

Watson Lake from Tahoe City High School

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Introduction

The ride from Watson Lake out to the “Lava Rocks” is a fun, single-track ride, and the view of Lake Tahoe from the Lava Rocks is spectacular. However, there are many ways to get to Watson Lake and the “lava rocks.” This ride describes a loop from Tahoe City, which includes a lot of climbing on dirt roads to get to the top, and some technical single-track downhill to get to back.

Figure 1: The view of Lake Tahoe from the “lava rocks” ([waypoint 067](#))



Trail Description Info

There are many rides that go to Watson Lake, as it is in part of the North Star Trail System. These notes were taken on 8/29/97 (Friday before Labor Day). This ride up is based on the “Ride #3 - Watson Lake Loop,” p. 81 of **Mountain Biking The High Sierra, Guide 3B: Lake Tahoe -**

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North¹ (1992 edition, I believe a newer edition is now available) by Carol Bonser. The route we took back down is not described in any book I have come across.

Note that linear mileages are recorded from my bike trip computer. The coordinates come from a hand-held GPS, and accuracy should be considered to around ± 400 ft. The elevations (in feet) are taken from USGS topo maps with 40' contour lines. The “~” symbol means approximately. The “+” symbol means it was a bit above this contour line elevation, and the “-” symbol means it was a bit below this contour line elevation.

Trail Type

This route covers both dirt roads and single track. Difficulty covers a wide range, including good dirt roads, very rocky dirt roads, fairly easy single track, and very challenging single track.

Length/Time

This is about a 13 mile loop. Due to some technical walking parts (not helped by the fact we rode late in the season which made for very loose dirt in the steep parts), our elapsed time was 5 hours 10 minutes (including a quick lunch, but not a lot of sight seeing). Trip computer riding time was 2 hours 23 minutes, with an average speed of 5.4 MPH.

Difficulty

This ride has about 1300' of elevation gain with lots of granny gear riding, but not too many “killer hills”. Thus this is a fairly strenuous ride, but many rides in the Tahoe area are much more severe.

In terms of difficulty, I would classify the majority of the ride in (and up) as advanced beginner. However, there are several sections that are at least intermediate, and a little bit that you will walk up (unless you are an advanced rider in great shape). Much of the ride out (and down), however, qualifies as intermediate with a lot of walking or advanced due to steep downhill single-track with loose dirt and rock. However, this ride could be done as an in-and-out, which would avoid most of the real technical stuff.

Most of this ride should be pretty easy to follow with these directions. However, the last little part of getting back to the high school can get confusing, as there are many junctions. To further make things difficult, my notes for the last little bit are very sketchy, largely because we were following another rider out who knew the trails and I didn't have a chance to take waypoints.

1. Published by Fine Edge Productions, Route 2, Box 303, Bishop, CA 93514, ISBN 0-938665-07-3. I believe a newer version of this book is now available.

Traffic/Crowds

This is typical Tahoe mountain biking: you'll probably see quite of mountain bikes and tracks on the route in. You may also see some motorized vehicles (cars, trucks, motorcycles, etc.) on some of the roads in.

