded and wildly scenic ascent of the wide subalpine valley of the West Fork Lostine River. Soaring granite walls rise thousands of feet on either side of this valley and, with binoculars, you can often spot mountain goats and bighorn sheep on these slopes. Over the next 3.5 miles you ford the cold stream twice (these could be tricky in early summer) before reaching large and jaw-droppingly beautiful Minam Lake. Several

campsites beckon the tired hiker and the views across the water to aptly named Brown Mountain and other peaks sooth the soul.

From Minam Lake there are two superb side trips that any hiker with both time and good weather should include in their schedules. The first crosses the dam at the south end of the lake and travels one mile of relatively gentle uphill to Blue Lake. Mountain lakes don't get much prettier than this and, interestingly, this pool also serves as the source of the Minam River. The second side trip climbs the trail to the east from Minam Lake, gaining 1200 feet to 8650-foot Carper Pass. From a little below the east side of this high divide, you'll enjoy grand views of towering Eagle Cap (the wilderness' namesake peak), which from this angle closely resembles Yosemite's famous Half Dome.

To continue the recommended loop, head south from Minam Lake, beginning a long, mostly gradual downhill that follows the nascent Minam River as it slowly gathers strength from tributaries and curves to the northwest beneath tall canyon walls.

A few early switchbacks lead to an easy crossing of the stream, near a meadow with grand views of the nearby granite peaks and domes. A short distance further along is a large and beautiful meadow where there is a junction with the lightly used trail to Frazier Pass.

Keep straight and steadily descend through a pleasant and scenic mix of open hillsides and strips of forest, generally staying on the slopes well above the stream where you'll have good views to the south of a cluster of craggy peaks centered on Needle Point. After almost 3.5 miles the descent gradually starts to ease as the valley widens, becomes increasingly forested, and you come to a junction with the Trail Creek Trail.

Go straight once again, still on the Minam River Trail, and begin what for the most part is a long, gentle, woody descent of the Minam River, which, if you choose, you can continue all the way back to the lodge. It is a fun and mostly easy hike that lacks grand vistas, but it's still enjoyable and interesting to watch as the Minam changes from a small mountain stream to the good-sized river that flows past the lodge. There are plenty of nice places to camp along the way and ample opportunities for anglers to try their luck. After 4.2 relatively uneventful but enjoyable miles, a short spur trail goes left to an excellent riverside campsite. Just 0.1 mile later you reach a signed junction with the Granite Trail, the shortcut route from the pass above Swamp Lake mentioned previously. Go straight and about 0.1 mile later, come to a junction with the Elk Creek Trail where you face a choice of routes.

Backpackers who are interested in fishing, have limited time, want an easier trail, or who simply want the pleasure of tracing a wilderness river from its headwaters on down, should continue straight on the Minam River Trail. This pleasant route continues with more of the same staying with the clear river as it grows in size, adding tributaries to its flow. The hiking is mostly in forest, but it is never boring and there are plenty of places where you can try to catch some tasty trout for dinner. After 4.2 miles you come to a junction with the Rock Creek Trail. There is no bridge across the river, so if you want to reach the nice camps on the other side of the Minam you'll have to make a ford that is usually a little more than knee deep. Continuing straight at the junction will lead you in 4 more fun miles back to the North Minam River and the close of your loop.

Longer Alternate Return Route: If you still have time and energy for a more rugged and considerably more scenic alternative return route, you should turn left at the Elk Creek junction and soon thereafter cross a convenient wooden bridge over the Minam River. The trail then

ascends the heavily forested valley of Elk Creek for 2.5 miles, fords the stream, and then continues climbing for 1.3 miles to another crossing of the now-much-smaller creek. Just past this crossing you go right at a junction and cross another branch of Elk Creek to a supremely scenic campsite beside a small meadow with outstanding views up to tall Granite Butte.



