

# **Supersize It**



## **Big Hikes in Southern California**

**David Money Harris**

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**[Internet Sneak Preview: Hikes 1-3](#)**

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Thanks to many friends who have been excellent company exploring the Southern California Mountains, especially Sian Davies-Vollum and the Überjocks Tony Condon, Brian Elliott, Joe Sheehy, Rick Graham, Elizabeth Thomas, and Alex Honnold. Good old Uncle Harv flew the Cessna 172 to obtain some of the aerial photographs. Most of all, my wife Jennifer has been supportive and encouraging as I venture out for day hikes.

Cover photograph: Telescope Peak from the air above Badwater

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Maps created by the author.

Third Printing

International Standard Book Number 0-9770385-1-3

Published by   Euclid Books  
                  1320 N. Euclid Ave.  
                  Upland, CA 91786

Printed in the United States of America

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# **Introduction**

This book is not for everyone. It is a compendium of big hikes, generally those involving a vertical mile or more of climbing, that can be completed in a day by a person in good condition. The hikes are physically demanding. They can be sweltering and parched or frigid and icy. Many require cross-country navigation skills. Perils include dehydration, avalanches, heat stroke, frostbite, rock fall, exhaustion, twisted ankles, and rattlesnakes. Cell phone coverage and rescue are not always available. Even the most capable hiker can have bad luck.

I find these hikes to be a spiritual experience. They are long enough to push the body and mind. I prize the friendships forged on the trail and the solitude of my own thoughts. The hikes mark the passing of the seasons and bring me to astonishing vistas rarely seen by the teeming hordes in the valleys below. The intimate knowledge of the hills visible from home brings pleasant memories on my daily commute. Tread lightly and preserve these special places for the future.

## **Maps**

This book provides driving directions and general descriptions of each hike. The maps in the book are only for general orientation; they lack adequate detail for cross-country navigation, and the data sources have not been verified. Bring a detailed topographic map of your own. The Tom Harrison Maps, available at REI, cover many of the popular hiking areas in Southern California (notably the San Gabriels, the San Gorgonio Wilderness, and the San Jacinto Wilderness) and are more convenient than USGS quads. For hikes that venture off trail, you should have the proper knowledge and equipment for navigation.

## **Regulations**

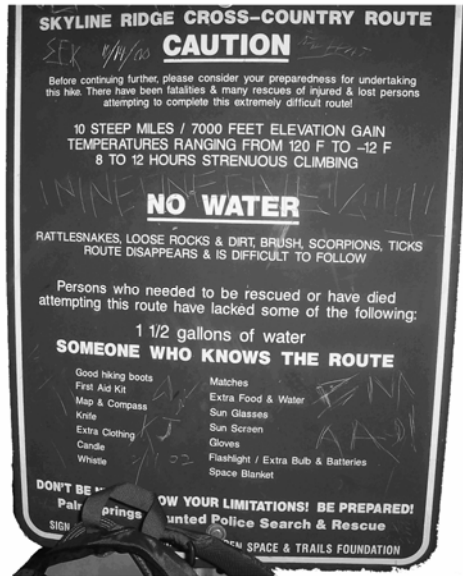
Some hikes enter designated wilderness areas. Before starting these hikes, pick up a wilderness permit at a nearby ranger station. The San Gorgonio and San Jacinto Wilderness have quotas that often fill during popular summer weekends.

There are numerous holdings of private land in Southern California. Take care to avoid them or receive permission from the landowner.

### Time of Year

Southern California hikers are fortunate to have outstanding mountains for every season. In the spring and fall, the big ranges enclosing the Los Angeles basin offer dramatic vertical rises within a short drive of more than ten million people. In the winter, these peaks require snow gear and substantially more labor, but the desert peaks beckon. In late spring, summer, and fall, the Sierra Nevada provides some of the world's best mountaineering in highly favorable weather while the lowlands bake under desert sun.

In some years with light snow, the San Gabriel mountains may be accessible until late December or January. In other years, they remain snowbound from November through May. Check the local conditions before starting.



Warning near the start of Cactus to Clouds.

Photo by Brian Elliott

# Mount San Antonio Overview

Mount San Antonio, also known as Mount Baldy, is the high point of the San Gabriel Mountains and the locus of many big hikes.

