

Helen Lake

Wildflower meadows, lofty lakes and castellate peaks provide a constant change of scene that draws you onward to a remarkable, wide-open alpine landscape. Many consider this one of Banff National Park's best day hikes.

Length: 6 km (3.7 miles) one way
Elevation gain: 455 metres (1,490 feet)
Allow: 1.5 to 2 hours one way
Rating: Moderate
Map: Gem Trek *Bow Lake & Saskatchewan Crossing*

Trailhead N51°39.848' W116°26.307'

Follow the Icefields Parkway north from the Trans-Canada Highway 33 km to the Crowfoot Glacier Viewpoint. The short spur road to the Helen Lake trail parking area is on the opposite side of the highway from the viewpoint.

Trail Outline

- 0.0** Trailhead (elevation 1,950 metres).
—Begin moderate to steep climb through subalpine forest.
- 2.4** Avalanche slope with open views.
- 2.9** Open views for remainder of hike.
- 3.4** Trail turns north at end of ridge.
—Grade moderates into Helen Lake cirque.
- 4.5** Rockslide.
- 5.0** Helen Creek crossing.
- 6.0** Helen Lake (elevation 2,405 metres).

Trail Description

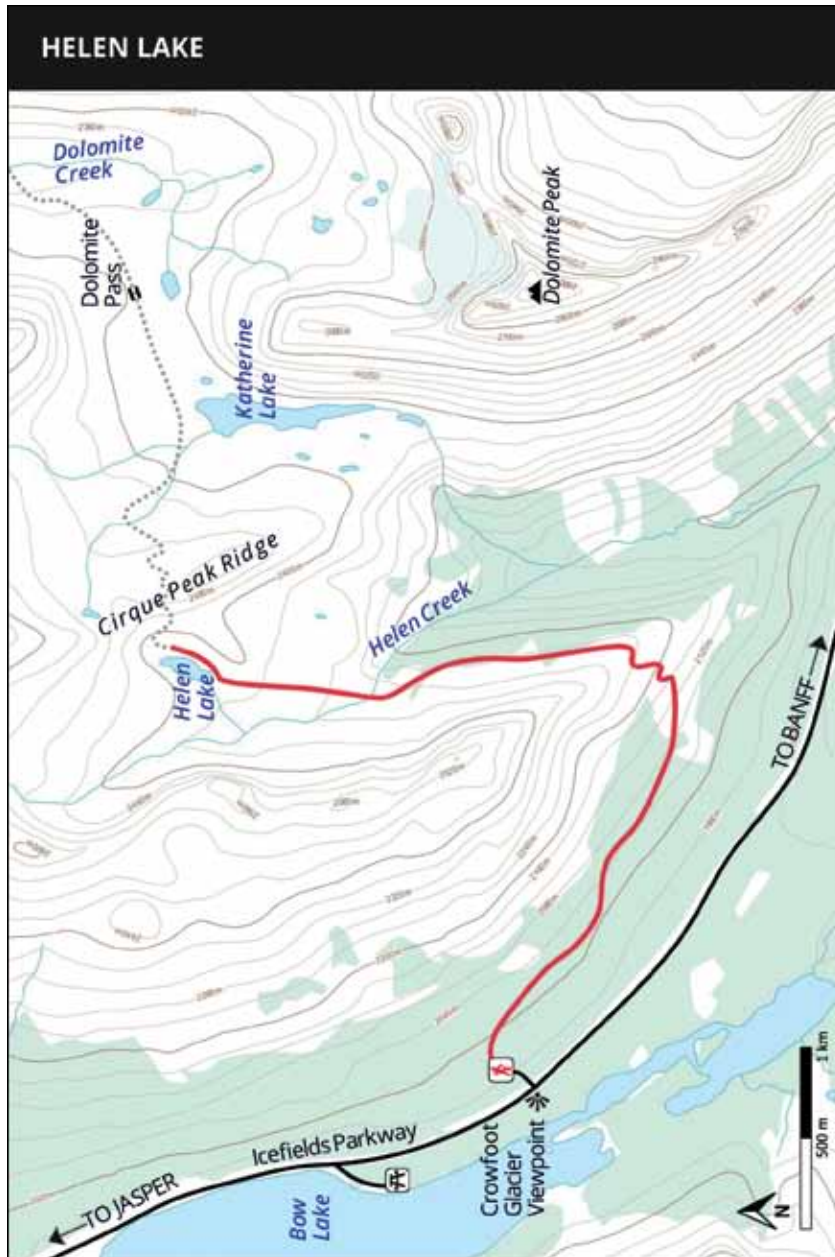
The Helen Lake trail climbs steadily through forest along the west-facing slopes of the Bow Valley for the first three kilometres and then emerges onto steep mountainside meadows. Views open across the valley to Crowfoot Mountain and Glacier, and the sharp summit of Mount Hector (3,394 metres), down-valley to the southeast.

The trail reaches the south end of a long ridge at kilometre 3.4, where a scattering of whitebark pine indicate that you are nearing treeline. Here it



Wildflowers are a colourful highlight of the Helen Lake trail (above) while the lake itself is a scenic gem (below).





switches around 90 degrees and contours into the amphitheatre containing Helen Lake.

After another kilometre of gradual ascent through lightly forested meadows, you drop beneath the toe of a relatively recent rockslide. The pile of tumbled boulders is surrounded by a lush snowbed plant community filled with the colourful blooms of purple fleabane, paintbrush, ragwort and valerian. Beyond the slide the trail climbs above the last trees and remains above treeline for the rest of the hike.

Helen Lake is bordered by open alpine meadows and scree slopes beneath the summit of Cirque Peak. It is a great place to kick-back and enjoy the scene, which is home to an amazing number of hoary marmots, who seem to have nothing better to do than sit in the sun and count passing hikers.

OPTION

Helen Lake would be an above average destination on most hikes, but you shouldn't end your day there. Gather your strength and continue for at least another 900 metres up a steep series of switchbacks to **CIRQUE PEAK RIDGE**. The 2,500-metre-high ridge, extending south from Cirque Peak, is the highest point on the trail, and it provides an outstanding overview of Katherine Lake and Dolomite Pass to the east and Helen Lake and its meadows back to the southwest. However, do take care on these exposed heights. When the weather is deteriorating in the Bow Valley, it is absolutely vile on this windswept ridge.



Helen Lake from Cirque Peak Ridge.

For most day hikers the ridge is a good spot to turn for home, but if you don't mind climbing back over this ridge at the end of the day, you can descend to **KATHERINE LAKE** and **DOLOMITE PASS**. The trail drops nearly 100 metres to the north end of Katherine Lake, which stretches beneath the castellate cliffs of Dolomite Peak. An opening beyond the south end of the lake serves as a window to the southern half of Banff National Park, and on a clear day the sharp horn of Mount Assiniboine is visible 100 kilometres away. Though the trail is not well defined beyond Katherine Lake, it is an easy climb over spongy alpine meadows to a small lake on the crest of Dolomite Pass. Dolomite Pass lies three kilometres beyond Helen Lake, so the roundtrip to the pass will create a very full 18-kilometre day.