



## Middle Cache Lake:

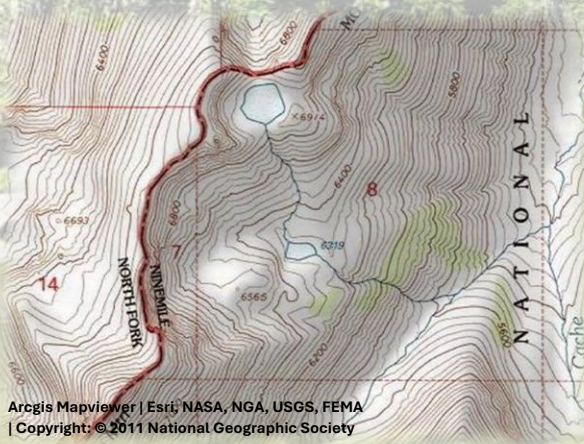
### Old Schley Trailhead:

**Difficulty:** *Challenger / Grinder*

**Distance:** 6.25 miles.

**Trailhead Elevation:** 6460 feet; **Trailhead Lat/Long:** 46°47'29.65"N / 114°47'17.38"W

**Lake Elevation:** 6340 feet; **Lake Lat/Long:** 46°43'25.57"N / 114°46'21.97"W



ArcGIS Mapviewer | Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, FEMA  
| Copyright: © 2011 National Geographic Society

**Getting There:** *Take the Fish Creek Exit on I-90 and proceed up Fish Creek Road #343, for approximately 16 miles and turn right on Surveyor Creek Road #7734 for 12 miles to the Schley Mountain Trailhead. This is a rough 12 miles, especially the portion past the Surveyor Lake trailhead at 8.5 miles. The Schley Mountain Trailhead has several places to camp and park along with a vault toilet. This trailhead and campground are dry, so bring plenty of water if camping. This is not the actual end of the road. The*

*gate is only open from when the snow is off until August 31; the gate is not open over Labor Day weekend.*

*The road behind the gate is designated by the Forest Service as a non-maintained road. The Forest Service does not maintain or brush out this road. If you are the first one through the gate in the summer, then expect to saw out the downed trees from the winter storms if you want to drive the 3 miles to the end of the road and the old trailhead. The road is pretty good until you reach the 2 switchbacks, and the road gets decidedly*



Middle Cache Lake 1981





**Middle Cache Lake 2023**

worse from there for the last mile. Currently, there are very limited places that 2 full sized vehicles can pass, someone may have to back up several hundred yards or more to find a spot wide enough. The trailhead has plenty of room for parking and several camping sites; the ridge trail #110 from Schley Mountain connects back to the road. The road continues beyond the gate.

**Hike this road, bearing left and up after 1/3 mile; the stateline and trail number #738 is about 1 mile from the trailhead. Once on top of the stateline there will be an old road that takes off to the left, this is part of the state line trail #738. Not all maps have trail #738 on them; Google Earth and the Lolo National Forest maps do not, very few older**



**Middle Cache Lake 2023**

**maps have the trail present.**

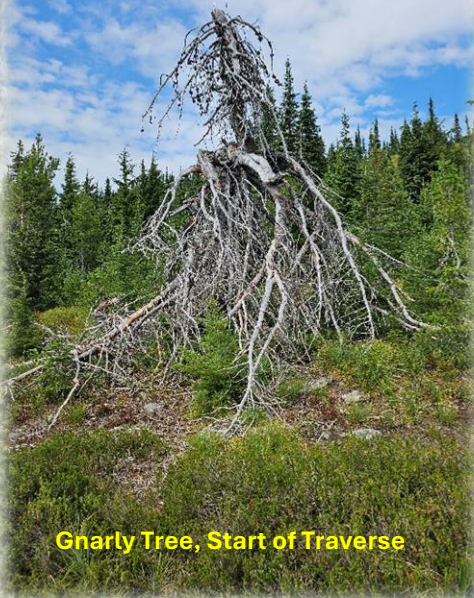
**Follow the old road, which is getting grown in, for 1/2 mile; there are some great views of Irish Basin with Cache and Pebble Creek in the background, take a minute or two here. The trail splits on the ridge with the better trail swinging right around the hillside and a more primitive trail going up the rocky ridge. Stay on the right-hand trail for another 1/2 mile, climbing up and around the rocky hilltop.**



**Middle Cache Lake 2024**

**You will come to a very defined open area and the trail disappears; there are 2 avenues to approach this. a.) Head directly across the meadow to the left of the rocky ridge line to another opening. Follow down the opening**





Gnarly Tree, Start of Traverse

towards a small rock slide on the left side; the trail will become visible and then swing below and left under the small rockslide. Follow the trail across the hillside. b.) Head across the meadow at a 45 degree angle through the trees and then down a steep slope where you should intersect the aforementioned trail cutting across the slope. Either way is acceptable. See the cross-country route.

Follow the trail across the hillside until you get to this really gnarly dead tree, see picture in text. The trail you are on disappears shortly after that. From that tree face straight down the hill, and head down. Your goal is the top of the drainage where it appears a stream channel is starting to form. It may take some looking to find the trail but it is there. If you can't find the trail then traverse the

hillside at about the same elevation, staying below the heaviest rocky areas. There is a detailed description in the Trail 738: Schley => Cache Creek page.

