

48 LION HEAD

DISTANCE: 2.3 miles roundtrip

TIME: Half day (or less)

ELEVATION GAIN: 1100 feet

HIGH POINT: 3185 feet

SEASON: June–September

SURFACE: Hardpack, boulders, mud

GRADE: Rolling with steep segments

INDIGENOUS LAND: Western Ahtna Athabascan

MANAGING AGENCY: Private (AT&T)

MAP: USGS Anchorage D-2 SW

ONLINE MAP SEARCH: “lion head ak”

TRAILHEAD GPS: 61.790274°N, 147.678657°W

It is an iconic image on the Alaska highway system: drivers headed west on a Glenn Highway straightaway out of the big, broad country of Eureka Summit feel the mountains closing in to form the Matanuska Valley, and they see there, guarding the headwaters, a sphinxlike lion, reclined, holding its head up. A chunk of rock left behind as glaciers retreated, Lion Head occupies the ground between the Chugach Mountains to the south and the Talkeetna Mountains to the north. On a sunny autumn day with new snow on the high peaks and aspen leaves burning yellow in the lowlands, it's hard to resist the urge to check out the view of the Matanuska Glacier and multiple perpetually white peaks above 10,000 feet in the inner Chugach Mountains.

The way up Lion Head is short but by no means easy. A trail of sorts is worn in, but steep grades, slippery surfaces, and rockiness all combine to make it more challenging. The entirety of Lion Head is on land owned by AT&T for communications facilities, and AT&T requests that all hikers call them to log in and out. You may not have phone service in this remote location, unless you are an AT&T mobile customer. Call AT&T's office in Anchorage before you hike from a place with known phone service: (907) 264-8363, or (800) 252-7521.

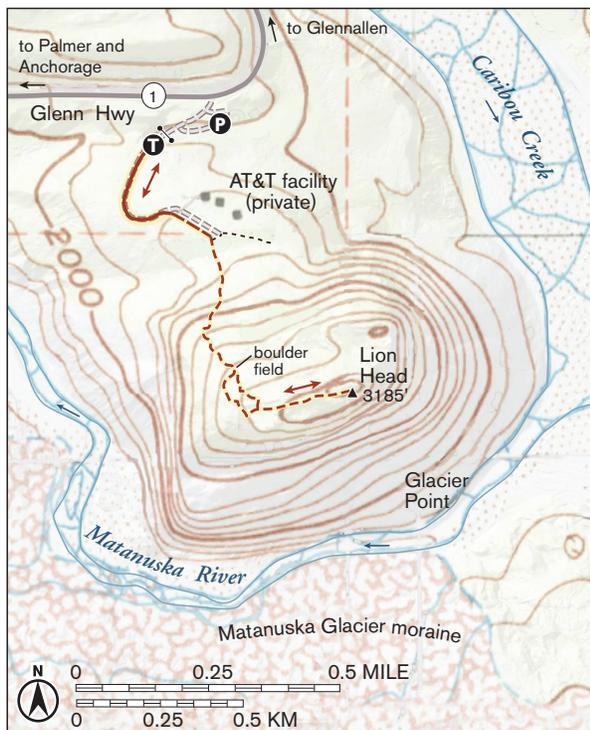
DRIVING DIRECTIONS

Search online for “lion head ak” or follow these directions. Drive the Glenn Highway to mile 105.8, and turn south toward Lion Head onto a gravel access road. For drivers headed east away from Anchorage and Palmer, be alert for the turn after passing Glacier View School. Traffic heading west will be climbing

out of the Caribou Creek drainage, and the driveway will suddenly appear. In either case, there is a short gap in the guardrail on the outside of the curve at the crest of a hill. Go cautiously to ensure you make the turn. Almost immediately, a gate blocks the access road. Park along the road or in an adjacent, higher pullout area. The walk begins at the gate.



Admiring Matanuska Glacier from the summit of Lion Head



ON THE ROUTE

After calling AT&T to log in, slip around the gate (elevation 2100 feet), and walk up the access road and around a bend. As the grade flattens and the communications buildings come into view, go right on a smaller offshoot road, which may be marked with a small pile of rocks. It is possible to miss the initial turn and end up alongside the buildings with an apparent trail straight ahead (southeast); this is *not* the main trail. If you are next to the buildings, go to the third building and tower, turn hard right, and head away from the buildings (southwest) to find the most-used route. At the top of a modest grade, look for two additional rock piles marking the footpath into the woods, away from the buildings and toward Lion Head.

This trail heads briefly downhill into a patch of trees, then breaks into the open and heads uphill on a track that can be muddy and slippery, with some

awkward step-ups. Expect some minor brush; it might come in handy to hold on to. En route, breaks in trees give improving views. At a crest, there is a first view of the toe of Matanuska Glacier. Just beyond, 0.8 mile from the gate, the trail enters a boulder field with two options: a steeper route that goes approximately straight up the boulders and continues more directly to the ridge crest, requiring use of hands, or a route that exits the top right side of the boulder field and continues up at a more modest grade. Ultimately, the routes rejoin on the “summit” ridge (1 mile in, elevation 2950 feet), and the whole glacier comes into view, framed nicely by clusters of conifers.

Follow the rocky ridge crest or a trail just below the crest to the high point, 3185 feet. This knob feels like a real summit, even though the hike up is barely a mile long. Up the glacier 20 miles stands a wall of peaks draped in ice and reaching above 10,000 and 11,000 feet high. These unnamed peaks wring snow out of moist ocean air from Prince William Sound,

generating the Matanuska Glacier on the north side and the Harvard Glacier at the head of College Fjord on the south side.

While the ridge near the summit feels relatively safe and can accommodate several parties, be cautious. Toward the glacier (south side), the ridge initially drops off at a modest angle, but there is an edge, and it marks a long drop. A fall would be fatal. Similarly, the back side (north) has crumbled away over eons, leaving boulder fields below a smaller set of cliffs. Cracks in the rock and tundra near the summit are evidence of freeze-thaw action that levers the solid rock apart. Stay back from cracks and from the edge. Also, the Grand Canyon effect has potential to occur on this ridge: people posing for photos with their backs to the view step off an edge. Oops. Instead, descend the trail.

Upon departure, call AT&T again as soon as you have cell service. AT&T says if they don’t hear back, they will assume people still are out on Lion Head and may need help.

49 BELANGER PASS LOOP

DISTANCE: 17-mile loop

TIME: 2–3 days

ELEVATION GAIN: 4000 feet

HIGH POINT: 4500 feet

SEASON: June–September

SURFACE: Hardpack, bushes (low), mud

GRADE: Rolling with steep segments

INDIGENOUS LAND: Western Ahtna Athabascan

MANAGING AGENCY: Alaska Division of Mining, Land, and Water

MAPS: USGS Anchorage D-1 NW, D-2 NE

ONLINE MAP SEARCH: “belanger pass ak”

TRAILHEAD GPS: 61.919203°N, 147.328353°W