MODERATE–HARD | PADDLE + HIKE | CANOE REQUIRED | CALLAGHAN VALLEY

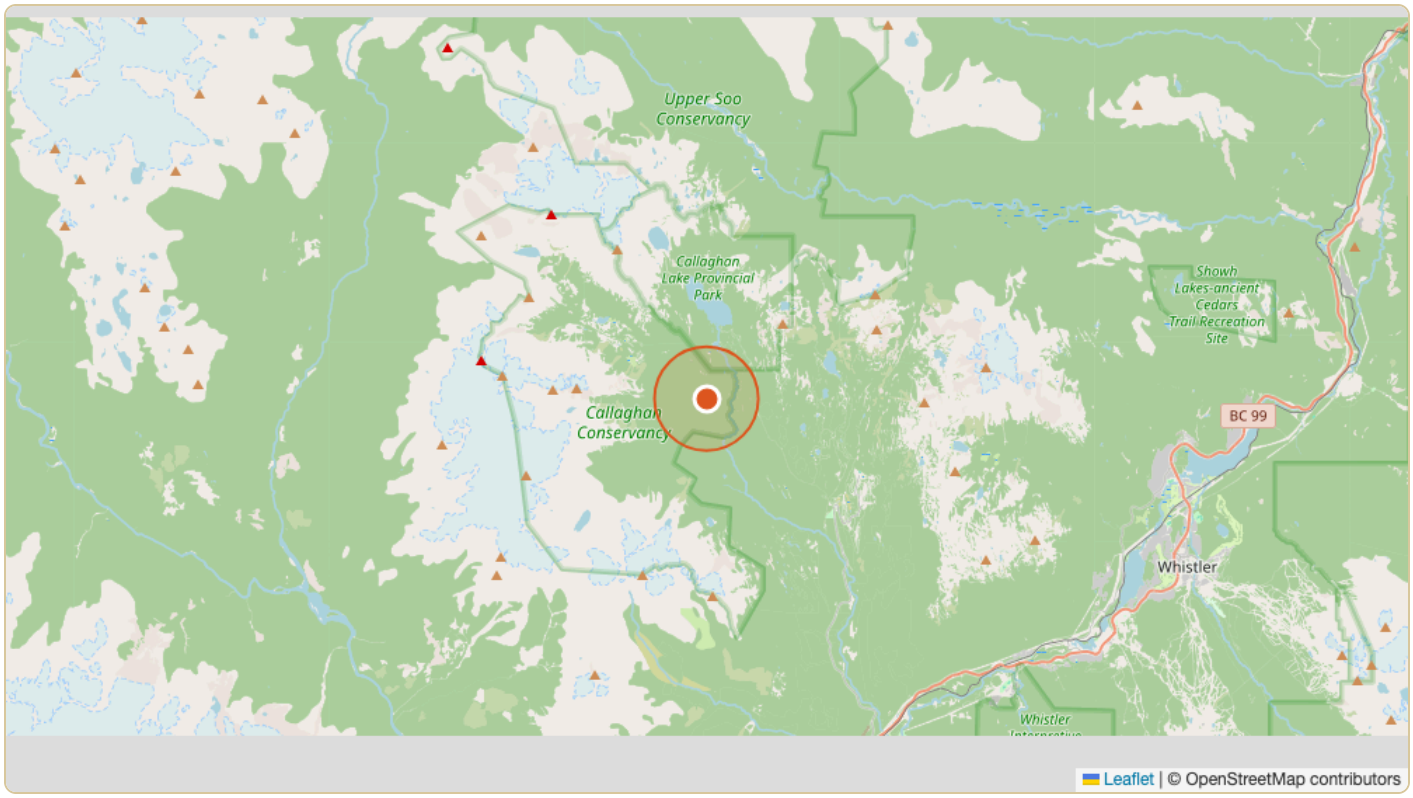
Cirque Lake

A hanging granite bowl above Callaghan Lake with no trailhead: paddle across, climb beside the creek, swim in a lake most people never see.

DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH FIRST. This is not a navigation tool and must not be your only source. Confirm everything with the land manager.

DIFFICULTY	RETURN DISTANCE	ELEVATION GAIN
Mod–Hard	**≈ 7–9 km**	**≈ 360 m**
Whistler.com: moderate–difficult	≈ 4–5 km paddle + 3–4 km hike	Sources: 300–400 m

TIME	BEST SEASON	BOAT
≈ 45 min + 1.5 h	**Jul – Sep**	**Required**
Paddle across + hike up	Road gated until mid-May	No trail around the lake



Approximate area only, not a trailhead or route. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors.

Park	Callaghan Lake Provincial Park
Access	16 km off Hwy 99; high clearance
Paddle	≈ 2 km each way (2–2.6 km)
Hike	≈ 1.6–2 km each way
Gain	≈ 360 m

Dogs	Not allowed in the basin
Facilities	Pit toilet at campground only
Season	Jul – Sep

Overview

There is no trail around Callaghan Lake, so reaching Cirque Lake takes a boat. You paddle about 2 km across to the far shore, find the creek and climb a short, steep, unofficial route to a granite bowl holding a clear alpine lake.

BC Parks says Callaghan Lake Park has no formally developed or maintained hiking trails. Whistler.com rates the Cirque Lake hike moderate to difficult, and other guides call it intermediate because the route is rugged and poorly marked.

