

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »

Maps-a-go-go

Get acquainted with the wide variety of maps you can use to plan and execute your hiking adventures

There you are, preparing for your hike, spooling through your Ten Essentials checklist. Water? Check! Extra clothing? Check! Headlamp and extra batteries? Got 'em! Map? Uh oh ...

If you're unsure about where to get the right maps or why "map" is even on that list in the first place, worry not. We'll get you acquainted with the variety of maps you may need in your hiking adventures.

Just as some people don't ask for directions when lost, some people don't bring maps along in the out-of-doors. If you have a good route description from your trusty guidebook (which may even include an overview map), is a map really necessary?

Yes! Imagine you've come to an unsigned trail junction. Or a junction where the sign gives you a trail number instead of a name. Maps, like pictures, can be worth a thousand words—far more than your guidebook's route description—and can help keep you found by showing you what terrain features you should see during your trip. Even better, maps give you the freedom to explore outside a guidebook author's prescribed route and into off-trail scrambling adventures!

Let's take a look at various stages of a hiking trip and what maps you might use during each phase.

Trying to Figure Out Where to Go

As a full-time desk jockey, I'll often get an email from a friend midweek asking if I want to head to a particular remote mountain

over the weekend. If I've never heard of that remote mountain, I'll do a little online research and definitely take a look at a map of the area using either mapper.acme.com or **National Geographic's TOPO! software**. If I really want to get an idea of what the terrain will look like, I can get immersed in the view using **Google Earth**.

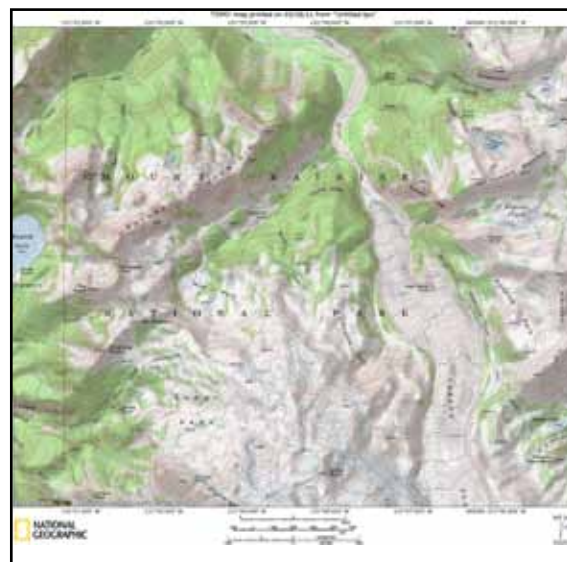
What?! Digital maps?

Yes, both digital and paper maps can be great. Both digital and paper have their strong suits. Digital maps can be very cheap, and they can be obtained at any time of night, long after retail stores close up. They can go with you wherever you have a computer, and searching for a particular terrain feature is a snap. The merits of paper maps are that they don't need batteries, often have a much larger surface area (compared to a computer screen), and usually have lines that are much smoother and easier to read. Choose whatever works best for you on each part of your trip.

Getting Ready for the Trip

Once I've figured out what the destination for our trip will be, I have to figure out what map(s) I want to bring along.

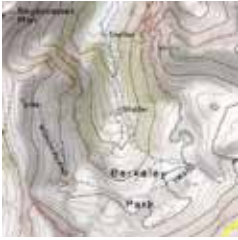
I love to have a copy of the **Green Trails**



A map of Mount Rainier National Park created using National Geographic TOPO! software.

**Susan
Ashlock**

map(s) for the area along with me. Unlike some maps, Green Trails maps include trail numbers and distances between trail junctions. If I'm thinking about going off-trail, I'll also bring along a higher-resolution map like the **U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5-minute quad**. Printing out a digital version of the area of interest works well, but for serious off-trail use (where I want to be able to scrutinize every contour line), I'll try my best to get my hands on a paper version of the quad. This requires sufficient advance planning (for a trip to your favorite map store or ordering one online) or a large home library of USGS quads.



Web Extra >>

Head to WTA's website to find a table covering all of the map types discussed in this article, sorted by usefulness to hikers! Table features include map type, scale area covered, where to purchase the map and the relative merits of each type of map.

www.wta.org/hiking-info/gear

Getting to the Trailhead

As bad as getting lost on a hike is, I really hate to get lost on the way to the trailhead! That's why a **DeLorme Washington State Atlas and Gazetteer** lives in my car. It's proven invaluable for getting to many a trailhead. Gazetteers include forest service roads, major topological features, some major trails, and contour lines at 100-meter intervals—just the right information for getting you to the start of your hike.

On the Trail

The same principle that covers cameras and water is true for maps: the easier it is to get to while you're hiking, the more likely you are to use it. I nearly always carry my map in my pants pocket. In Washington, where humidity is high—and it's been known to rain on occasion—protecting maps is crucial. Don't let your ticket home turn into a wet wad of mush! Plenty of map protectors are on the market, but using zip-locked bags (small, easy to fit in your pocket) or waterproof paper (which saves the step of taking the map out of its bag to refold) are my favorite solutions. I use my scanner and printer at home to copy the Green Trails map onto one side of a piece of waterproof paper, and the appropriate USGS map gets printed

onto the other. If I'm feeling especially motivated, I'll copy just the right bits of my route description onto a corner of that paper.

At the summit

If I expect to end up at a particularly good viewpoint (like a mountain summit) I'll usually throw the appropriate **National Geographic Trails Illustrated map** into my pack. These waterproof, 1:75,000 maps cover large areas (examples include the Glacier Peak Wilderness and North Cascades National Park) and are superb for identifying all the gorgeous peaks around you that you want to climb on your next trip!

When Things Don't Go Quite As Expected

Sometimes even the best-laid plans go awry: the bridge that you expected would take you across a roaring river is washed out or your climbing partner suggests that a different route home might be even more interesting. At times like these, I'm glad I've got an overview map (like the National Geographic Trails Illustrated Map or a Green Trails map) along with me. And although the screen is tiny and I try not to rely on it, my GPS can hold topographic maps for the entire state, which can be quite handy when we wander off the paper grid I've brought with me.

As I glance at the file cabinet that holds my map collection, it's hard to believe that when I moved to Washington ten years ago, I didn't have a single trail map to my name. I've come to love maps as a tool for fantasizing over future trips, carrying out the current one, and reminiscing about trips past. I hope you'll fall in love with maps, too!♦

When WTA Fireside Circle member Susan Ashlock isn't busy cataloging her maps, she helps instruct Washington Alpine Club's basic climbing and winter backcountry travel courses.

Learning How to Use Your Maps

Read *Wilderness Navigation: Finding Your Way Using Map, Compass, Altimeter and GPS* by Bob Burns & Mike Burns, The Mountaineers Books

Or try taking The Mountaineers Basic Navigation class. Find details at www.mountaineers.org/seattle/navigation.

Printing and Protecting Your Maps

National Geographic Adventure Paper is available at REI and through Amazon.

SealLine makes a variety of waterproof map protectors, also available at REI.

Map class at Maple Pass. Photo by Raymond Dion.

