

Trail of the Gargoyles

EFFORT	Minimal
LENGTH	3.0 miles
GEOLOGICAL FEATURE(S)	Erosional Features, Volcanism
LOCATION	Stanislaus National Forest
CONTACT	209-532-3671

Description: This hidden gem of an interpretive trail is worth driving a mile on a bumpy dirt road. It's a beautiful and amazing spot which dramatically displays the process of erosion upon soft volcanic deposits. Somebody in the Forest Service seems to have taken some delight in trail naming. In this area, other intriguingly-named interpretive trails include Columns of the Giants, Trail of the Survivors, and Trail of the Ancient Dwarfs.

From the parking area, walk up the dirt road to the trail register and a startling overlook of a deep, forested canyon and the mountains beyond them in the distance. Even if you didn't come to hike the trail, this view alone would be worth the stop. To the north and south, tall cliffs circle around the canyon. There is not much tree cover on this trail, so wear a hat and carry water. What trees you'll find are Jeffrey pine, white fir, lodgepole pine, and western juniper. Manzanita bushes are also growing among the sparse ground vegetation.

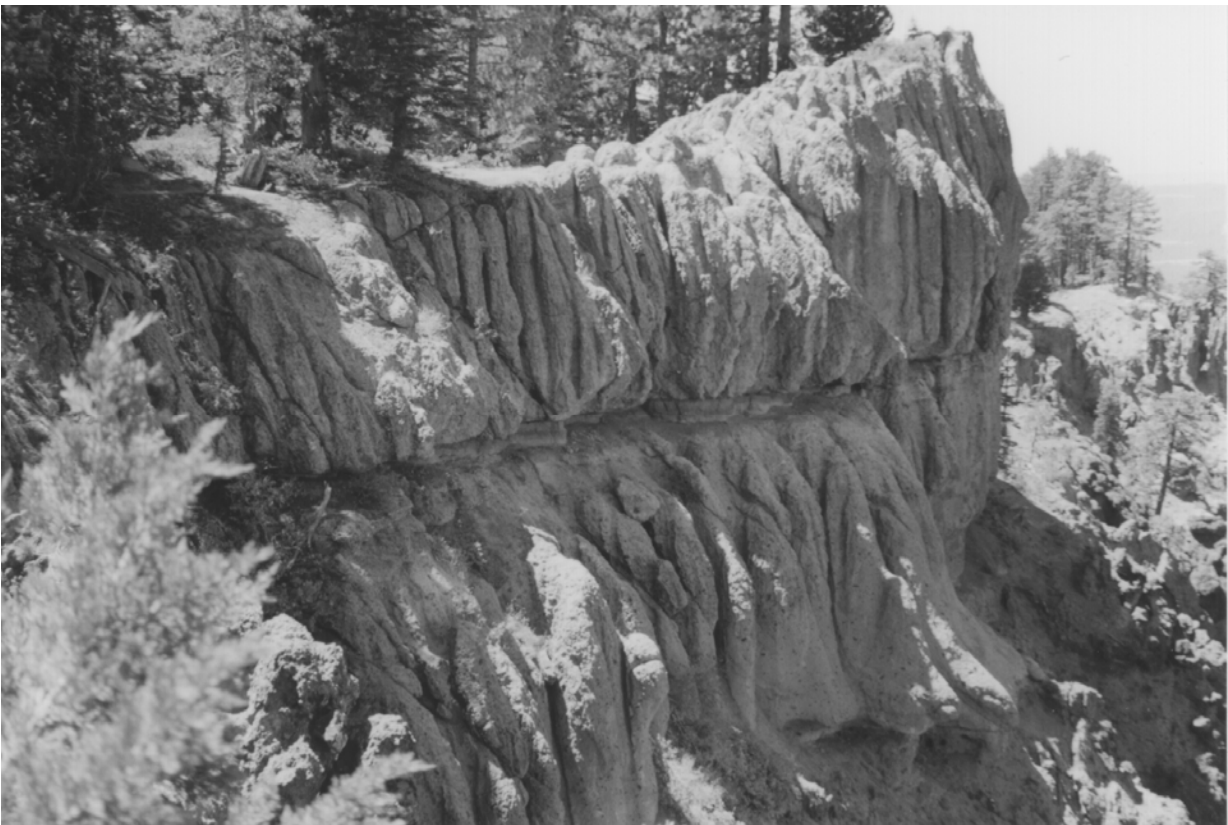
There is evidence here of several volcanic events—lava flows, lahars, and ash deposits. You can see immediately that the cliff edges are fragile and highly eroded. Stay away from the edge. The South Rim Trail follows the south canyon wall, and the North Rim Trail follows the north canyon wall. This is not a loop. You walk to the end of one trail, come back, and walk the other direction. The two trails are similar, but they do have different formations, and it is worthwhile hiking both.