Boat mandatory · Unofficial route · Grizzly country · No dogs in the basin · Afternoon wind

Getting there

The drive Turn off Highway 99 (70 km north of Vancouver, 20 km south of Whistler) onto the paved Callaghan Valley Road for 8 km, then onto Callaghan Forest Service Road 01 for 8 km of gravel to the lake.

The road BC Parks says the gravel road is only suitable for high-clearance vehicles because of deep water-bars and cross-ditches. It is closed by snow, usually from November to early June, and one guide reports the gate is closed until mid-May.

The launch The campground and launch are at the lake. BC Parks lists a pit toilet at the campground (not maintained in winter), no garbage service and minimal cell coverage. Pack out everything.

The route, step by step

1. Launch and paddle across *≈ 2 km each way · ≈ 45 min · Cold glacial water*

- Paddle about 2 km toward the sound of the waterfall and the stream of runoff on the far shore.
- Launch early. Afternoon wind in the valley can make the return crossing hard work.
- Wear a PFD or stay close to shore: the water is very cold.

2. Land and find the trail *Marshy landing · Bugs*

- Land on the grassy, marshy patch beside the stream and expect lots of bugs.
- The trail is not well marked, but a worn track is usually visible. Follow the river upstream and cross it, on logs in summer.
- Orange markers or tape may be present, depending on what survived winter.

3. Climb to the lake *≈ 1.6–2 km one way · ≈ 360 m gain · Steep, wet, rooty*

- The first section is short, steep and often wet and slippery. Ropes are present and can help.
- The trail then opens onto a rocky slope: stay left or pick your own line.
- Turn around on the climb for views back over Callaghan Lake.

4. Arrive at the bowl *Highest point ≈ 1,544 m*

- Plan your day around the return paddle, not the departure.
- Whistler.com and other guides suggest allowing a full day.

Know before you go

Grizzlies and black bears BC Parks says grizzly bears live in the park and black bears are present. Make noise, keep food and scented items secured, and see BC Parks' wildlife safety advice.

Dogs BC Parks: dogs are not allowed in the Cirque Lake Basin, which is grizzly bear habitat. Elsewhere in the park they must be leashed and only at the campground, day-use area or in a boat.

Wind Afternoon wind can turn the return crossing into hard work. Launch early.

Cold water Glacial water is very cold. Wear a PFD for the whole crossing.

Unofficial route Navigation is largely on your own. Carry a map and a survival kit, and leave a trip plan with someone.

Remote BC Parks says cell coverage is minimal and suggests a satellite phone for emergencies.

> **A remote trip dressed up as a short one** The distances look modest, but you are combining open alpine water, an unmarked route, grizzly country and a valley with no reliable cell coverage. Tell someone your plan, launch early and wear the PFDs.

When to go

Most guides put the season at July to September. BC Parks says the access road is closed when snow covers it, usually from November to early June.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

July to September The usual window. One guide suggests mid-August to the end of September for fewer bugs.

June and October The road may be snow-covered or just opening. Check BC Parks before driving up.

November to May Road closed by snow. The road is groomed for cross-country skiing in winter.

Questions

Can you hike to Cirque Lake without a boat?
No. There is no trail around Callaghan Lake, so the practical way is to paddle roughly 2 km to the far shore. Paddle boards and small inflatables are also used.

How hard is the climb?
Whistler.com rates it moderate to difficult. Figures vary: about 3.2 km round trip with 361 m of gain in one guide, and about 2 km one way and 300 m of gain in others. The first section is steep and slippery.

What is the road like?
BC Parks says the gravel Callaghan Forest Service Road is only suitable for high-clearance vehicles, with deep water-bars and cross-ditches.

Can I bring my dog?
Not into the Cirque Lake Basin, which BC Parks describes as grizzly bear habitat. In the park, dogs must be leashed and are allowed only at the campground, day-use area or in a boat.

Can I camp?
BC Parks allows camping only in the designated campground at Callaghan Lake. Lakeshore and other backcountry camping is not allowed. Check BC Parks for reservations and fees.

Are there bears?
Yes. BC Parks says grizzly bears live in the park and black bears are also present. Make noise and keep food and scented items secured.

Safety checklist

Tell someone your plan Leave your route, group size and expected return time with someone you trust, and check in when you are back. BC AdventureSmart (adventuresmart.ca) has a free trip-plan form.

Check conditions the same day Look at the weather, road and trail conditions, closures and (in snow season) the avalanche forecast on the day you go, not last week. Use the land manager's page for this guide.

Set a turnaround time Pick a time to turn back whatever happens, start early, and carry a headlamp. Most trips go wrong in the last hours of the day.

Carry the essentials Water, food, navigation (map and offline GPS), light, first aid, extra layers, sun protection, a whistle and fire or shelter. A phone alone is not a plan.

Emergencies Call 911. Cell coverage is unreliable or absent in much of the Sea to Sky backcountry, so consider a satellite messenger and know your location.

Water and wildlife Wear a life jacket on the water: cold water can disable you in minutes. Carry bear spray where bears are present, keep food secured and give wildlife space.

Sources & disclaimer

This guide draws on BC Parks: Callaghan Lake Park; Rise and Alpine: Cirque Lake guide; Whistler.com: Hiking in the Callaghan Valley; The Outbound: Hike Cirque Lake.

Last checked November 18, 2026. Figures marked ≈ are approximate, and sources sometimes disagree. Always confirm with the land manager before you go.

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