

EMPEROR'S CHALLENGE 2011 – THE BABCOCK MOUNTAIN ROUTE

After ten years on Roman Mountain, The Emperor's Challenge Mountain Run moved onto Babcock Mountain in 2009. This route is twenty kilometres long, although the challenging terrain makes it easily half marathon distance. It has numerous intriguing features – many say it is even more special than the old route. A few further changes were made in 2010 and 2011 to make the route even more challenging and attractive.

There are some significant differences, although the distance is identical to the Roman Mountain route, which included the Matthews Gully. Examples include:

Elevation gain of 2000 feet (previously 2500 feet)

Summit is at kilometre 10.7, previously at kilometre 6.5.

Apart from one short stretch near km 10, the gradient is never as steep as on the old route. Instead, the elevation gain is gradual but prolonged. This means that super-fit athletes may be able to run the entire route without walking at all.

In the new route, the first 2.3 kilometers (km 0 - 2.3) are repeated in reverse at the end of the race (km 17.7 - 20). The rest of the race follows a figure eight shape – half of the bottom loop, then the top loop, then the remainder of the bottom loop (see map). The footing on the off-road sections is rough and there are some highly technical sections – please run with caution and watch your step.

Water stations are at km 2.3, 8.5, 10.5, 14, and at km 17.7. Do not expect to find other drinkable water on the mountain. Be prepared for extremes of cold / heat / wind and any conceivable weather. There may be patches of snow.

Get to know your Roman numerals: all kilometer points are marked with these signs.

There are over 1000 stakes to mark the route, with their tops painted fluorescence orange. These markers are much closer together off-road, and appear only infrequently on established roads. Major junctions or direction changes are marked by runner signs, flagging tape, or paint.

0-1: The start line is wide, with the first 300m on a flat dirt road. After a few early turns there is a short downhill (remember this because it will be an unpleasant uphill at the end) after which there is a steady climb on the road.

1-2: At km 1.3 there is a sharp left turn at a road junction. The relentless early uphill continues, with the road switch-backing twice before the 2 km mark is reached.

2-3: The uphill ends at the Boulder Gardens trailhead, and the first water station (km 2.3). There is a welcome fairly flat section – for a hundred metres the route follows the Boulder Gardens trail, a narrow section between alders, then veers off to the right before joining and following an old pipeline right of way. Although it is flattish, it is one of the roughest sections of the entire run, with some alder stumps. Run or walk with caution and watch your footing!

3-4: The route leaves the pipeline section at km 3.5 for an old exploration road, which contours along the eastern lower slopes of Babcock Mountain. There are a few wet spots. Enjoy the flat terrain while it lasts.

4-5: The route continues along the old road, with a few ups and downs, then at a crossroads swings left onto an even older, rougher and wetter exploration road.

5-6: A long, long, grunt, with steady climbing and no views yet – rather hard work.

6-7: At km 6.5 there is a major change from 2009: the route leaves the road onto a narrow, single-track forest section before emerging into an exquisite rocky valley, which it climbs steeply. There are technical sections amid the great boulders and cliffs, with a sign warning runners to be prepared to leap over three

consecutive, deep rocky cracks. After the route descends past an often-dry tarn, eventually the rounded summit of Babcock Mountain becomes visible in the distance – seemingly a very long way away.

7-8: The route now ascends an exposed, bare rounded ridge, with the scenery forming an antidote to the uphill battle, then meadows and single track through more dwarf fir forests. This off-road section has been extended in 2011, making for less road running and more wilderness running.

8-9: A road is crossed at the 8.5 km water station, nicely sheltered from the wind. Immediately after the station, a steep, open valley uphill section begins. The next 400 metres are shared with the downhill route, so there is two-way traffic. Downhill runners have right of way! At the top of this valley the road is reached again and the route follows it steadily uphill past two mountain tarns to the 9 km mark. Views of the distant Rockies improve steadily.

9-10: At km 9.2 the route leaves the road. From here on it will be true mountain running on the tundra for the next 5.5 kilometres. The route passes a small tarn on the right, then leads up a crack between some rocks, slowly gaining elevation between patches of dwarf forest. After a further ascent, one of the highlights is reached: the Rift Valley that bisects the summit of this enchanting mountain. The route follows this unique geological formation west.

10-11: Just after km 10 this valley is blocked by massive boulders and impressive cliff topography beyond. The route avoids this by swinging up to the right past the last trees and ascends very steeply up a challenging scree slope. This is the only really steep section and is thankfully over fairly quickly. Then it's uphill again on the tundra to the next water station at km 10.5, and then a tricky section for runners on irregular bedrock. But the summit is in sight - look out for goats! After passing the remote structures on the windblown summit (6135 feet above sea level) the route descends in leisurely fashion down the summit ridge.

11-12: There are magnificent views from the summit ridge on a clear day of the northern Rockies in runners' and hikers' faces – another highlight, making for mountain running at its finest. But watch your feet – the terrain is still rough in places – and don't deviate from the staked route. Then there is a curve to the left, down a rough section where an old exploration road has been decommissioned, followed by a pleasant descent back down into the Rift Valley between two lakes which dry up towards the end of summer. The route leads beside one of these through unique scenery, before swinging sharply left and up out of the Rift Valley for the last time, onto a plateau beside impressive rock bluffs.

12-13: Smile for the summit photographer! For a change the terrain is fairly level, at tree-line, then the route passes through a rocky col, after which the descent begins.

13-14: There are slow descents through meadows with tarns, and different views of the Rockies in the distance, and a few short technical sections across small creeks in the stunted forest. The route then curves round the southern cliffs of the mountain via the trace remains of an old exploration road, and eventually heads back into the valley you ascended, with its two-way traffic. You now have right of way!

14-15: At the bottom of the valley is the km 14 water station. From here it's back onto the Babcock Mountain road, and an unexpected slightly uphill section that will surprise many. After this irritation the route leaves the road and tries to get off the mountain in earnest, leading down open slopes.

15-16: At km 15.2 an established road is gained, which the route will follow all the way back to the finish.

16-17, 17-18: Steeply downhill along the road, with Roman Mountain directly ahead, and past the km 17.7 water station.

18-19, 19-20: A reverse of the first two kilometers, so it's steadily downhill until the low point of the race is reached just 600 metres before the finish and there's that short but unwelcome uphill, before the final sprint home and the welcome cheers and bells at the finish line, and the end of a magical twenty kilometers on Babcock Mountain!