Trailhead

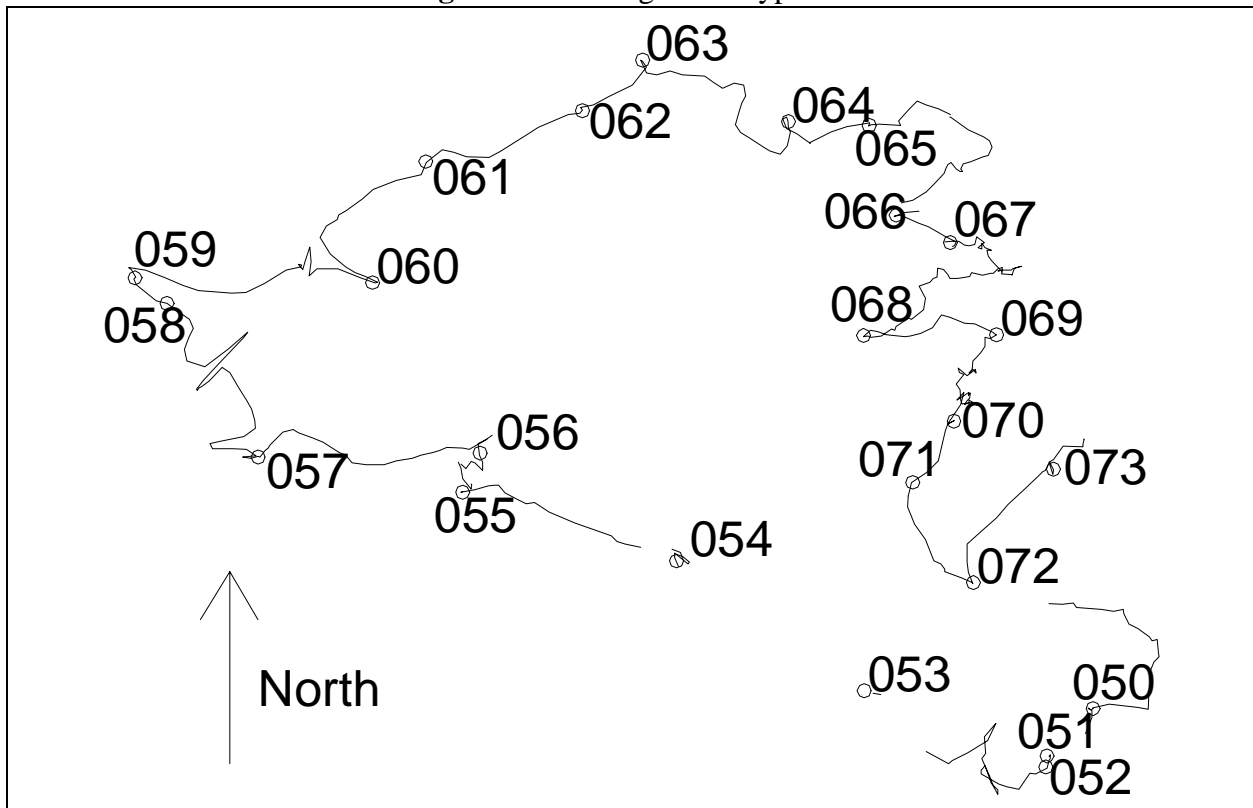
I'll quote from the book for this. The book assumes you might want to ride to here. We drove.

In Tahoe City, start from the intersection of Highway 89 and Highway 28. Ride or drive north-east on Highway 28 through the main part of town. Turn left (northwest) on Old Mill Road, and after about a half mile, turn left again on Polaris at the top of the hill. Continue 0.4 mile farther to the end of the pavement just past North lake Tahoe High School. If you drove to this point, park here out of the way of the school traffic.

We parked at the end of the pavement next to the high school parking lot (N 39° 11' 37.2", W 120° 07' 18.0", waypoint 050, elev. ~6600-).

Route Map

Figure 2: Tracklog and Waypoints



[Figure 2](#) shows the tracklog and waypoints for this ride. As with all the GPS data in this document, the points are fairly accurate, but there are times (especially when the GPS temporarily lost

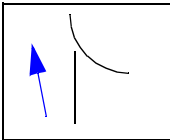
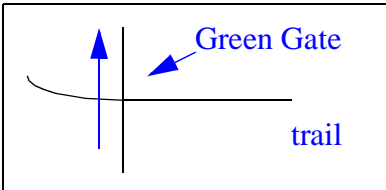
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lock on the satellites) when jogs and such appear in the track log that weren't actually on the route.

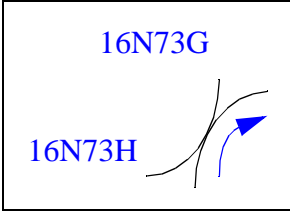
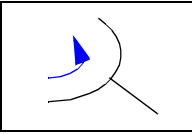
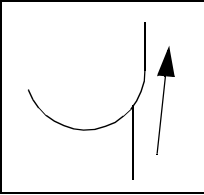
Route Description

Note that the description I give here marks major junctions, but there are many small side roads and trails I don't note. If you come to an unmarked junction, just continue on what appears to be the same, main route you are currently on.

Also note that trail diagrams drawn below are oriented so you arrive from the bottom. They have no relation to compass directions (up is probably not north).

