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Introduction to the Rubicon Trail

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Location

The Rubicon Trail is located in the California High Sierra, due west of Lake Tahoe, approximately 80 miles east of Sacramento, and 35 miles east of Placerville. This world-renowned 4-wheel drive route leads from Georgetown (at California Highway 49) to Lake Tahoe (near Tahoma), a total distance of approximately 22 miles. The trail is a non-maintained County road located in El Dorado and Placer Counties. Parts of the trail pass through the Eldorado National Forest and portions of private lands.



Elevations run from approximately 5400 to over 7,000 feet (approximately 1,646 meters to over 2,134 meters). The section of road from Georgetown to Wentworth Springs (also known as the McKinney-Rubicon Springs Road) is a maintained road, while the off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail begins near Loon Lake. Most visitors begin the run from this mid-point, which is accessible off U.S. Highway 50. The portion of the trail from Loon Lake to Lake Tahoe is about 12 miles (19 kilometers) long and winds through the trees and rugged granite common to the area.

History

Originally a Native American trail connecting the Sacramento Valley and Lake Tahoe, the Rubicon Trail was re-discovered by European immigrants in the 1840s. By the 1890s, the trail had become an actual road (by the standards of the day) and was used to reach the Rubicon Mineral Springs Resort and Hotel. The first car into Rubicon Springs arrived in 1908, driven by a woman from Lake Tahoe. This historic drive received quite a bit of publicity from the San Francisco newspapers.



Throughout the 1920s, the Rubicon Springs road was being promoted as the best route from Georgetown to Lake Tahoe. To encourage travel along the route, a promotional automobile trip was organized, complete with photographs in the local papers. The write-up included mention of a survey party that would make plans for improving the road.

However, when the Rubicon Springs Hotel closed in the late 1920s, the road fell into disuse. The route has been used by 4-

wheel drive vehicles since the early 1950s and has become one of the most famed, 4-wheel drive trails in the world.

The Current Trail



While the current trail travels the same route from Wentworth Springs to Rubicon Springs that has been used since the 1860s, it changes a little each season, due to erosion and vehicle traffic. As vehicles bypass "bad spots" or avoid broken or abandoned vehicles, the trail deviates more significantly from the original route. Drivers looking for a more "fun" route cause additional damage, as do today's larger and modified vehicles, making their way over the much smaller original wagon road. Sections of the original wagon road are still visible where it was cut from the solid granite. Many of the rock formations along the route are unique, allowing identification from historic photos of the original route, which is crisscrossed in some areas by the 4-wheel drive road. The 4-wheel drive road also crosses a spillway built by PG&E in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Rubicon Trail is now widely recognized as the premiere OHV route in the United States and has been called the "crown jewel of all off highway trails." At one time, it was revered as the most difficult, rated 10 on a scale of one to 10, due to its narrow passages, rocky climbs, and occasional mud hole. Because of its difficulty, the trail is recommended for short wheelbase vehicles with all skid plates in place.



The Rubicon Trail attracts both street legal and "green sticker" off-road motor vehicles. As a result, users travel the trail on and in wide range of all-terrain vehicles, including dirt bikes and a variety of 4-wheel drive vehicles, from street-legal SUVs to vehicles built for the sole purpose of driving the trail. Because the trail lies adjacent to the Desolation Wilderness, the Rubicon Trail is also used as an access route by hikers, backpackers, and fishers.

The ceremonial Rubicon trailhead is in Georgetown, a small community nestled on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California's Gold Country. The much of town's economy is centered on servicing and supplying many Rubicon adventurers and their vehicles. The Rubicon Trail is normally run west to east (traveling east to west is referred to as "running backwards"). The western end of the Rubicon Trail has two trailheads. The true trailhead is located at the Wentworth Springs campground, while the more popular trailhead is at Loon Lake. These trails converge at Ellis Creek, approximately one mile from the start of each course.

The trail from the Wentworth Springs trailhead starts with an uphill climb. Once at the top, the trail levels out to a challenging drive to Ellis Creek. The trail from Loon Lake is more moderate. Beginning at the bottom of the spillway at the second dam, the trail passes through the Granite Bowl. It skirts Loon Lake on its way to Ellis Creek, where it joins with the Wentworth Springs section. From Ellis Creek, the trail winds through the trees on its



way to Walker Hill.

Walker Hill is a challenging, uphill area that offers drivers a number of difficulties. This area contains three sections, each with its own challenge. First comes the lower, rock-strewn section, which makes a sharp turn to the right. Second is 100 feet (30 meters) of extreme trail that makes a turn to the left. Finally, you reach the third, upper section, referred to by some as the "sandstone section," which is difficult terrain over decomposing rock. At the top of Walker Hill is a wide spot in the trail in a small grove of heavy timber. From here, the trail continues on toward the Little Sluice.



The Little Sluice is challenging and considered by many as the most difficult part of the Rubicon Trail. Though only about 100 feet (30 meters) long, it is heavily boulder-infested. In recent years, several additional boulders have fallen onto the trail, providing a challenge to even the most experienced drivers. The Little Sluice is so difficult that three bypasses have been created around it.

Once through the Little Sluice, most drivers take a rest at Spider Lake, a high mountain lake just above a low hill on the south side of the trail. From the Little Sluice and Spider Lake, the trail continues for approximately a mile to a granite shelf overlooking the Rubicon Valley

and Buck Island Reservoir. At this point, the trail forks to the Granite Slab on the left and the Old Sluice on the right.

The Granite Slab route is more scenic and less time-consuming. It makes its way to the right and down the granite face of the mountainside, rejoining the Old Sluice fork approximately half a mile before the Buck Island Reservoir.

The Old Sluice route is more difficult, following a section of the historic Rubicon Trail that is often bypassed due to its difficulty. The route is fairly level along the mountainside, first reaching the short Chappie Rock drop-off. From here, the trail continues on its level path until reaching another small overlook. From this overlook, the trail begins a gentle, then steep, descent into the Old Sluice.

The Granite Slab and Old Sluice routes rejoin just past the bottom of the Old Sluice. From here, the trail crosses over the dam at Buck Island Reservoir. The trail then skirts the eastern edge of the reservoir and bears left, up, and over a low mountain pass before heading down to the Big Sluice.

The Big Sluice is another challenging section of the Rubicon Trail. Though misnamed (the Big Sluice traverses the side of the mountain rather than being walled on each side), this long downhill section offers rock after rock to crawl over.

After the Big Sluice, the trail crosses a bridge over the Rubicon River and heads down the Rubicon Valley. It passes through Rubicon Springs, continues on past the El Dorado County boundary line, and enters Placer County, the eastern terminus of the proposed study area for the Rubicon Trail Master Plan.



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