

# Harding Icefield Trail

Complete Alaska Hiking Guide

[AnchorageHikes.com](http://AnchorageHikes.com) -- Alaska's #1 Hiking Resource

## TRAIL STATISTICS

DISTANCE

8.2 mi RT

ELEVATION GAIN

3,500 ft

EST. TIME

6-8 hours

DIFFICULTY

HARD

DOGS ALLOWED

No dogs

BEST SEASON

June - September

DIFFICULTY: HARD

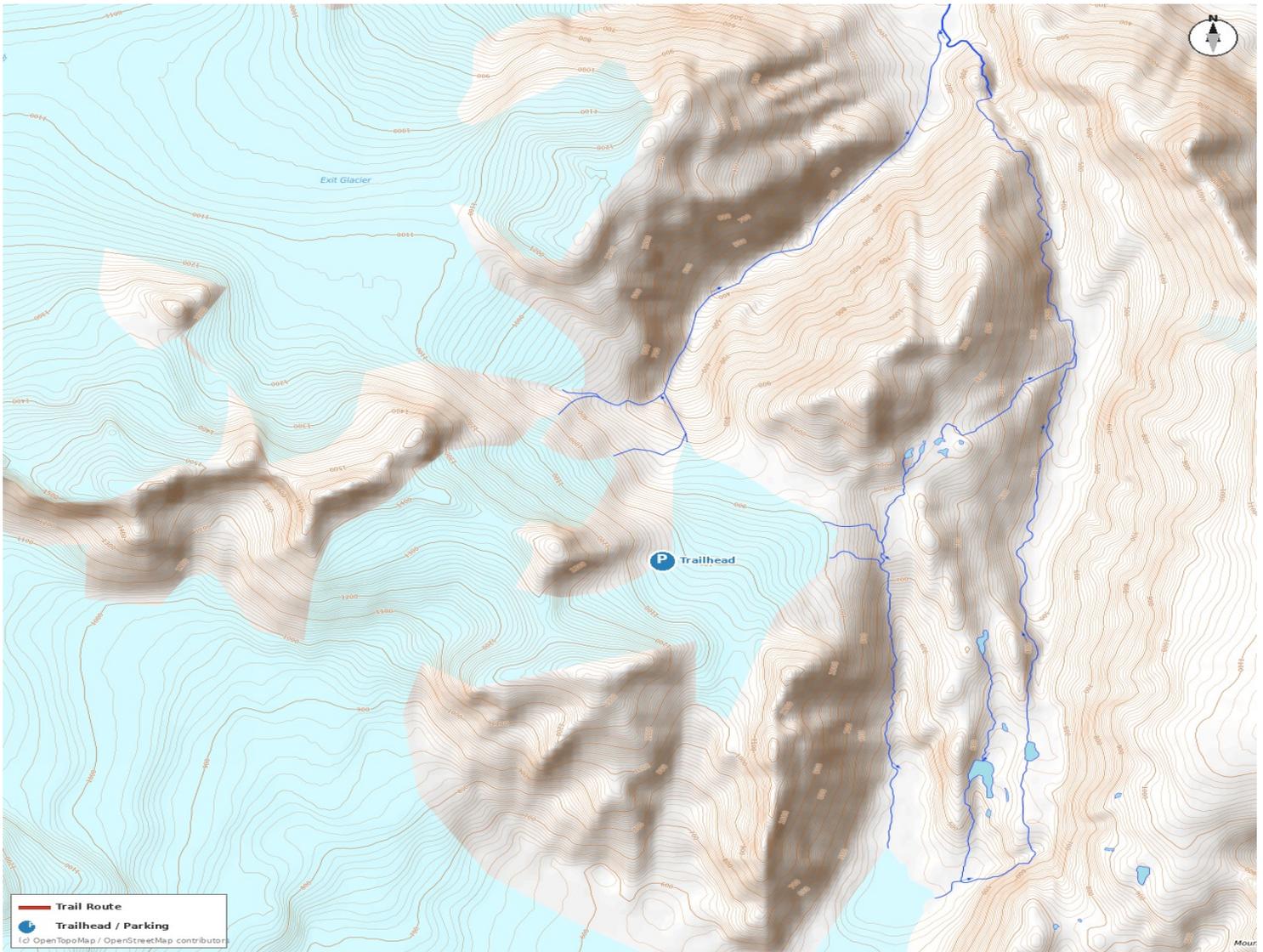
## TRAIL HIGHLIGHTS

- One of the most dramatic hikes in North America
- Views over 700-square-mile Harding Icefield
- Exit Glacier visible throughout climb
- Mountain goats frequent the upper slopes
- Sunrise hikes (avoid afternoon storms)

## IMPORTANT WARNINGS

- ! NO dogs allowed (Kenai Fjords NP rules)
- ! Snow on trail through July -- microspikes recommended early season
- ! Afternoon thunderstorms -- start by 6am
- ! Most physically demanding day hike in Kenai Fjords
- ! No water above treeline -- carry all you need
- ! Cell service only at trailhead

# TRAIL MAP -- HARDING ICEFIELD TRAIL



Map: (c) OpenTopoMap contributors | Data: (c) OpenStreetMap contributors | anchoragehikes.com