There are several game trails that traverse this hillside, but they are a bit sketchy and disappear on a whim. Your goal is the low point along the ridge, about a mile along the traverse. This is a rare place on the stateline where running water is available. This is about the halfway point to Leo and



Google Earth | Image Landsat / Copernicus | 2014

Estimated Cross-Country Route

Smokey. At this point a nice well-defined trail is visible that heads south along the ridgeline. Stay on this trail; there used to be a trail sign and trail that would take you down into the Middle Fork of Kelly Creek but that seems to have disappeared, so stay on the ridge top.

About a half mile from Leo Lake there is a prominent rocky outcrop about 20 feet above the trail. Make sure you take a few minutes here, this is just an unbelievable view of



Middle Cache Lake 2024





**upper Cache Creek, Granite Peak and Pilot Knob in the distance. Cache Creek is an expansive drainage system. Continue for another 1/2 mile to Leo Lake for a total of about 5 miles. The trail from the water stop to Leo Lake has deteriorated over the years, due to lack of regular maintenance and use. There is a lot more deadfall and many small trees are now growing in the trail itself. However, I have found that horse packers do clear out some of the trees blocking the trail, but it is not regular maintenance.**



Nice Cutthroat 2024



Middle Cache Lake 2023

**A good trail continues around the right side of the lake and climbs steeply up towards the prominent saddle. The trail crosses a small stream (inlet to Leo Lake) and stays along the left hillside as it climbs continuously to the state line. This portion is just a primitive trail, so don't expect too much here. The farther up the hill, the worse and steeper the trail gets. North Cache Lake is virtually on the state line 450 feet above Leo Lake, The lake is a stone's throw down the hill. This is the highest lake along the state line that are included in these descriptions.**

**Continue around the lake over to the outlet and drop straight down the hill right of the outlet streambed from the North Cache Lake. There is a primitive game trail that will take you around and**

**down the hillside towards the basin above the lake. It disappears about halfway there but make a mental note about the location for the way out. The trail ends near a rocky outcrop with an old snag, the picture to the right.**

**NOTE: There is a spring at the base of this rocky outcrop. Find the best way down toward the inlet of the lake. There isn't much brush or deadfall along the way, so it is good going. You**



Middle Cache Lake 2023





Middle Cache Lake 2023

should pick up the main trail (I think) out of Cache Creek just about the same time you get to the lake and follow it around to the outlet. Most maps do not show the Cache Creek trail that goes all the way to the state line and connects with the trail from Rhodes Peak. There is good reason for this as the trail is not maintained and is very difficult to find above the hunting camps in main Cache Creek.



Middle Cache Lake 2023

**Cache Creek Trailhead:**

**Difficulty:** Challenger / Grinder

**Distance:** 10.0 miles.

**Trailhead Elevation:** 3900 feet; **Trailhead**

**Lat/Long:** 46°48'20.26"N / 114°39'7.34"W

**Lake Elevation:** 6340 feet; **Lake Lat/Long:**  
46°43'25.57"N / 114°46'21.97"W

**Getting There:** Take the Fish Creek Exit on I-90 and proceed up Fish Creek Road #343, for approximately 18.5 miles and turn right on Montana Creek Road #4218. After a little more than a half mile, take the lower road at the fork, the road ends at the trailhead in ¾ mile. The last time I was at the trailhead in 2020, there was still an old outhouse and some horse hitches. Follow the main Cache Creek Trail #317 for around 8 miles to a hunting camp.

From what I understand the trail is not maintained past this point and is hard to follow. I talked to a Game Warden in 2023 and he indicated that the trail is difficult to follow past that camp. The one time I hiked the from North Cache Lake, the trail was in good shape, but that was almost 40 years ago. This will be a difficult 2 miles to the lake if the trail is not available as the climb is around 1,300 feet. The trail is probably there in some fashion as there is evidence of it by the lake and beyond, although not great.



Middle Cache Lake 2023





Middle Cache Lake 2024

**At the Lake:** Middle Cache Lake is on the small side and very shallow, no more than 10 feet at its deepest. However, it does appear to support a robust trout population, which I was surprised to see as everything that I have seen from the Montana Fish and Game indicates no stocking or fish

*presence. I contacted a Fisheries employee in 2024 and he was also surprised of the presence of fish.*

*The fish weren't that big (8-10 inches), but they were rising all over the lake. I was expecting to find at least some evidence of campsites but there was none. It is flat on the North side of the lake with a parklike feel in the pines. This is a lake similar to Kelly Lake that would be a good choice for those that want to go a little farther and not see anyone else for several days. Middle Cache doesn't look like much from above, but it has a nice shoreline, good sunrises and great background.*



Middle Cache Lake 2024

*In 2023, I did continue up a trail that I believe is the old Upper Cache Creek Trail, but it kind of disappeared after a half mile or so. In retrospect and from what I found in 2024, this was not the Cache Creek trail. Most topo maps show the outlet stream from North Cache Lake entering the lake, this is not accurate as the North Cache Lake outlet bypasses the Middle Lake entirely. The inlet stream comes from one of the large basins*



Morning at Middle Cache Lake



Evening at Middle Cache Lake





*Lakes of the Great Burn & More*

***along the shoulder of Shale Mountain. Back in the late 1980's my brother-in-law at the time and I hiked from the Schley Mtn trailhead to Leo and North Cache Lakes then dropped down and picked up the main Cache Creek trail east of the lake, we didn't go to the lake at the time. Then followed the trail out to the trailhead. Back then the trail was in very good condition and easy to follow all the way out.***