- **Mileage 0 (N 39° 11' 37.2", W 120° 07' 18.0", waypoint 050, elev. ~6600-)** - From the end of the pavement, continue on the dirt road past the green gate. Stay right at the junction you come to almost immediately. (The right fork was freshly covered with wood chips when we were there.)
- **Mileage 0.15M** - You come to a sign that says "Burton State Park".
- **Mileage 0.32M (N 39° 11' 28.3", W 120° 07' 26.6", waypoint 051, elev. ~6520)** - You go through another green gate.
- **Mileage 0.39M (N 39° 11' 26.1", W 120° 07' 26.8", waypoint 052, elev. ~6520+)** - Turn right when you T into another dirt road. This stretch of the ride is slightly rough, but fairly level.
- **Mileage 1.03M (N 39° 11' 40.4", W 120° 08' 00.9", waypoint 053, elev. ~6600+)** - You join another dirt road. Continue straight. This section of the ride isn't too steep, but many rocks and loose dirt make this section fairly technical. 
- **Mileage ~1.6M** - When you reach this point in the road, you'll trade in most of the technical rocks and soft dirt for granny-gear uphill.
- **Mileage 1.84M (N 39° 12' 04.8", W 120° 08' 36.1", waypoint 054, elev. ~6800)** - You come to a 4-way junction with a green gate straight ahead. (The road right turns into a trail.) A tree next to the gate has an "8" on it and is marked "Antone Natural Preserve Area". Continue straight ahead past the gate. This section of the ride is fairly easy and level. 
- **Mileage 2.56M (N 39° 12' 17.7", W 120° 09' 16.3", waypoint 055, elev. ~6840)** - You come to a T-intersection. Go right up the steep, uphill single track, with rocks and loose dirt. Good riders in good condition could probably ride much of this. We walked. (You gain about 120' in about 0.2M.)
- **Mileage 2.75M (N 39° 12' 25.0", W 120° 09' 13.0", waypoint 056, elev. ~6960)** - You come to a T-intersection with a single-track trail. A passing rider told us the route to the right goes back to the high school (perhaps via [waypoint 054](#)? I'm just guessing). Go left to continue this ride. This section of trail is fun, rideable single-track, although there is quite a bit of granny gear.

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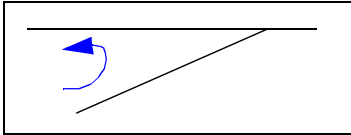
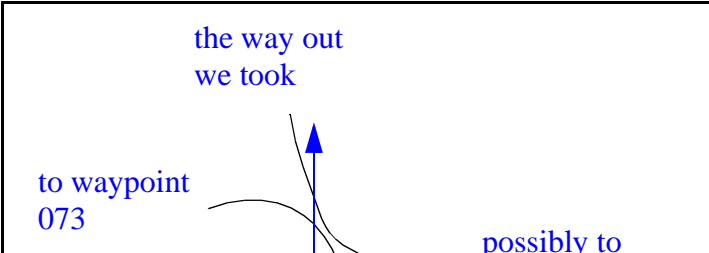
- **Mileage ~3.1M** - The trail crests, and it is mostly downhill or flat from here.
- **Mileage 3.55M (N 39° 12' 24.3", W 120° 09' 54.5", waypoint 057, elev. ~7120)** - Here you T with a hairpin curve in dirt road 16N73. A sign behind you indicates the trail you just came off of is "73E". Go uphill to the right, starting a long, steady, granny-gear hill climb. Other than some soft dirt in the turns and the uphill, this section of ride is easy.
- **Mileage 4.39M (N 39° 12' 53.1", W 120° 10' 11.7", waypoint 058, elev. ~7400-)** - The marked Tahoe Rim trail crosses the road here. Continue the granny-gear uphill on the road.
- **Mileage 4.55M (N 39° 12' 57.8", w 120° 10' 17.7", waypoint 059, elev. ~7400)** - A road joins from the left as the road you are on curves to the right. If you look closely, you discover it is actually two roads, with the one to the left labeled 16N73H, and the one on the right labeled 16N73G. Continue up the road you are on for more granny-gear climbing.
- **Mileage 5.29M (N 39° 12' 57.0", W 120° 09' 33.1", waypoint 060, elev. ~7600+)** - The road you are on curves to the left while another road joins from the right. Continue the granny-gear climbing up and left on the road you are on.
- **Mileage 5.99M (N 39° 13' 19.6", W 120° 09' 23.1", waypoint 061, elev. ~7800-)** - Road 73E joins from the right, which goes up to very near the peak of Mt. Watson. (A nice ride if you have the energy, but much of the road is quite steep. It was granny-gear plus frequent stops the last time I rode it.) A sign pointing the other way indicates "Tahoe City" where you just came from. Continue ahead on the road you have been riding on. The good news is that you are near the top of your ride, and it is fairly flat from here.
- **Mileage 6.51M (N 39° 13' 29.2", W 120° 08' 53.7", waypoint 062, elev. ~7800-)** - You join another road (at a curve in the other road). Where you just came from has a red sign "End of North Star Trail System." (Essentially all the red signs in this area are North Star trail signs.) Continue up and right (actually more straight) on the road (not down and left) past the red diamond "100" sign.
- **Mileage 6.77M (N 39° 13' 38.6", W 120° 08' 42.5", waypoint 063, elev. ~7800+)** - You come to a road at a 90° angle entering from the right, with a sign indicating Watson Lake is down that road. Take that road to Watson Lake. This part of the ride is mostly downhill, but with some uphill.
- **Mileage 7.49M (N 39° 13' 27.1", W 120° 08' 15.2", waypoint 064, elev. ~7800-)** - You've reached Watson Lake. This is a nice place to enjoy the view, eat lunch, etc. When you're ready to continue, continue on the road. It's pretty faint right here at the lake as it winds up through some rocks (not many vehicles, even 4x4's, could make it through here). Soon, however, you rejoin a recognizable road that heads mostly downhill.
- **Mileage 7.79M (N 39° 13' 26.4", W 120° 08' 00.0", waypoint 065, elev. ~7720)** - Watch for a marked single-track trail to the right and take it. (Don't go too quickly down the hill, or you might ride right past this trail.) You are starting on a single-track trail that is moderately tech-

