

Quick Guide to Hiking California's Lost Coast – Northern Section

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This guide describes a general plan for hiking the northern section of The Lost Coast Trail in California's Humboldt County – between the Mattole River and Black Sands Beach (Shelter Cove). We assume you've already heard how incredible this hike is, so we'll just get down to brass tacks and tell you how to do it.

Permits and Other Red Tape

This section of trail travels through the Kings Range Conservation Area, managed by the BLM. No permits are necessary to hike the trail. However, if you plan to use any type of camp stove, a campfire permit is required. The permits are available through the BLM office (see below for details). Bear Canisters are required for all overnight hikers. If you do not own a bear canister, they can be rented from the BLM. Also, remember to sign in at the trailhead prior to leaving.

The Route

The section of trail between the Mattole River and Black Sands beach is roughly 25 miles long. The route is generally flat, but more than half of the route is directly on the beach, which slows down your normal pace considerably. We recommend 3 – 4 days for this hike.

Local wisdom suggests a south-bound hike is the best way to attack the trail, not to mention the most popular. This allows for the prevailing winds to be at your back the majority of the time. Speaking of weather, the Lost Coast gets plenty of it. Be prepared for wind and rain any time of year. Also be ready for sunny days with no shade along the trail. That means rain jackets and sunscreen.

Route-finding is pretty straightforward on this hike. If you're hiking south, just keep the Pacific on your right and you should be A-OK. A map is available from the BLM (see below for details). Wilderness Press also publishes a Lost Coast map. The BLM map is sufficient and helpful for identifying major creek crossings and intertidal sections of trail, but lacks the components for more involved map and compass work.

There are no designated campsites along the trail, but the creek mouths are popular because of the access to fresh water. Buck and Shipman Creek are reported to be very popular, so it may serve you and the land well to stay elsewhere. Please remember to always camp at least 200 feet from creeks and streams and follow other Leave No Trace principles when selecting your site.

Our Route – On our most recent trip (April 2005), we hiked the trail in four days – two short days (days 1 and 4) and two long days (days 2 and 3). Starting at the Mattole River and heading south, our campsites were Punta Gorda Lighthouse, Kinsey Creek, and Gitchell Creek.

Hazards Along the Route – READ THIS!

Flora and Fauna: Poison Oak is abundant throughout the hike. Either wear long pants while hiking or resign yourself to a bit of discomfort once the rash hits. Black Bears are present in the King Range. Bear canisters are required for all overnight hikers and can be rented from the BLM (see details below). Observe other bear country best practices while camping. Rattlesnakes and ticks also call the Lost Coast home. Consider yourself warned!

Intertidal Zone Hiking: Windy Point and two longer (3-4 mile) sections of the Lost Coast Trail are impassable at high tide. This is no B.S. If you get caught in one of these sections during high tide you could be in real trouble. Tide tables are available from the BLM, both shuttle services, and also online at the NOAA website (www.noaa.gov). Learn to read the table and how to use the correction factor for your location. Give yourself some time to get through these sections and try to hike on an outgoing tide.

Creek Crossings: There are several major creek crossings along the route that can be deep and swift at times. Some may be impassable after a storm. None of these creeks have bridges, so get creative and prepare to have wet feet. Brush up on your creek-crossing techniques – see [recommended reading](#).

Sleeper Waves: Don't turn your back on the Big Blue. Sleeper waves can sneak up and knock you down or worse yet, sweep you out to sea.

Coordinating Travel

Because this route is effectively a short thru-hike (i.e. point-to-point), some coordination is necessary to arrange transportation. If you have two vehicles at your disposal, it's possible to leave one at your end trailhead and drive the other to the starting point. A simpler solution is to use one of the two BLM-approved shuttle services operating on the Lost Coast (see details at right). The prices may seem high at first, but if you consider the cost of using two cars and the time wasted bouncing back and forth between trailheads to shuttle yourself, the value begins to reveal itself. Both shuttle services will transport you at the beginning of your trip. Leave your car at the endpoint and get shuttled to your starting point.

Directions to Mattole River (Northern Trailhead) - From US 101, exit at Weott, take Bull Creek Road toward Honeydew (22 miles), take a right on Mattole Road toward Petrolia (15 miles), left on Lighthouse Road, follow Lighthouse road to the end

Directions to Black Sands Beach/Shelter Cove (Southern Trailhead) - From US 101, exit at Garberville, travel west 2 miles through the town of Redway, turn left on Shelter Cove Road at the west end of Redway, continue for 23 twisting/turning miles on Shelter Cove Road, follow signs to Black Sands Beach parking area once you reach Shelter Cove

Other Tips

- Bring rain gear and a pack cover. The Lost Coast sees a couple hundred inches of rain a year.
- *Coastal Pooping Technique* – Dig a standard 6" deep cathole in the sand/rocks well below the high tide line. Cover your hole when you're done and the wave action will take care of the rest. DO NOT bury your toilet paper. Be a good backcountry citizen and pack it out in doubled-up Ziploc bags. And wash your hands, ya filthy beast.
- Become a student of sand density and stability. Try to find firm sand that will allow for a faster walking pace. Lift your toes while you walk. That last tip is from a friend of mine who is in the Navy - sage advice.
- If high tide is at 11:30, that doesn't mean everything is going to be Kool and the Gang by 11:35. Give yourself some breathing room before heading into the intertidal sections of trail.
- Read the Coastal Travel section of *NOLS Soft Paths* book for some specific information on minimizing your impact.
- Don't forget to leave your [planned itinerary](#) with someone that will miss you if you run into trouble on the trail.

Phone Numbers and Resources:

BLM (Arcata Office) - 707-825-2300

The BLM office can help you with maps, trail conditions, fire permits and bear canister rentals.

Lost Coast Hikers Shuttle - 707-986-9909

Other Hiker Shuttle (Sheri) - 707-223-1547

Key Waypoints (NAD84):

Mattole River - N 40° 17.335' W 124° 21.383'
Windy Point - N 40° 16.257' W 124° 21.77'
Punta Gorda - N 40° 14.968' W 124° 21.012'
Sea Lion Gulch - N 40° 14.376' W 124° 19.887'
Randall Creek - N 40° 12.023' W 124° 16.902'
Kinsey Creek - N 40° 10.336' W 124° 13.768'
Gitchell Creek - N 40° 05.637' W 124° 06.114'
Black Sands - N 40° 02.772' W 124° 04.740'

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