Someone has gone to some trouble to give the formations colorful names, but the trail is not in the best condition. We could not find all the numbered posts described in our trail brochure. Nevertheless, we did not have much trouble identifying the important features. You

can start with either the north or south rim. For this description, we are heading south (left facing the canyon).

You are walking on the remnants of a lahar, rock formed by a mixture of volcanic ash and snow or water which flowed as hot mud, collecting smaller rocks and debris along the way. Once the mudflows cooled, the resulting material resembled concrete. You can see the rocks embedded in the ash where they were gathered up.

The dark band of rock around the canyon, below the rim, called the River of Stone by the brochure, is an ancient lava flow that filled a river channel. Above and below the lava are lahar deposits. As you approach the south canyon wall, you get a good view of the “Wall of Noses.” Stop and enjoy the metaphor. It is easy to see that the noses were formed by water erosion on the ash flow deposits.



Wall of Noses

Continuing on the footpath, you head downhill and swing around a tall block of stone which you can see very well once the trail takes you back to the canyon rim. Look back at the

eroded stone wall you just detoured around. It looks a bit like a castle. The trail continues only a little further, ending at an overlook of the canyon.

Return the way you came to the trailhead, and then continue on the North Rim Trail. At stop #2, you can see the tops of a series of basalt columns fifty or sixty feet tall. Such columns are a natural result of lava cooling at a uniform rate. Cracking patterns form similar to those in a mud flat baking in the sun. If you are interested in such columnar formations, you can drive further up Highway 108 to the Columns of the Giants Trail where a much more impressive example can be seen. And an even better example, not far away, is at Devils Postpile.

On either leg of this trail, you will notice many granite boulders, or erratics, transported to their current location by glaciers. These big rocks, caught in the ice sheets, acted like grinding stones, polishing and gouging the landscape as the glacier moved through. After the ice retreated, the boulders were left behind.

At stop #7, you will see evidence of how frozen water in the crevices of the lava enlarge the cracks over time and create a fragmented surface. This process is called frost wedging.

The Gargoyles at stop #9 are the interesting columns that have been carved by erosion of the mud flow deposits. Such natural sculptures are formed fairly rapidly in the soft lahar material by wind, rain, and snow. The trail ends at stop #11. Turn back and return to the trailhead.

Directions: From Highway 108 in Sonora, travel east to Strawberry, continuing a couple of miles before turning right on Herring Creek Road. Proceed 6 miles to the trailhead. This paved, two-lane road will narrow after a couple of miles to become a paved one-lane road, after which it becomes a rough dirt road for the last mile. When we visited, the only marker for the trail was a piece of paper stapled to a tree. The paper may not be there when you visit. If you reach a signed fork in the road, you have just passed the pullout for this trail. It is on the left side of the road, an open dirt area with a sign reading, "No Camping Beyond This Point." Stop at the Summit Ranger Station just before you get to Strawberry and ask for a trail pamphlet. This is also a good place for a restroom stop, as there are no facilities at the trailhead. Access is free.