The two most direct routes up or down Mount San Antonio, Baldy Bowl Trail and Devil's Backbone Trail, start at Manker Flats and at the Mt. Baldy Ski Area. Both are accessed from the Mt. Baldy Road. From the 210 or 10 freeways, exit at Mountain and go north toward the mountains. Mountain runs into Mt. Baldy Road; make a right and head up the San Antonio Canyon to Mt. Baldy Village. The Mount Baldy Visitor Center / Ranger Station is on the left side of the road in the village. The road passes a spur on the right side for the Icehouse Canyon trailhead 1.5 miles past the visitor center, then switchbacks up to Manker Flats (6200', 4.2 miles past Mt. Baldy Village). It continues another 0.4 miles to the Mt. Baldy ski area parking lot (6500'), where a parking fee may be charged.

## **Baldy Bowl Trail (5.1 miles, 3900')**

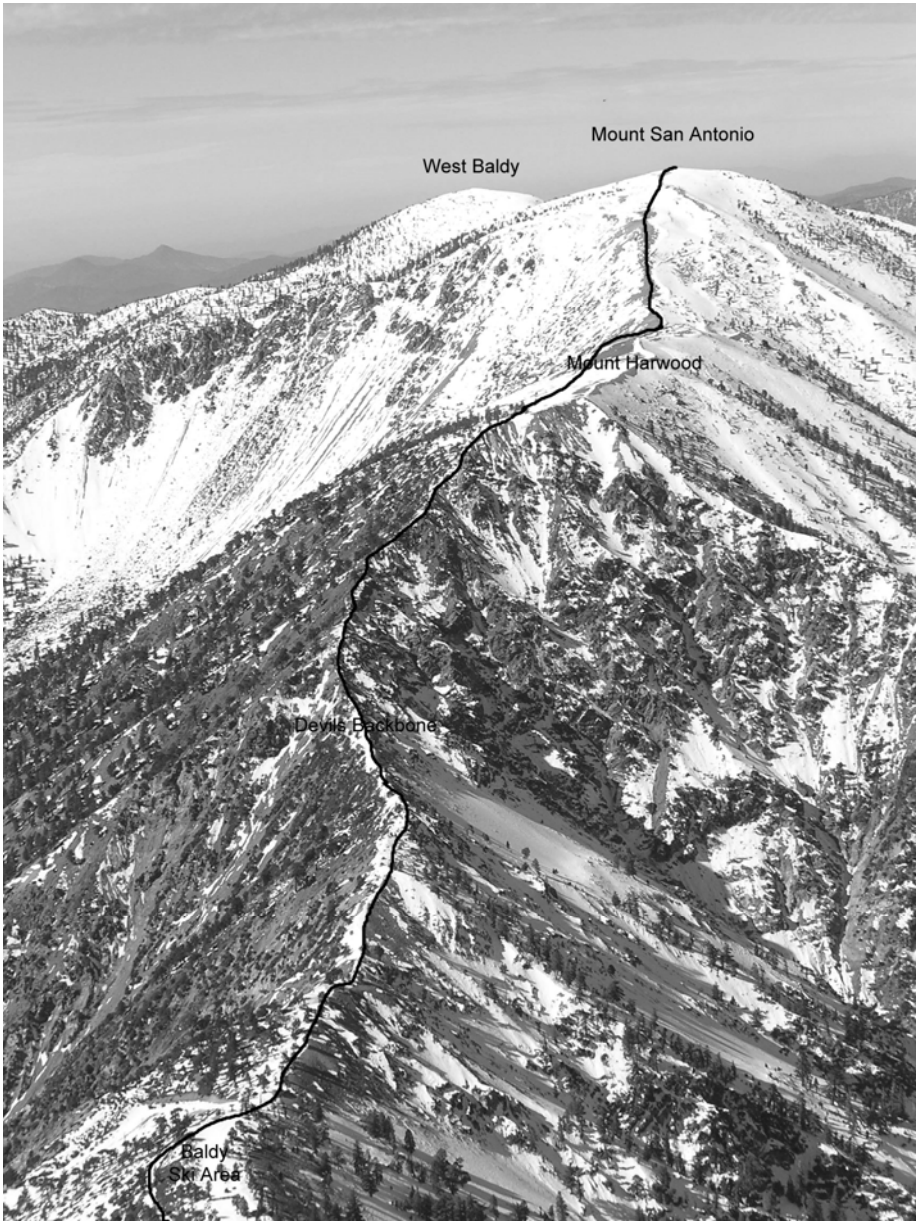
The Baldy Bowl trail approach starts at Manker Flats past a locked gate up the San Antonio Falls dirt road. From the first switchback in the road is a good view of San Antonio Falls, which is usually a trickle but which can cascade dramatically in the wet season. After the sharp switchback and look for the Baldy Bowl trail picking up on the left side of the road at 6600' above the Manker Flats parking area (0.9 miles). The trail is easy to miss. It passes the Sierra Club ski hut (8200'), then switchbacks up the south side of the Baldy Bowl to gain a ridge. From the ridge, you can see scraps of wreckage from a Curtis C46 Commando that crashed in 1945. The trail continues to the summit (4.2 miles). The top of the Baldy Bowl trail can be difficult to locate for a descent if it is dark or covered with snow.

