



Navigating permits

The permits and passes behind the places in our guides, and what to do when you can't get one.

Why permits exist

More and more people are drawn to the same trails. That enthusiasm has brought trash, new social trails, abandoned dog waste and damage that takes seven or more years to recover, while land-management budgets shrink and nonprofits fill the gaps. Quotas at the busiest trailheads are one answer. Since the Central Cascades system started in 2021, the Deschutes National Forest reports less crowding, better distribution of visitors, signs of wildlife returning and far less trash and human waste for rangers to manage (USFS).

Central Cascades Wilderness Permit: the quick facts

When	June 15 to October 15 every year. Outside those dates a free self-issue permit at the trailhead covers day and overnight visits.
Where	Every overnight trip in the Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington and Three Sisters Wilderness areas. Day use at 19 of the 79 trailheads, including Broken Top, Tam McArthur Rim, Todd Lake, Green Lakes and Soda Creek, Devils Lake and South Sister, Pacific Crest at McKenzie Pass, Breitenbush Lake, South Breitenbush and Crag Creek, and Whitewater Creek. The other 60 trailheads use the free self-issue permit.
How	Recreation.gov only (website, app or 1-877-444-6777); search for "Central Cascades Wilderness". Forest Service offices do not issue them. Overnight permits need a Recreation.gov account. Carry the permit, on paper or your phone.
Cost	\$1 per person for a day-use permit, \$6 per group of 1 to 12 for an overnight permit. Both are non-refundable processing fees, refunded only if the Forest Service closes the area (USFS, checked September 26, 2026).
Release	Day use: two rolling windows, 10 days and 2 days before the trip, at 7 a.m. Pacific. Overnight: about 40 percent of each day's permits on the first Tuesday in April at 7 a.m. Pacific, the rest 7 days before the entry date.
Limits	Three active overnight permits per person. Enter on the date and at the trailhead on the permit; the group starts the same day and camps together; up to 14 consecutive nights; permits are not transferable.

After entry, travel anywhere inside the wilderness and exit at any trailhead.

Exempt

Pacific Crest Trail long-distance permit holders (500 miles or more), hunters with an ODFW mountain goat, elk or deer tag during the season inside the hunt unit, and volunteers working with the Forest Service.

Also

The permit does not cover parking. Trailheads that charge a fee still take a Northwest Forest Pass or an America the Beautiful pass. The Forest Service does not allow campfires above 5,700 feet in these areas, or at some lower destinations.

Other passes you meet in our guides

- Northwest Forest Pass: \$5 a day or \$30 a season at many Forest Service trailheads in Oregon and Washington; the America the Beautiful pass also works (USFS, checked September 26, 2026).
- Oregon Sno-Park permit: required November 1 to April 30 at plowed winter lots; \$4 a day, \$9 for three days or \$25 for the season from the DMV (Oregon DMV, checked September 26, 2026).
- Oregon State Parks day-use parking at Smith Rock State Park; camping at Prineville Reservoir State Park is reserved through Oregon State Parks up to six months ahead.
- Lava River Cave: a timed-entry reservation and a \$2 ticket through Recreation.gov, plus a Northwest Forest Pass or Interagency pass, when the Forest Service opens the cave (USFS, checked September 26, 2026).
- Prineville Reservoir State Park asks stargazers to fill out a free stargazing permit, linked from our stargazing page.

Can't get a permit?

Cancel a permit you cannot use so someone else can take the spot. Then look at the 60 trailheads without quotas, shift your dates, or volunteer: Friends of the Central Cascades Wilderness runs work trips in the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests, and its volunteer pass may give you and one guest access to the limited-entry trails the following season. Our guide “Can’t Get a Central Cascades Wilderness Permit? Do This Instead” explains how to join.

Facts checked September 26, 2026. Sources: USFS, Central Cascades Wilderness Permits (fs.usda.gov/r06/willamette/permits/central-cascades-wilderness-permits); Recreation.gov; Oregon DMV; Oregon State Parks.

Longer reading on findyourrecreation.com: “The Central Cascades Wilderness Permit System: A Comprehensive Guide 2025” and “Everything You Need to Know About Central Cascades Wilderness Permits 2025”, under Get Outside.