

YELLOW BELLY & MCDONALD LAKES TRAIL

A Read & Hike Idaho Trail Guide

▣ SAWTOOTH AREA, IDAHO

TRAIL SNAPSHOT

LOCATION:

Sawtooth area near Pettit Lake, Idaho

DISTANCE:

About 3.6 to 5.1 miles

DIFFICULTY:

Moderate

BEST SEASON:

Summer to early fall

BEST FOR:

Lake exploration, active families

Yellow Belly & McDonald Lakes Trail offers a peaceful family adventure in Idaho's mountain landscape. This trail invites hikers to explore alpine lake scenery, forest edges, open views, and quiet places to pause, read, and reflect beside the water.

Detailed Trail Guide

Yellow Belly & McDonald Lakes Trail invites families into a Sawtooth landscape of lake water, mountain views, forest edges, and quiet shoreline spaces. This trail is especially good for families who want to connect reading with noticing: reflections on the water, animal signs near the shore, changing light, and the feeling of moving from one lake space to another. It can be used as a longer family hike or adapted by choosing a shorter stopping point.

Quick Trail Facts

LOCATION	Sawtooth area near Pettit Lake, Idaho
DISTANCE	Approximately 3.6 to 5.1 miles, depending on route and turnaround point
DIFFICULTY	Moderate
ESTIMATED TIME	2 to 3 hours for many family groups
BEST SEASON	Summer to early fall
RESTROOMS / PARKING	Parking and access may vary depending on route and trailhead. Check road and trail conditions before visiting.
FAMILY-FRIENDLY NOTES	Best for families comfortable with a longer hike, uneven trail, and lake-area exploration.
SAFETY REMINDERS	Bring water, sun protection, layers, snacks, and a map or downloaded trail information. Watch children near water.

Family Hiking Reminder

Use this guide flexibly. Pick a safe turnaround point, pack water and layers, and check current trail or weather conditions before visiting.

Read Before & After

Books that connect to this trail

Use these books before the hike to build curiosity and after the hike to extend family conversation. Choose one short read-aloud, one longer title, or a mix for different ages.

READ BEFORE YOU GO • The Camping Trip by Jennifer K. Mann • Because of an Acorn by Lola M. Schaefer • The Hike by Alison Farrell • Over and Under the Pond by Kate Messner • A Stone Sat Still by Brendan Wenzel	READ AFTER YOU HIKE • My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George • The Wild Robot by Peter Brown • A Wolf Called Wander by Rosanne Parry • Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults adapted by Monique Gray Smith • Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv
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Family Conversation Prompts • What did you notice first when you saw the lake? • What part of the book reminded you of this hike? • How did the landscape make you feel? • What changed as we moved along the trail? • What can we do to care for this place?

Trail Activities

Observe, search, sketch, and wonder

Observation Prompt
Look closely at the lake edge. What do you notice where water, plants, rocks, and trees meet?

Scavenger Hunt

☐ Lake reflection	☐ A quiet place to sit
☐ A shoreline plant	☐ A sign of wildlife
☐ A bird sound	☐ A mountain shape
☐ A rock with more than one color	☐ Something growing near water
☐ A place where wind changes the water	☐ Something that shows the season

Drawing or Journaling
Draw the lake in three layers: foreground, water, and mountains. Add labels for the details you noticed.

Simple Nature Activity
Compare two lake views. What is the same? What is different? What changes when you move just a little farther down the trail?

Age-Level Variations

Ways to use this trail with every age

Ages 0-3	Point to water, trees, rocks, and sky. Practice simple words like blue, cold, tree, bird, and big.
Ages 4-7	Do a color hunt. Find three shades of green, two shades of blue, and one surprising color.
Ages 8-12	Write field notes comparing the lake, forest, and mountain areas.
Teens	Photograph or sketch patterns: ripples, tree lines, shadows, and rock textures.
Adults / Family Read-Aloud	Read a short passage beside the lake and talk about how water changes the feeling of a place.

Downloadable Printables

- Trail guide PDF
- Lake-to-lake scavenger hunt
- Field notes page
- Drawing journal page

Before You Go

Trail distances, access, amenities, and seasonal conditions can change. Families should check the managing agency, recent trail reports, weather, road conditions, and posted trailhead signs before visiting.

Source Notes

- Sawtooth National Recreation Area trail updates note that Mays Creek Trail connects to the Yellowbelly Trail near McDonald Lake.
- Sawtooth National Forest recreation information notes that Yellow Belly Lake is north of Pettit Lake and does not allow motorized watercraft.
- Sawtooth Wilderness information notes special campfire restrictions in some drainages, including Yellow Belly Lake Creek; check current rules before visiting.

Library Program Idea

Use this as a Lake-to-Lake Nature Hunt. Families compare shoreline plants, water movement, and soundscapes, then finish with a read-aloud and a reflection about how each lake space felt different.