## **Devil's Backbone Trail (3.2 miles, 2300')**

The Devil's Backbone trail starts at the Mt. Baldy Notch (7800'), which can be reached by riding the ski lifts from the end of the Mt. Baldy Road or by hiking the dirt road from the Manker Flats trailhead for 3.6 miles.

The ski lifts are typically open from 7:30 to 4:30 on weekends all year long and seven days a week during the winter when the ski area is operational; call 909-981-3344 to confirm. A ride on the lift up to the Mt. Baldy Notch is \$7 one way or \$10 round trip. The gate to the parking lot is locked when the lifts close and there is no parking below the gates, so Manker Flats may be more practical for big hikes despite the larger elevation gain.

From the restaurant at the notch, walk northwest under ski lifts toward Mount San Antonio. The ski run becomes a trail as it gains the crest of a narrow ridge called the Devil's Backbone (tricky when icy). The trail continues across the south slope of Mt. Harwood (9552') to the summit of Mount San Antonio.



Devil's Backbone, Mt. Harwood, and Mt. San Antonio from the East



# 1 San Antonio Ridge

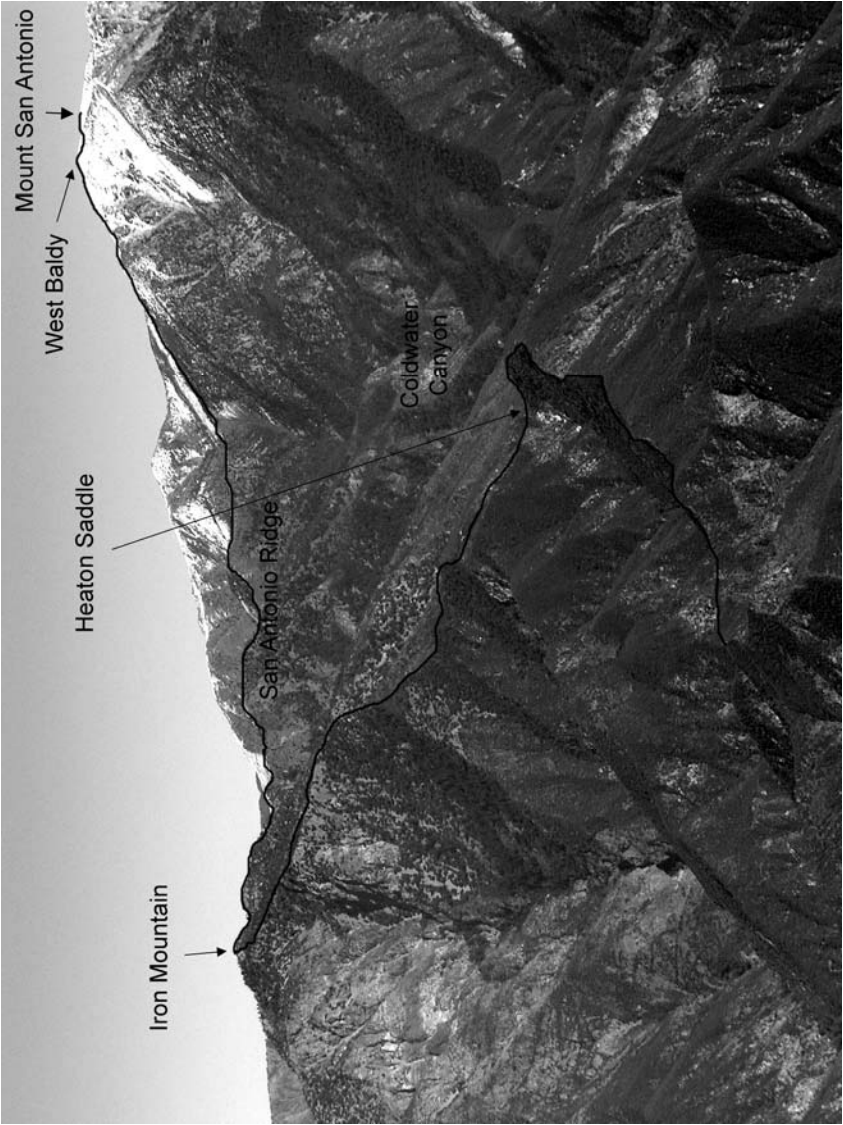
**Distance:** 16 miles one way

**Elevation Gain / Loss:** 10200' / 6000'

This is a monster hike in the San Gabriel mountains, ascending Iron Mountain and traversing the San Antonio Ridge eastward to Mt. Baldy. It requires a car shuttle between the trailheads. The hike is long, strenuous, completely devoid of water, and absolutely spectacular. It should be done when temperatures in the canyons have cooled but while Mt. Baldy is still free of ice; this is most common in late fall, but sometimes feasible in mid-winter during a light snow year. Headlamps are usually necessary and some parties have spent an unplanned night (or two!) on the ridge.

