

EMPEROR'S CHALLENGE 2009

BABCOCK MOUNTAIN ROUTE

After ten years on Roman Mountain, The Emperor's Challenge Mountain Run moves onto Babcock Mountain in 2009. The new 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.

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

Elevation gain of 2000 feet (previously 2500 feet)

Summit is at kilometre 11.3, previously at kilometre 6.5.

Apart from one short stretch at km 10.5, 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 two kilometers (km 0-2) are repeated in reverse at the end of the race (km 18-20). 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).

Water stations are at km 2, just before km 11, km 8.5, just before km 15, and at km 18. Do not expect to find any other drinkable water on the mountain.

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.

The footing on the off-road sections is rough – please run with caution and watch your step.

Here follows a km by km description:

0-1: The start line is wider than before, and a hundred metres distant from the old start line near the Core Lodge. 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 to a sharp left turn at a road junction at km 1.

1-2: The relentless early uphill continues, with the road switchbacking twice before the 2 km mark is reached at the Boulder Gardens trailhead, and the first water station.

2-3: 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 at km 3.2 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: The uphill grunt continues, but there is definite progress, and eventually the summit of Babcock Mountain is visible in the distance – seemingly a very long way away.

7-8: Soon after km 7, the route suddenly swings off the road into the stunted forest, making for delightful running. Soon it breaks out into the open on a rounded ridge-top, which it ascends amidst increasingly fine scenery, until it hits the Babcock Mountain road. Turn left on the road and start another uphill to km 8.

8-9: Up and up along the road, until the welcome break of the 8.5 km water station, then still more uphill but with ever improving mountain scenery.

9-10: More uphill on the road, with great scenery and two mountain tarns in the foreground on the left, then at km 9.5 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.

10-11: 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, to where it is blocked by massive boulders and impressive cliff topography beyond. It swings 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 10.7, and then a tricky section for runners on irregular bedrock. But the summit is in sight!

11-12: After passing the remote structures on the windblown summit (6135 feet above sea level) the route descends in leisurely fashion down the summit ridge, with magnificent views on a clear day of the northern Rockies in runners and hikers' faces – another highlight, and mountain running at its finest. But watch your feet – the terrain is still rough in places – and don't deviate from the staked route.

12-13: More entrancing scenery, then a swing to the left, back down a rough section where an old exploration road has been decommissioned, then 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.

13-14: Back to tree level, and fairly level running or slow descents through meadows with different views of the Rockies now in the distance, and more fine rock scenery close by.

14-15: Slowly downhill, with more tarns in the middle distance, then curving round the southern cliffs of the mountain via the trace remains of an old exploration road, to the next water station, then the route swings to the right, more steeply downhill, until it gains an established road which it steadily descends.

16-17, 17-18: Steeply downhill along the road, with Roman Mountain directly ahead, until the welcome sight of the 18 km water station.

18-19, 19-20: A reverse of the first two kilometers, so steadily down until the low point of the race is reached just 300 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 the mountain!