BIGHORN – ATLAS – COPPER JOE ROUTE

**Distance:** 54 km (33.6 mi) approx.  
**Elevation gain:** 1305m (4,282’)  
**Time:** 3-5 days  
**Maximum elevation:** 2,170 m (7,120’)

Trailhead: this route is reached by floatplane drop off or by hiking in an alternate route.

A route is not a trail. Routes are not marked with signs or maintained in any manner. The route described here is only a suggestion that may help guide you on your trip. Self-reliance and wilderness travel experience are essential, including excellent route finding skills, map and compass skills. It is the responsibility of individual hikers who choose to follow such routes to adequately prepare and be prepared to rely on themselves.

**IN SUMMARY**

This route follows creek and river drainages for the most part with some sections along an old road, horse and wildlife trails, and some sections without any obvious trail at all.

**THE DETAILS**

**Bighorn Creek**

From Bighorn Lake the route begins along a visible horse trail 300 m north west of the Warden patrol cabin north to Bighorn Creek. Once at the creek choose a good spot to cross (you may have to look for a while if the creek is high). Once across, proceed upstream along the north side of the creek until the creek is visible within the canyon. At this point, you must decide whether to stay along the creek or find a convenient route up the steep slopes to the north. If you decide to travel through the canyon you may find you have to cross the main channel of the creek a number of times. If the creek is high, it is recommended to bypass the canyon by heading north, up roughly 400’, and then contouring east to a convenient slope that drops down on the tributary (Chert Creek) of Bighorn flowing from the north. At low water levels, walking through the canyon will take less than an hour, while taking the canyon bypass may take as long as 3 hours.

Another alternative if the creek is running high is to hike to Atlas Pass via Expectation Pass. This route (which is described by V. Lougheed in The Kluane National Park Hiking Guide) offers stunning views of the Donjek and some of the bigger peaks in the icefields. The elevation gain along this alternative route is steady, but the contouring is easy.

**Chert Creek**

The next stage of the route involves following the tributary of Bighorn (Chert Creek), which flows in from the north by north east. About 2 km up, the creek branches. Follow the right (east) side. 600 m past the fork is a second fork (you will pass a small creek before the second fork, do not mistake this for the second fork!). From the second fork a waterfall may be visible (depending on water levels) on the
right side. It is easiest to bypass by following the left fork (west) 300 500 m until a climbable slope appears on the right (east) side. After a short, steep climb you will emerge in sub alpine area and a good place to camp (UTM 07 V 591300E 6782600N).

An alternate route to bypass the waterfall is to climb high on the grassy slopes of the east side of the creek but it is steeper and you have to climb higher than on the left (west) side. Just a bit above the falls the creek forks again. The area between the two forks is a flat, excellent, slightly overused campsite.

**Atlas Pass**

The route follows the left fork tributary to its source just before the top of Atlas Pass (6900') at UTM 07 V 593100E 6785300N. It is very easy to travel up off the creek drainage, between the falls and the top of the pass, into the alpine and there are numerous places to camp.

Once you reach the top of Atlas Pass the view is stunning and a little overwhelming (provided you aren't immersed in cloud). Simply going straight down the most direct route off the pass is neither inviting nor recommended. The easiest route is to head to the left (north) side of the pass and climb up a bit toward some rock outcrops along the ridge (there is a small outcrop of rock that you will pass, continue up to the larger outcrop above this one). It is then relatively easy to contour along the base of the outcrop and over to a broad sloping ridge (about 150m long) composed of silt and scree. This material gives way under foot and provides a comfortable route down (and a more difficult route up). Directly down the slope you see a knoll along the ridge, off a bit to the left. Beyond this knoll there is a small saddle and then the ridge levels off and rises slightly before dropping off to the creek. Stay to the left side of the rising ridge and watch down slope to the left for "A Hole #9" (a distinct, flat, green patch visible on the top of a little knoll that resembles a putting green on a golf course). The best route down is the drainage just right (east) of Hole #9. Once you are down on the creek it is just a matter of following the water to where it flows into the Duke River, about 6 easy km downstream.

An alternative route description for reaching the Duke River from Atlas Pass can also be found in V. Lougheed’s *The Kluane National Park Hiking Guide*.