**Trailheads:** Leave a getaway car at your favorite trailhead for Mt. Baldy. Because the ski area parking lot closes before you are likely to complete the hike, the Manker Flats trailhead is recommended. Start the hike from the end of the East Fork Road near Heaton Flat. From the 210 freeway, take Azusa Ave (Highway 39) north through town and up the San Gabriel Canyon past Morris and San Gabriel reservoirs. At the north end of San Gabriel reservoir, make a right and follow the East Fork of the San Gabriel River past Camp Williams to a locked gate at a large parking lot by the East Fork Fire Station (elevation 2000').

**Description:** From the parking lot, contour 0.5 miles north along the dirt road to the Heaton Flat campground. Near the outhouse, turn right and follow the Heaton Flat Trail 3.9 miles up to a saddle and along a ridge to Heaton Saddle (4582'). At this point, the maintained trail ends, but a remarkably good use trail leads up the south ridge of Iron Mountain for an unrelenting 2 miles to the 8007' summit. The ridge is distinct and straightforward to follow even in the fog. The path is lined with sharp yucca, so sturdy pants and gaiters are useful. Iron Mountain is a big hike in itself, but your adventure is only half over. If you are still feeling strong and have adequate time, descend the east ridge toward Mt. Baldy. Pick your way through 2nd and 3rd class terrain on the dramatic trailless ridge for one mile and cross the treacherous Gunsight Notch to the low point on the San Antonio Ridge. Follow the undulating ridge 1.5 miles over two bumps to the eastern saddle before the steep rise to Mt. Baldy, staying on bighorn sheep trails where possible through patches of manzanita. Climb east for 1.5 more miles up and over West Baldy (9988') to the true summit of Mt. San Antonio/Baldy (10064'). Familiarity with the summit will help you locate the Baldy Bowl trail that descends the south face for 4.2 miles past the Sierra Club Ski Hut to a dirt road. The upper part of the trail remains icy long after snow melts off the summit; it was the site of a fatal fall in 2004 for an experienced hiker. Turn right on the road and follow it 0.9 miles down one long switchback to your vehicle at Manker Flats (6200').



