

# Bluff Mountain Trail, WA

**Vicinity Location:** 31 miles northeast of Portland in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

## Directions:

From Portland, OR, take I-205 north to exit 30b to Battle Ground. Move over to the middle or left lane and proceed north on SR503 for about 10 miles to Battle Ground. Continue north on SR503 about 5 1/2 miles further and turn right on Rock Creek Road. Follow Rock Creek Road for about 8 1/2 miles just past Moulton Falls County Park, and turn right on Sunset Falls Road. Proceed 7.3 miles to Sunset Falls Campground. Turn right just as you get into the campground and take Forest Road 41 across Copper Creek.

Turn left just after the bridge and drive 2.5 miles from Sunset Falls Campground to a junction for Forest Service Road 4104. Bear right to stay on Forest Road 41. You'll get plenty of practice dodging potholes or cringing as your car bottoms out for about the next mile. Drive a total of 9 miles on FR 41 from Sunset Falls Campground to a gravel parking lot situated in small saddle. The last couple of miles of the road have erosion control berms that may cause low clearance vehicles to bottom out.

No permits are required.

There are no bathrooms at this trailhead. The closest bathrooms are at Sunset Falls Campground.

## Length and Elevation:

13.2 Miles round trip. Elevation gain 2,000 Feet and loss 1,200 feet to the turn-around point at Silver Star. Total gain and loss is 3,200 Feet one way. Elevation at the trailhead at 3,550 feet, summit is at 4,390 feet. Lowest elevation is 3,130.

## Trail:

Gifford Pinchot National Forest Bluff Mountain Trail #172, Silver Star #180 with connections to Starway Trail #175, Ed's Trail #180A, Sturgeon Rock Trail #180C, Silver Star Mountain Trail #180D, Indian Pits Trail #180E, Grouse Vista Trail #180F.

## Trail Maps:

Topo Map, National Forest Service Map, Download Garmin .gpx file

## History:

Few of the peaks in this area are forested even though they are all less than 5,000 feet high. This is because the area was burned in the Yacolt forest fire of 1902. The fire started on September 11, 1902, near the town of Carson, in Skamania County. The fire grew to be 12 miles wide and traveled 36 miles per hour as it raced through the forest. In less than two days the fire burned 238,000 acres and killed 38 people. A half-inch deep layer of cinders and ashes fell in Portland. The smoke from the fire turned the sky so dark in Seattle, which is 140 miles away, that the street lights were turned on during the day.

There have been 24 more fires in the area since the 1902 fire. The Sunset fire of 1919 burned about 27,000 acres, the Rock Creek fire in 1927 consumed 48,000 acres of trees, and the Dole Valley fire in 1929 torched over 227,000 acres. The 1902 fire remains the largest ever recorded in Washington State. Now the area is covered by acres of meadow, wildflowers, and huckleberries.

**Review:** September 29, 2008

The drive from Battle Ground takes about an hour to get to the trailhead. This is one of the hikes

where the drive to the trailhead is almost as nice as the hike. Walk up the jeep trail at the southwest edge of the parking area. The jeep trail is supposed to be blocked off but the barriers are usually torn down.

The jeep trail goes for about 2.2 miles and loses about 400 feet in elevation. The jeep trail ends just after dropping down into a small saddle. From here you can see Silver Star in the west. It is the double peak joined with a saddle. Silver Star is the peak on the right side of the saddle. From the end of the jeep trail, take the main trail that drops off the saddle to the right or walk over the saddle for great views and take the steep user trail down to the main trail.

The trail drops down one switchback to the low point on the trail, crosses a small saddle, then begins climbing. The trail passes at the base of tall cliffs and there is some rockfall on the trail to scramble over. After that the trail continues up a consistent grade on a packed rock tread which is fairly easy to walk on.

The trail continues to climb and passes into the woods. Look back for a nice view of Mt. St. Helens just as the trail enters the woods. The trail pops in and out of the forest for about the next .5 mile. Silver Star reappears and the trail climbs again after crossing the large scree field and regain the ridge. The trail stays on the ridge and drops below occasionally. The trail uses switchbacks to stay on the ridge except for skirting sharp promontories of rock.

About 5 miles from the trailhead is the junction for Starway Trail #175 marked JCTST at 45° 44.997N 122° 13.637W. Continue on the ridge, reenter the forest and at JCTBT, 45° 44.912N 122° 14.377W, take a left and go uphill. The trail climbs fairly steeply through the woods on the northwest side of Silver Star for about .1 mile. This trail ends in a small campsite, which is big enough for 3 or 4 tents, however there is no water nearby for most of the year.

Head on up the hill for about .2 mile. The trail comes out of the trees and splits again. Straight ahead is the lower summit of Silver Star. To the left about .1 mile are the remains of a fire lookout and the summit of Silver Star. By the time you get to the top, the trail will have spiraled around Silver Star. From the summit of Silver Star you can see parts of the Bluff Mountain Trail.

There is a side hike to Indian Pits on Trail 180E. You can access this trail two ways. One way is to go over the lower summit of Silver Star and join up with the trail. Crossing the lower summit of Silver Star you can see the Indian Pits Trail in the southeast. It is the barest trace of a trail on the ridge. The other way to the Indian Pits is to go back down the Silver Star Trail .2 mile to the junction in the trees, turn left, and follow the old jeep trail about .2 mile to the wooden trail sign on the left for 180E. Follow this footpath about 1 mile to the ridge. The Indian pits are located at the south end of the ridge. There are about a dozen pits scattered on the ridge.

There are three theories for why the Native Americans made the pits. One theory is they were used for hunting blinds, another theory they were used to store food. I like the theory that Native Americans used them for spirit quests. Native Americans on a spirit quest would fast and sit isolated in the pits for days seeking a spiritual vision.

From the summit of Silver Star you can see Mt. Rainier, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Hood, Mt. Adams and the Columbia River. Back on the main trail, remember that you have 400 feet of elevation gain once you get back to the old jeep trail. Take a break on the way back to the parking lot and enjoy the view of the Columbia River and Mt. Hood in the distance.

After returning to your vehicle, you might want to stop at Sunset Falls or Moulton Falls County Park on the drive back and enjoy the river and a waterfall.

This trail is not recommended for small children because of the cliffs and dropoffs along the trail.

Enjoy the Photos!

Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve