Pacific Crest Trail
Sections P, Q, and R

A Long Walk: The Big Bend
Pacific Crest Trail Sections P, Q, and R

Getting there: This trek is described for the length of the PCT through the Klamath Mountains—from Interstate 5 at Castle Crags State Park in California to interstate 5 at Siskiyou Summit in Oregon. The route can be hiked from north to south or south to north. The advantage to either really lies in your interests in hiking with other people. About 300 people will be streaming along (south to north) in July on their way from Mexico to Canada attempting the entire 2650 miles of the route. If you want to meet up with other hikers and talk trail, this might be your route. In the fall, you will mostly likely have it to yourself most of the way.

Why go? The Big Bend is botanically interesting. This is due to the unique geology and climate offered as the trail swings westward to the ocean and onto the complex soils of the Klamath Mountains. The trail also offers 6 designated wilderness areas and many more miles of undesignated wild land. If you have the stamina and the time, it is surely one of the greatest segments of the Pacific Crest Trail.
Section P: Castle Crags to Etna Summit (100 miles)

In section P, from Castle Crags to Etna Summit you travel over the Scott Mountains, which are predominantly serpentine rock, for 80 miles. The final 20 miles are over a granite intrusion called the Russian Pluton, through the Russian Wilderness. These are both sub-ranges in the Klamath Mountains. The Scott Mountains are botanically exceptional in that one can see 8 of the 10 pines in northwest California—often growing very close together. Jeffrey pine and western white pine are the most common, forming extensive stands over the entire stretch. In the Russian Wilderness the transition begins to a more Cascade flora—when several species that are common further north first appear.

Begin the hike by traversing the base of the granite spires of Castle Crags State Park. The common conifers of the area are ponderosa pine, knobcone pine, Douglas-fir, and incense-cedar. This is a lower elevation walk, contouring below the impressive crags, at 2,500 feet. This is also the lowest elevation on the Pacific Crest Trail until Seiad Valley. The ecosystem here is surprisingly lush until the climb begins into the wilderness on south facing slopes. Along the creeks falling from the crags, one passes interesting plants like giant chain fern (*Woodwardia fimbriata*), California spikenard (*Aralia californica*), Indian rhubarb (*Darmera peltata*) and vine maple (*Acer circinatum*).

Though the climb into the Scott Mountains is slow going, shade can be found under Douglas-fir, sugar pine, white fir or ponderosa pine throughout this mixed evergreen forest. After a 4 mile climb, reach a saddle under some of the Castle Crags, where Jeffrey pine, white fir and Shasta red fir become common. Here one also gets the first hint of the dominant red rock forest to come. Soon after a small spring, the trail comes to another saddle with the first views of Mount Shasta since before Castle Crags. The trees really start to get interesting and challenging here.

From this point for the next 70+ miles western white pine and Jeffrey pine are extremely common; probably the most common they get in the entire Klamath range. Also, within a mile of this saddle, the conifer lover can also observe lodgepole, ponderosa, knobcone and sugar pine—six pines! Other conifers include incense cedar, Shasta red fir, white fir, mountain hemlock, Douglas-fir. Together that is an impressive eleven conifers on a hot, south-facing, montane chaparral dominated slope. This is the epitome of Klamath diversity.

On the approach to the Gumboot Trailhead the trail traverses some beautiful serpentine ridgelines with views down to the headwaters of the Sacramento River in Cedar Basin, to the north, and the headwaters of the Trinity River in the Mumbo Basin, to the south. Both of these areas hold some exceptional plants but are less than exceptionally protected. Cedar Lake, if you have the time, is well worth the visit for its inland population of Port Orford-cedar. This area is written up in the book (hike 17). At Mumbo Lake one can find the rare and unpredictable common juniper.

After the Gumboot crossing, the Scott Mountains really start to show some flare. While none of the range east of Scott Summit is protected as wilderness, it takes on a "park-like" feel from here to the Parks Creek Trailhead. We can only hope that one day this crest will be protected, especially closer to Deadfall Lakes Basin. Many meadows along the crest support the rare and endemic California pitcher plant (*Darlingtonia californica*). This insectivorous plant is one of ten in the relict family Sarraceniceae, and the only member of its genus that still survives on earth. Its insectivorous nature is due to the fact that it grows on nutrient deficient soil and must supplement growth with another source. This is a discrete example of the speciation that can occur on these serpentine soils. There are at least eight distinct populations along the trail from here to the Trinity Alps Wilderness boundary.

One will next come upon Porcupine Lake, which is well worth a visit. Near the upper campsite is the first foxtail pine of the trip. Just past Porcupine Lake is Toad Lake, in a basin with walk-in campsites. John Sawyer notes the importance of this lake for its serpentine loving flora. Just past the lake, Jeffrey pines dominate on the way to the small pass where whitebark pines first grow alongside western white pines. A mile past this saddle is another saddle where the trail heads onto a forested south-facing contour on the final approach to the Deadfall Lake Basin. Here is the first prominent population of foxtail pine. The most spectacular pure stand in the Klamath Mountains can be reached by a quick trip up Mount Eddy.

After Parks Creek Pass, the trail contours, with little elevation gain or loss, for many miles through some of the most spectacular Jeffrey pine forest in...
the region. Within 3 miles of the pass, near the headwaters of High Creek, are some of the largest Jeffrey pines I have seen in northwest California; one next to the trail has a circumference of nearly 20 feet. Wander for a while through this open forest and enjoy some beautiful old-growth. From here the trail makes a slow descent to Scott Summit, but don’t miss a swim at Bull Lake.

After passing Scott Summit one enters the Trinity Alps Wilderness—while enduring a private road and nasty clear cuts. Obviously, the most unsightly stretch in the Klamath Mountains, a reward awaits—the most transcendent foxtail pine grove along the trail since the Sierra Nevada. At the East Boulder Lake junction foxtails first appear. Over the next 4 miles they become dominant—reaching record size at the trail junction to Telephone Lake. 200 feet up the trail is the world record tree, in a narrow south facing canyon just above a spring. Obviously ideal conditions paired with good genetics. Make sure you walk up and give it a hug.

Somewhere around the junction to Mavis Lake, the Scott Mountains blend into the Salmon Mountains and the rock changes. This change and blend has enabled what Sawyer and Thornburg termed enriched coniferous forests to grow. Mavis and Virginia Lakes hold the southern most stand of subalpine fir in the world. Virginia Lake is a great place to camp if you can find it. Continue to Carter Meadows Summit through...meadows of course.

The PCT climbs from Carter Meadows Summit and eventually enter wilderness—traversing the west side of Russian Peak. The drainages around this peak hold these distinct forests. The PCT, unfortunately, does not travel through a diverse forest type as it stays along the crest on the west slope through the first part of the wilderness. After a climb through montane chaparral reach a crest on the north-face below Statue Lake. Here, the first two Brewer spruce on the walk are encountered as well as more whitebark pine along the ridge. This is a hard tree to see.

There is access at the Horse Range Creek, a mile further, where one can see subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce. The trip to see them will require a two mile descent. Just past this junction, crest to the east-face of the north-south trending range and Virginia Lakes hold the southern most stand of subalpine fir in the world. Virginia Lake is a great place to camp if you can find it. Continue to Etna Summit.

**Section Q: Etna Summit to Seiad Valley (56 miles)**

After entering the Marble Mountain Wilderness, Brewer spruce can be observed right away along with Shasta red fir, white fir, western white pine and mountain hemlock. Quickly climb back into the high mountains and onto a ridgeline. From here the trail continues on the west side on an unnamed ridge for 10 miles. Almost immediately after dropping into this west ridge the first Pacific yew of this walk are evident on the hill above the trail. This stretch is surely one of the most sublime of the entire Pacific Crest Trail. The sky, the stars, the wilderness—be sure to savor your time in the Marble Mountains.

The view in all directions is protected within the 250,000 acre wilderness. Approaching Shelly Meadow there is a prominent granitic pluton to the south, across the headwaters of the North Fork of the Salmon River. This area is the English Peak Pluton and between those peaks are the southern most stands of Pacific silver fir on earth. There were several fires started by lightning in the summer of 2006. From the PCT one gains good vantage for understanding the movement and intensity of those fires. Mountains sides show evidence of fire with varying levels of devastation; some trees were all killed and other areas no trees died. Fire ecology plays a large role in dynamic forest evolution in the Klamath Mountains.