San Antonio Ridge from Iron Mountain to Baldy

## 2 Bear Ridge

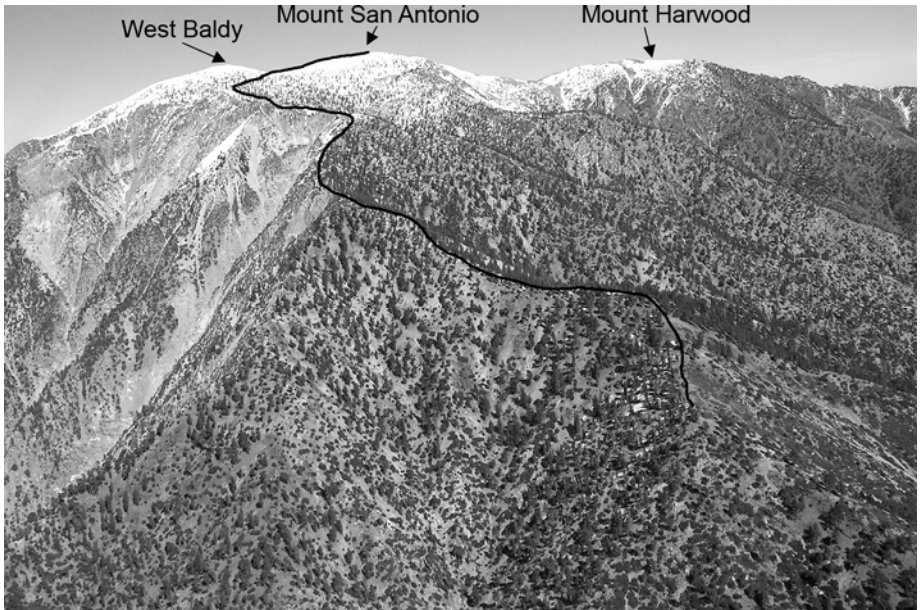
**Distance:** 9.6 miles one way

**Elevation Gain / Loss:** 5800' / 2300'

The great south ridge of Mount San Antonio rises directly from Baldy Village to the summit, climbing nearly 6000' in 3.5 horizontal miles. The views get better and better as you climb.

**Trailheads:** Follow the driving directions from the San Antonio overview. Leave a car at the Mount Baldy Ski area (if you'll be down early enough) or Manker Flats. Take a car shuttle or fast bicycle ride back down to Mt. Baldy Village. Leave your vehicle in a small lot at the intersection of Mount Baldy Road and Bear Creek Road in the middle of the village (4300').

**Description:** Hike up the short paved Bear Creek road (0.4 miles) until it turns into a dirt trail. Follow the trail upward along the creek; when it divides, take either branch until they rejoin. After another 1.3 miles, you will reach Bear Flat, a (not so flat) meadow. From here, the trail switchbacks to the crest of the ridge and climbs unrelentingly, passing close to West Baldy and on to the true summit of Baldy (4.7 miles, 10064'). Descend the Devil's Backbone or Baldy Bowl trails to your car.



Bear Ridge

### 3 Baldy to Wrightwood

**Distance:** 12 miles one way

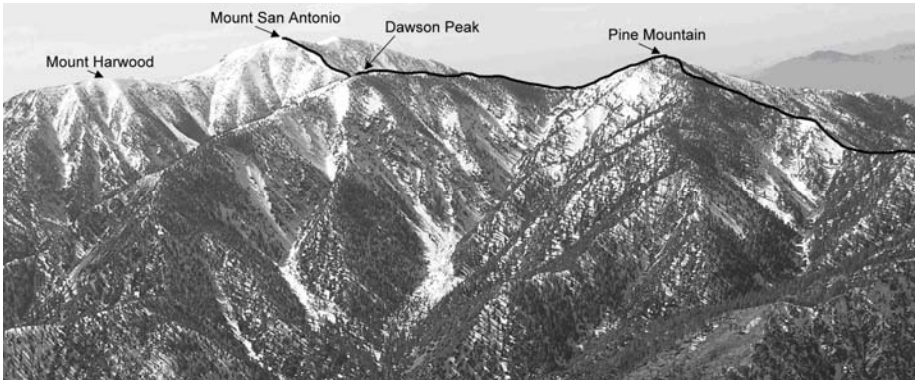
**Elevation Gain / Loss:** 5100' / 4700'

This hike traverses the San Gabriel Mountains from south to north, climbing over Mount San Antonio and following its north backbone over Dawson Peak and Pine Mountain to Wrightwood. The hike features grand views along Baldy's north face and down into the remote Fish Fork of the San Gabriel River. The north slopes hold snow long after the south face has melted out.

**Trailheads:** The hike starts at Manker Flats (see the San Antonio overview) and ends in Wrightwood at the Acorn trailhead. To reach Wrightwood, take Interstate 15 to Highway 138 just before the Cajon Pass. Follow 138 west toward Palmdale for 8.8 miles, then turn left on Highway 2 and follow it for 5.2 miles to Wrightwood. Make a left on Pine, an immediate right on Apple, and a left on Acorn. Take Acorn south for 1 mile until you reach a gate where you can park a vehicle. The road continues another quarter mile south from the gate, then becomes the Acorn trail.

**Description:** Follow the Baldy Bowl trail to the summit of Baldy. Descend the north side on the less-used North Backbone trail to an 8800' saddle, then climb steeply back up to Dawson Peak (9575', 1.5 miles). Continue another 0.5 miles to a 9200' saddle where the Dawson Peak Trail cuts off westward into the Fish Fork canyon. Stay on the Backbone trail and climb 0.5 miles to Pine Mountain (9648', 0.5 miles). The trail veers west 100' below the peak; take a short detour to the true summit. Descend another 1.5 miles to the Pacific Crest Trail at 8200'. Head west on the PCT for 0.8 flat miles, then drop down the Acorn trail to the north for 2.1 miles to the 6600' trailhead. With an early start, you can reach Wrightwood in time for a pleasant lunch at a downtown café with a friend who picks you up.