**Duke River**

Just before you reach the Duke River you will see a game trail leave the creek bed on the right. After 200 300 m along the trail it is possible to head left towards the river and find some good places to camp at UTM 07 V 596400E 6789500N.

From this point, proceed upstream along the south (right) side of the Duke River. Hiking on numerous game trails and old gravel river drainage. Just over 4 km along the river you will arrive at small creek, in a big drainage, which flows into the Duke from the south. Along the east shore of the creek, 100 m upstream from the river, there is evidence of old and new campsites alike. Continue along the Duke for about 1 km until the river begins to braid out and look for a place to cross (if water levels are high you may have to go upstream and cross Grizzly Creek before finding an area shallow enough to cross). Once across the river follow game trails and gravel washes for another 3 4 km.

**Cache Lake**
Where to turn up, away from the Duke River is not that obvious. As you travel along the river, the vegetation on the left (north) begins to thin out into an open terrace covered in Dryas (mountain avens). From this terrace head northeast to the edge of the vegetation and right away there is a dry creek wash evident and emerging in a small steep fan from the bank. Continue east past this fan until you hit the next dry fan. As you head north up the wash (about 100-300 m) you will find a small path that was once a road. This path can be difficult to find and the creek is small. If you find yourself standing across from Grizzly Creek you have gone too far and missed the path. Retrace your steps and eventually you will find the path. You can easily follow this path up over a low pass to Cache Lake where you will find another excellent camping spot at UTM 07 V 604300E 6787600N.

When looking at a map, you can see that there is an alternative way to reach Cache Lake, by ascending the first creek (it may appear as a dry creek bed) southeast of Cache Lake. Walk through the trees and continue along the creek bed for about 2 kilometres. Just past the knoll at UTM 07 V 605100E 6785900N, exit the creek bed up and to the left (northwest). Continue northwest towards Cache Lake. You will pass another small lake on your left, and the walking is pleasant and provides great views. It is an easy walk down to Cache Lake, and the old road can be located on the west side of the lake.

**Copper Joe Creek** (Halfbreed Creek on some maps)

The remainder of the route follows the drainage of Copper Joe Creek. At some points there is evidence of an old road, but in many places it has been washed away. In most cases the remains of the road are found on the east (right) side of the creek and as a result it is often easier to travel on that side, but you may find it necessary to cross. You will cross the park boundary again about 15 km before the Alaska Highway. The road improves substantially 4 or 5 km before you arrive at the highway and it is an easy end to the trip.

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

**An activity permit is required for a drop-off or pick-up at Bighorn Lake** and may be requested 3 days in advance from staff at the Kluane National Park and Reserve Visitor Centre in Haines Junction or at the Thechàl Dhâl Visitor Centre. For more information, please call 867-634-7207.

Unfortunately, cases of giardia have been reported in Kluane, so water boiling, tablets or filters are recommended.

Good boots are necessary when climbing scree and gaiters are also handy for keeping the water, rocks and snow out.

Depending on the year, this route is generally snow free from around mid-June to mid-September. Although unusual, it is possible to get snow on the passes on any day of the summer.

Some commercial companies guide groups over this route, so do not be surprised to see other people in the middle of nowhere. However, some times of year it will be unusual to see someone else on the whole hike.

For all overnight trips in the park Approved Bear Resistant Food Canisters are mandatory (see the link http://www.igbconline.org/index.php/safety-in-grizzly-country/bear-resistant-products/igbc-certified-bear-resistant-
products) and a Wilderness Permit is required, both can be obtained from the Kluane National Park and Reserve Visitor Centre in Haines Junction or at the Thechàl Dhâl Visitor Centre. For more information, please call 867-634-7207.

Bear sightings are common in this area. Review recommendations for travel within the YOU ARE IN BEAR COUNTRY brochure. Please report all bear sightings to the staff at the Visitor Centre.

Cellular telephones do not work in most of the park. Satellite phones or satellite messaging devices are strongly recommended. **For emergencies please call 1-780-852-3100.**

Using topographic maps at a 1:50,000 scale is highly recommended: Bighorn Creek 115 G/3, Duke River 115 G/6, and Burwash Landing 115 G/7.