**HARD**

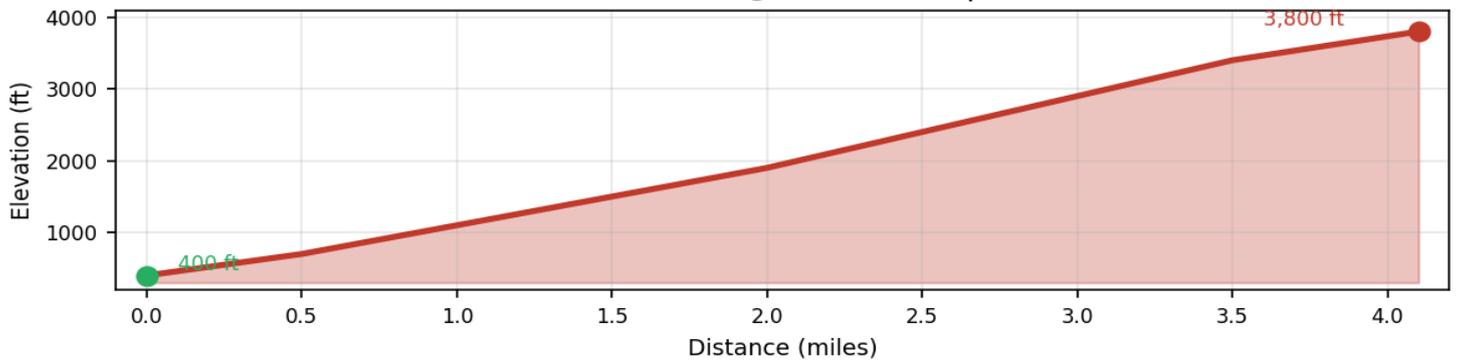
Dist: 8.2 mi RT

Elev Gain: 3,500 ft

Time: 6-8 hours

## ELEVATION PROFILE

### Elevation Profile - Harding Icefield Trail | Gain: 3,400 ft



## Harding Icefield Trail Guide: A Journey to Alaska's Ice Age Heart

The Harding Icefield Trail in Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska, is not merely a hike; it is an pilgrimage. This iconic journey transports you from lush temperate rainforest to the edge of a vast, primeval icefield, offering an unparalleled glimpse into a landscape sculpted by millennia of glacial power. Renowned as Alaska's most famous day hike, it promises an experience of profound awe, demanding respect for its challenging terrain and unpredictable weather, yet rewarding every step with views that etch themselves into memory.

### Why This Hike Is Legendary

The Harding Icefield Trail holds legendary status for several compelling reasons. It offers a rare opportunity to ascend from near sea level to an expansive ice age remnant in a single day, showcasing an incredible diversity of ecosystems along its path. From the vibrant green of the forest floor to the stark, windswept alpine tundra, the trail culminates at an overlook revealing the 700-square-mile Harding Icefield - a colossal, ancient sea of ice that feeds 38 outflow glaciers, including the very glacier you start near, Exit Glacier. This hike is a testament to the raw, untamed beauty of Alaska, a challenging ascent that rewards the determined with a perspective on geological time and natural grandeur found in few other places on Earth. It's an immersion into a landscape that feels both timeless and profoundly alive, leaving an indelible mark on all who undertake it.

### The Climb

The 8.2-mile roundtrip Harding Icefield Trail, with its 3,500 feet of elevation gain, is a steady, strenuous ascent divided into distinct ecological zones.

- **The Forest:\*\*** The journey begins at the Exit Glacier Nature Center, initially following the flatter, accessible paths towards the base of Exit Glacier itself. Soon, the trail veers sharply upwards, plunging into a dense, moss-draped temperate rainforest. Here, the air is cool and moist, filled with the scent of spruce and hemlock. The path, well-maintained with numerous switchbacks, climbs steeply through this verdant canopy. The sound of the rushing Exit Glacier river often accompanies you, a constant reminder of the powerful forces at play. This section is a continuous, calf-burning climb, gradually thinning out as you gain elevation.
- **Alpine Meadows:\*\*** As you break free from the dense forest, the landscape transforms dramatically into open alpine meadows. The tree line recedes, replaced by hardy shrubs and, in summer, a vibrant display of wildflowers. Views begin to open up, offering glimpses of the valley below and the retreating snout of Exit Glacier. The path here can be less relentlessly steep in places, winding through rocky outcrops and grassy slopes. Keep an eye out for marmots sunning themselves on rocks and the quick darting movements of pikas amidst the scree. This section provides the first real sense of being high above the world, with expansive vistas beckoning you onward.
- **Rocky Upper Slopes:\*\*** Above the meadows, the vegetation becomes sparse, giving way to a rugged, rocky landscape of scree and exposed bedrock. This is often the most challenging section, as the trail continues its relentless switchbacks up steep, unstable terrain. Snow patches can persist here well into summer, requiring careful footing and sometimes traction devices. The air grows noticeably colder and the wind more biting. The views, however, become increasingly spectacular, stretching across the Kenai Mountains and hinting at the

grandeur

## GEAR CHECKLIST

### Pack List for Harding Icefield Trail

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sturdy boots with ankle support     | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunglasses & sunscreen (icefield glare) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trekking poles (essential)          | <input type="checkbox"/> Snacks for 8 hours                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5L water minimum                    | <input type="checkbox"/> First aid kit                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full rain gear                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Download offline map (Gaia GPS)         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Warm jacket (top is cold and windy) | <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency bivvy                         |

### GETTING THERE

From Seward: Drive 3.7 miles north on Herman Leirer Rd (Exit Glacier Rd) to Kenai Fjords NP visitor center. Free parking (NPS fee area). GPS: 60.1875, -149.6317. 2.5 hrs from Anchorage.

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