Granite Butte over meadow slopes east of Burger Pass

From here the trail makes a long, well-graded climb featuring long switchbacks, small waterfalls, and ever-grander views to a junction with the Sand Pass Trail. Go straight and climb three more switchbacks before reaching Burger Pass. From here there are long views to the north of a series of wild ridges (your upcoming route) and right next door of the rugged heights of tan-orange colored Burger Butte. The trail then gradually descends to a junction marked only with a cairn next to a dry gully. A spring feeds this gully about 30 yards down from the junction and you should take advantage of that water as it will be your last for many miles.

Veer right (slightly uphill) at the junction and climb to the top of the ridge north of China Cap. For the next 5 miles you'll be following this high ridge enjoying grand views up and down the ridge as well as west to the Grand Ronde Valley and Elkhorn Mountains, and east to the jumbled peaks and canyons of the Wallowa Mountains. In July there are often acres of blue lupine covering much of the slope and elk are common throughout the summer. It all adds up to some of the grandest ridge walking in Oregon, but this exposed ridge is often windy and is not a good place to be if thunderstorms are in the area. After 4 up and down miles, you come to a junction in a prominent saddle. Continue straight, climbing through more view-packed country to the top of Meadow Mountain where the trail curves right and goes fairly steeply downhill to a wide pass with another junction.



Lupine carpeting ridgetop meadows with Meadow Mountain in the distance

You have a few options at this point. One alternative is to go straight and make a long descent all the way to a cold ford of the Minam River where you turn left and follow the Minam River Trail downstream to Minam Lodge. You could also go about 3 miles down the trail that goes straight and then turn left at a junction and climb back up to lovely little Lackeys Lake before following the Jim White Ridge Trail back to your starting point. (See Trip 16 for details of this route.)

Another choice is to go sharply left at the junction, taking the trail down North Fork Catherine Creek. This path winds rapidly downhill, twice crossing a small snowmelt creek, your first reliable water since the spring below Burger Pass. At the crossing of a second tributary creek, about 1.5 miles below the pass, is a nice campsite and a meadow. About 0.1 mile later, look for an unsigned miner's trail angling up to the right. Take this initially obvious route as it climbs the hillside for about 0.2 mile and then fades away. From there simply climb the very steep open slopes heading generally north-northeast for about 0.6 mile until you reach the top of Cartwheel Ridge and hit a maintained trail. Turn left and hike to a saddle with a four-way junction marked only with a cairn.

Go right and ascend onto the high, wildflower-covered slopes of Jim White Ridge. After 1.1 miles you reach a signed junction with little-used Little Pot Creek Trail, keep straight and just 30 yards later come to a cairn marking a fork in the trail. The well-used path to the left is an unofficial horse packer's trail. You want to take the less-well-defined trail to the right (uphill) which is marked with infrequent but helpful cairns. Follow these as the path curves to the *right* (don't go left – northwest – onto Young Ridge) and drops to a saddle before closely following the northward trending ridgetop. July-blooming wildflowers make for colorful foregrounds for pictures of Young Ridge to the west and the distant peaks of the Wallowa Mountains to the east.

After several ups and downs you reach Peak 7442, which offers unparalleled views in all directions. From here you descend through high-elevation forest, making two switchbacks before walking across a heavily forested slope to a mediocre campsite on your right. About 25 yards to the east of this camp is a barely trickling spring. It isn't much, but it's the only water on Jim White Ridge, so take advantage of it.

Just beyond this camp you go left at a junction with a confusing game trail and climb briefly back up to the ridgetop. The trail then makes a gradual climb to a woody high point before beginning a long downhill. For the first mile or so you go in and out of old burns, and then it's a relentless, moderately steep descent in forests, with very few views. Eventually you make a series of short switchbacks before coming to a campsite next to a small but reliable creek. About 0.7 mile past this point, you reach a pretty little meadow along the banks of much larger Boulder Creek (nice camp here) and follow this creek downstream to a junction with the Little Minam River Trail. Turn right (downstream), following the river for about 0.3 mile before pulling away from the water and contouring through forest to obscure Yew Spring. A short downhill leads to a junction near the top of Backbone Ridge. Turn right and descend for 0.8 mile to the junction beside Reds Horse Ranch just 0.6 mile from Minam River Lodge.

Grand Backpacker's Tour Map – east half

