

High Peaks

DISTANCE: 6 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1400 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Loop

The High Peaks of Pinnacles National Park (formerly known as Pinnacles National Monument) are a one-of-a-kind collection of sky-pointed spires that provide fascinating scenery and a robust hiking experience. The adventurous hike across the top of the Pinnacles crosses a steep, narrow, and impressively constructed trail that is a highlight of any visit to the park.

The High Peaks can be reached from the east or west entrance. No roads travel across Pinnacles National Park, so the heart of the rugged park is only accessible on foot via a well-maintained network of trails. An excellent option that begins on the east side of the park and travels up High Peaks Trail, across the Pinnacles, and down Condor Gulch Trail makes a 5.3 or 6-mile hike. The total distance depends on whether or not you include a visit to [Bear Gulch Reservoir](#) (and you probably should). Between the top and bottom of the trail are 1,325 feet of elevation change and panoramic views.

A few alternative routes incorporate the High Peaks, including the longer [High Peaks – Balconies Cave Loop](#). Begin at the Bear Gulch Day Use Area and hike south toward Bear Gulch Reservoir. If you are skipping the reservoir, the directions are simple. Make a right at every junction you come to heading clockwise around the loop.

To visit the reservoir, turn left at the junction 0.2 miles from the start and hike just over half a mile to the reservoir. There is an option along the way to hike up [Moses Spring Trail](#) or [Bear Gulch Cave Trail](#). Both are worthwhile, but the Cave Trail should not be missed if it is open. From the reservoir, turn north up Rim Trail, which provides nice views as it backtracks above Bear Gulch for 0.4 miles to a junction with High Peaks Trail. Turn left here, joining the single track coming up from the first trail junction, 0.3 miles below.

Above the Rim Trail junction, High Peaks Trail offers a more arduous climb, tackling 850 feet over 1.5 miles to a lofty junction near Scout Peak. Take your time tackling the elevation and enjoy the widening views. The trail enters a world of tall strangely shaped monoliths that thrust out of the landscape like nothing else around. Pass through a tunnel carved in the rock and continue another half mile up switchbacks to the junction near Scout Peak. There is a bathroom at the junction, which is located at the south end of the notorious section of High Peaks Trail that crosses the backbone of the Pinnacles.

You may have the good fortune to meet a telescope-bearing volunteer stationed here tracking California condors. These massive birds were near extinction before being rescued and reintroduced by a captive breeding program. Pinnacles National Park (then Pinnacles National Monument) was a primary release point for the condor, and the immense birds have reestablished themselves here. California condors weigh about 20 pounds and have a wingspan of 9½ feet. Park staffers and volunteers continue to monitor the progress of these daunting creatures, and it is important to be respectful of the birds if you are lucky enough to see one. The gargantuan birds are not always easy to spot, but High Peaks Trail is a great place to look. Turn right at the Scout Peak junction and head north across the peaks. The trail is steep and narrow in many areas over the next 1.3 miles, ascending to a height of 2,570 feet. Building this trail must have been quite an endeavor. There are steps carved into the rock and occasional railings to make the crossing possible. The scenery is incredible. This cluster of peaks is the tallest thing around, and the views are vast.

Stay to the right through a junction with Tunnel Trail and continue northeast across the wild peaks to a junction with Condor Gulch Trail. Turn right, leaving the amazing trail to begin the descent to the Bear Gulch Day Use Area. The gradual trail features southeasterly views, exiting the rocky pinnacles for chaparral-covered slopes. Condor Gulch Trail is 1.7 miles long from top to bottom with 1,065 feet of elevation loss.

After dropping into the gulch, there is a short turnoff on the right leading to an overlook. Take a moment to peer off the steep ledge before continuing the last mile down the gulch to the trailhead. There are bathrooms at the end of the trail for those in need of relief, and Bear Gulch Nature Center is just across the road. Turn right and hike the final quarter mile passing through a picnic area up to the parking lot where the hike began.