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nical in some places, and that has some granny-gear uphill. This is also where the ride leaves the book description.

- Near the top of your climb, you come to a 4-way trail junction. The trail coming down-hill from the right is coming from the top of Mt. Watson. (This is where you would come in if you had taken the road at **waypoint 061**.) The trail down and left is blocked off with logs and such. Continue straight ahead and somewhat up on the middle trail.
- **Mileage 8.58M (N 39° 13' 09.5", W 120° 07' 54.9", waypoint 066, elev. ~7880-)** - Fairly soon after the trail starts to drop gently downhill, the trail makes a hairpin curve to the left and starts to drop more steeply downhill. Due to some rocks and loose gravel, this is a moderately technical downhill ride (and quite technical if you come up this).
- **Mileage 8.74M (N 39° 13' 04.5", W 120° 07' 44.8", waypoint 067, elev. ~7680)** - Look to your right for some large lava rock next to a cliff. The view from here is spectacular, with a great view of almost all of Lake Tahoe on a clear day. This has been the destination of many of our rides, and to avoid the really technical downhill, turn around here to do an out-and-back.

To continue on this loop, continue down the trail from here. You will find lots of technical sections, with various combinations of steep downhill, curves, rocks, and loose dirt.

- **Mileage ~9.4M** - The single-track trail becomes a bit more rideable from here.
- **Mileage 9.65M (N 39° 12' 47.0", W 120° 08' 01.0", waypoint 068, elev. ~7360)** - You come to a single-track trail junction, with a sign indicating you were on the Tahoe Rim Trail. Take a sharp left and continue downhill on fairly easy, rideable single-track. 
- **Mileage 10.05M (N 39° 12' 47.2", W 120° 07' 36.1", waypoint 069, elev. ~7240+)** - You come to a junction with a trail on your right. The trail ahead was blocked off with a log when we came to it (but logs can move with time). Take the trail down and right. This is another technical section that is fairly steep with lots of loose dirt. We walked quite a bit of it.
- **Mileage 10.45M (N 39° 12' 31.0", W 120° 07' 44.1", waypoint 070, elev. ~6920-)** - You come to a T-intersection with choices of left (and a bit up) or down (and a bit right). Go down and right. The rest of the ride is mostly rideable on roads.
- **Mileage 10.67M (N 39° 12' 19.5", W 120° 07' 51.8", waypoint 071, elev. ~6840)** - You come to another T-intersection with a dirt road. Go left and slightly down.
- **Mileage 10.99M (N 39° 12' 00.7", W 120° 07' 40.5", waypoint 072, elev. ~6840)** - Unfortunately this is where the clear directions end. You come to a 4-way junction in the road that doesn't have an exact match on the USGS topo map (revised 1992). 

We started out taking the left-most route (which is the continuation of

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the road you are on), and rode a ways past **waypoint 073** (**Mileage 11.33+**, **N 39° 12' 21.9"**, **W 120° 07' 25.4"**, **waypoint 073, elev. ~6800-**), but it didn't look like it was going where we wanted, and a passing rider confirmed this.

My guess is that taking the right-most route would eventually take you back to **waypoint 053**, but I can't be sure since we didn't take that route.

What we did do was follow another ride out through the "middle" of the two forks (more or less straight ahead on the other road), as indicated on the diagram. We continued on the most significant road past at least one notable junction (road joins on the right, we stayed left--the topo map suggests this road might go back to near **waypoint 051**). A bit further, we came to another significant junction where the road we were on continued more or less straight, and we took the road down to the right. A bit farther on, a somewhat faint trail took off to the right of the road. We took this trail to the right, and quite quickly (probably within a tenth of a mile) the high school appears. Continue on the trail around the field to the parking lot, and head back to your starting point.

- **Mileage ~13.12M** - You should now be back where you started at **waypoint 050**. Note that the mileage here includes our detour past **waypoint 073**, so if you do things right your mileage should be lower.