

Umatilla National Forest
Recreation Opportunity Guide

Walla Walla Ranger District
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TRAIL DIFFICULTY LEVELS

WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTY LEVELS?

The trail difficulty level represents the degree of challenge that a trail presents to an average user's physical ability and skill.

Difficulty levels are based on the trail condition and location factor such as: trail alignment, steepness of grade, clearing width, tread conditions, gain or loss of elevation, availability of drinking water, type of natural barriers that must be crossed, exposure to cliffs and steep slopes, length of trip, and other appropriate criteria.

The three levels used on the Umatilla National Forest are:

- *Easiest**-a trail requiring only limited skill or travel
- *More Difficult**-a trail requiring some skill and challenge to travel
- *Most Difficult**-a trail requiring a high degree of skill and challenge to travel.

DIFFICULTY LEVELS AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

Difficulty level serves as a communication tool to indicate what the trail user can expect, and to provide the manager with direction on how the trail should be maintained. Often, the Most Difficult levels are found in more primitive settings, but higher difficulty is not unique to these settings. Snow, ice, rain, and other weather conditions may increase the levels of difficulty.

Volume of use will usually vary by difficulty level, with the higher volume normally occurring on the Easiest level trails and lower volume on the Most Difficult trails.

Although trail managers have guidelines that help them determine trail difficulty (grade, length of trip, clearing and tread width, etc.), variable conditions and site-specific situations require the rating to be more subjective.

DIFFERENT RATINGS ON THE SAME TRAIL

A trail will often be rated differently for different kinds of use. For example, a trail may be rated as Easiest for hiker, but Most Difficult for pack and saddle stock use because of the narrow clearing-width.

Trail difficulty levels can even be different for the same type of use, depending on the specific activities. For example, a trail may pose different challenges for a day-use horseback ride, than for a horseback rider leading a string of pack stock with camping equipment. A trail, which has a 36-inch wide, smooth, gravel surface, might usually be classed as an Easiest difficulty level, but if it is located on the side of a steep, rocky cliff where one wrong step means a 500-foot fall. It would be rated a More Difficult or Most Difficult.

Trail difficulty ratings are based on the conditions of the local area so similar trails in a different area might be rated differently.

SHARED USES

In most cases, trails classified for one type of use does not mean that other types of uses are not accepted. Most trails designated for a specific use are also available for use by others.

"Caring for the land and serving people."

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