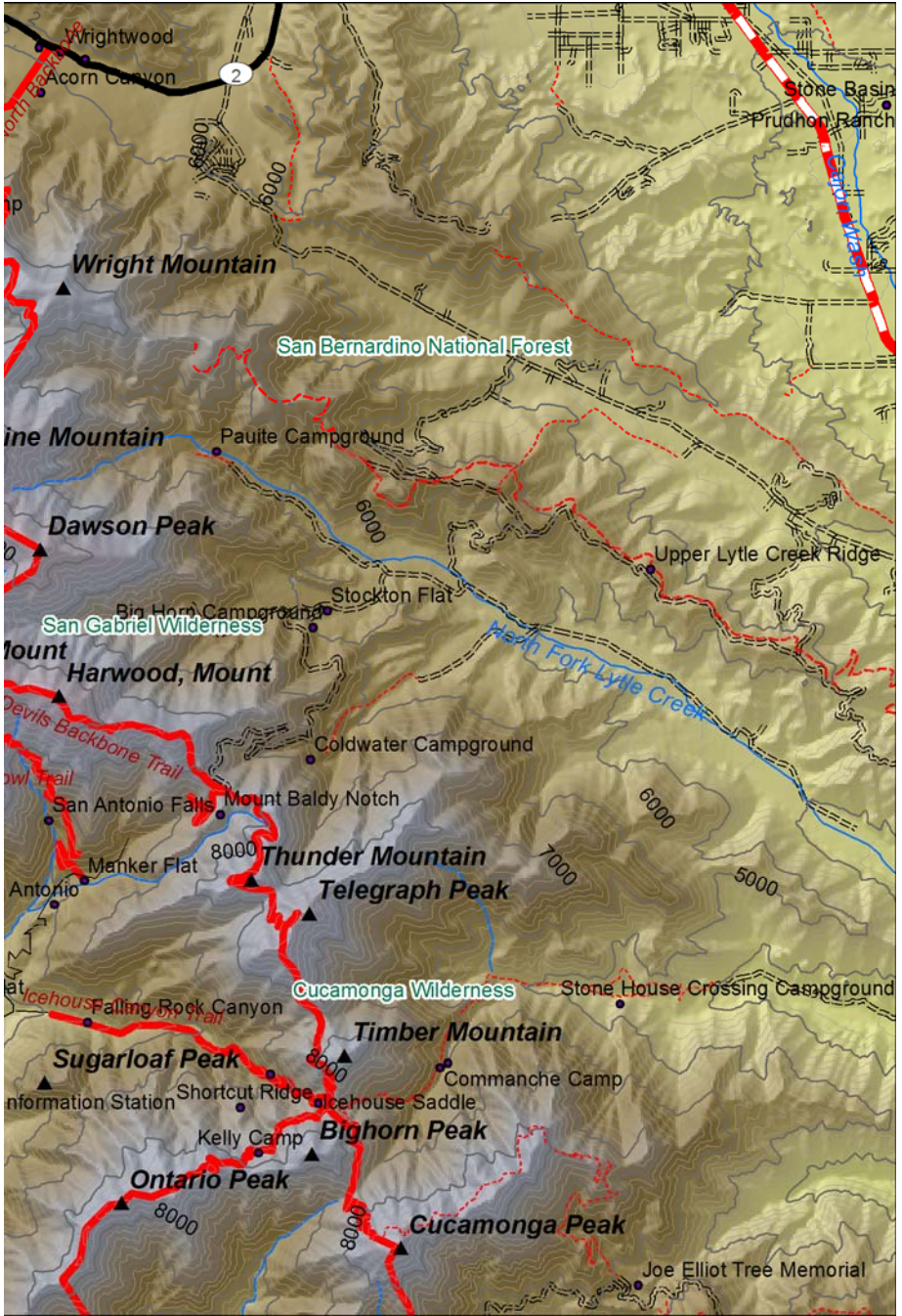
**Variation:** For an extra 2000' of elevation gain and 1.3 miles of walking, start from Baldy Village up Bear Ridge (Trip #2).



North Backbone from San Antonio over Dawson and Pine



San Antonio Region West (Hikes 1-6)



San Antonio Region East (Hikes 1-6)