Shelly Meadow offers a cool stream and a beautiful forested meadow. Literally right off the trail by the creek is subalpine fir. This is one of the few places to see this species in California—though they become dominant in the Cascades. A trip into the meadow will make the trees even more obvious as the tops will be silhouetted against the sky—the most distinct conifer crowns in the Klamath.

The trail continues up through montane chaparral to a saddle and a drop to the east face of the Wooley Pluton at the headwaters of Kidder Creek. Again, Brewer spruce loves this habitat and form some terrific, almost pure, stands before Fisher Lake. Continue here through a subalpine wonderland also watching for numerous Pacific yews. At the junction with the Kidder Creek trail, though longer and more strenuous, I suggest the true PCT. The pass is Sierra-like and the views to Man Eaten Lake are sublime.

From the junction with the old PCT the trail undulates along a ridge to the distinct Marble Mountain. This stretch contains some of the best Shasta red fir forests in the entire Klamath. It is rare to see pure stands of this tree like you might see California red fir in the Sierra. Along this crest walk these trees reach epic size. This stretch is also on the northern divide above wild Wooley Creek—one of the headwaters to the Salmon River. From this vantage the coastal haze of the Pacific Ocean—50 miles to the west—might be observable. This is as close as the trail will come to the Pacific Ocean, north of Southern California.

Marble Valley offers some unusual scenery and unparalleled fecundity. Life abounds in the valley; in one particular trip I saw 4 bears in a 3 hour stretch of walking. Watch your food if you camp here. Climb quickly from the valley to a saddle and junction with Box Camp Mountain. The ridge walk continues for 10 more miles offering sublime views into the Klamath River watershed—all along beautiful serpentine ridgelines. Kings Castle, the highest peak in the area, shelters its own small foxtail
pine grove as well as terrific views across northwest California.

After this long ridge walk, descend into Grider Creek and enjoy a forest transitions from subalpine to mixed-conifer to mixed-evergreen. In these lower elevation, north-facing canyon bottoms, Douglas-firs reach impressive size. In lower Grider Pacific yew grow to be small trees and compliment the rushing water with their yellowish-green foliage. Enjoy a Pancake Challenge at the Seiad Valley Store.

Section R: Seiad Valley to Siskiyou Summit (65 miles)

After reaching the crest, following a killer climb from Seiad Valley, one contours the edge of the Red Butte Wilderness, and serpentine red rock barrens. The first knobcone pines in 100 miles become common on the burned ridgelines. At a small saddle, just passed Lily pad Lake, a trip up Kangaroo Peak could reveal common juniper and pacific yew, which is rare at this elevation. Just beyond and below, in West Fork Seiad Creek, is the Seiad Baker Cypress Botanical Area. I recommend hiking the 4WD road from Bee Camp to see these trees just below the trail. Read the Cook and Green Pass trail write-up (hike 10) for more details on how to find the Siskiyou cypress.

After some spectacular red rock ridge walking, one leaves behind Cook and Green Pass and climbs through another botanical area, named for the pass. This area, both east and west of the pass, is renowned for its early summer orchids as well as being the northeastern limit of Brewer spruce. On the north side of Copper Butte and between Black Mountain and White Mountain, are two of the three stands of Pacific silver fir in California. Seeing this tree offers a perspective into the forest to come in the Cascades of Oregon and Washington.

Three miles past the junction with road 47N81 you reach Alex Hole. It is worth a trip for the views, water, and some great plants. Just below the car camping spot there is a tent spot and out on the rocks are many beautiful common junipers. In early summer the wildflower display below the creek outlet can be spectacular. On the rocks, watch for the endemic Siskiyou Lewisia (Lewisia cotyledon).

From here, though the conifers are somewhat uneventful, the hiking is beautiful and Oregon will soon offer a whole new ecosystem that the Klamath have gently introduced you to. The landscape becomes more arid near the summit of Mount Ashland—whitebark pines do grow and in a few drainages below the mountain and there are some threatened stands of Englemann spruce. The Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument east of I-5 is the final transition into the Cascades.