Devil’s Backbone, OR

Notice: 7/17/2022 – This trail is no longer in the closed area but in the aftermath of the Eagle Creek fire expect to crawl over multiple large charred trees.

Vicinity Location:
About 30 miles east of Portland, OR in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

Directions:
From Portland, OR, take I-84 east past Troutdale to exit 28 or exit 35. The easiest way to get to the trailhead is to go east from Portland and take exit 28 from I-84. This is the Bridal Veil exit. Drive about .3 miles to the stop sign and turn left, heading east on the Columbia River Scenic Highway. After about 3 miles from the stop sign, you pass Multnomah Falls. Follow this road for about 3 more miles to the parking lot for Horsetail Falls.

If you take exit 35, then head west on the Columbia River Scenic Highway back towards Portland for about 1.4 miles and look for parking. Be aware parking fills up fast all along the Columbia River Scenic Highway on weekends.

To return to Portland, drive east and cross underneath the freeway in about 1.3 miles, then follow the road as it loops around and merges onto the westbound I-84 back to Portland.

From Hood River, OR, take I-84 west to exit 35. Cross underneath the freeway and drive west on the Columbia River Scenic Highway for about 1 mile.

To return to Hood River, drive east for about 1.5 miles and merge onto I-84 east to Hood River.

No restroom facilities or drinking water is available at the trailhead. The closest water and bathrooms are at Ainsworth State Park, .5 mile east of Horsetail Creek. There is a water fountain just before the bathrooms, along the road near the day use area.

Length and Elevation:
9.5 miles roundtrip, Trailhead elevation: 60 feet. 3,300 feet gain, 3,300 feet loss. 3,000 feet at the highest point.

Trail:
Columbia Gorge Trail #400 and Oneonta Trail #424 with connections to trails 400, 425, 427, and 459

There is at least one geocache along this trail at: N 45° 35.350 W 122° 03.969 Info at Geocaching.com

Trail Maps:
Topo Map

Review: July 12, 2008
The trailhead is just east of Horsetail Falls. Enjoy some time admiring how Horsetail Falls arcs out from the cliff and falls into a pool right next to the highway.

Climb up a few switchbacks on the trail to the junction with Trail 400. Turn right and walk towards Oneonta Creek. As soon as you come around a sharp corner in the trail and can see Ponytail Falls,

start looking for the trail junction on the left, in about 50 feet. The trail isn't really obvious but it is marked with an end of trail maintenance sign. The trail is quite steep and there are a couple patches of poison oak.

Clambering up the steep trail, there is a junction of 3 trails; take the left trail heading towards the Gorge. It leads to a natural arch at 45° 35.340' N, 122° 03.977' W. This first section of the trail has clays soil, which gets very slippery when wet, so be extra careful during rainy periods or choose another day to hike this trail.

Coming up the trail you gain the ridgecrest and you reach a trail junction just below Devil's Backbone. The junction is about 1,260 feet in elevation at 45° 35.273' N, 122° 03.834' W. You can take the left branch, and then double back to the ridge views or you can climb up the little cliff and go up Devil's Backbone and over the top. To the left is easier and more protected. On the Devil's Backbone there are great views into the Gorge, Mt. Adams, and the mountains on the Washington side of the Gorge.

From Devil's Backbone, the trail gets to be less steep, less rocky, and winds up through the woods to the trail junction with Horsetail Creek Trail #425. In the woods before the trail junction, there are a couple of glimpses of the Columbia River and the Gorge, but no wide open vistas.

Make a right at the junction with trail #425 and go downhill. The trail from here meanders through the woods, crosses several small streams, and then flattens out.

The small streams are a little bigger than a step-across stream in the spring and early summer. Most of the streams have rocks or logs to cross on. One of the bigger streams is waypoint STHO 45° 34.567' N, 122° 02.116' W.

The snow melted out late in 2008 and I took a picture showing the snow in July where the trail crosses Horsetail Creek at 45° 34.261' N, 122° 02.249' W.

Going clockwise, you will come to the junction of trails 425 and 459. Bear right at the junction and head west. After about .5 mile you begin descending steeply downhill using a lot of switchbacks dropping down the hillside into the valley for Oneonta Creek.

There is a short viewpoint trail off to the south of the trail, but it is a view of the forest and distant scree fields. You can hear the stream far below. It is waypoint VPF 45° 34.274' N, 122° 03.397' W.

This section of the trail isn't very well maintained. There is some deadfall in the trail and there is a place where small springs come out of the hillside along the trail.

Follow the little boot path upstream and cross on the large cedar tree that has fallen across the creek. If it is raining or wet, this angled log will become very slippery. The only other choice is to wade the stream or hop across in late summer.

There is another campsite just upstream from the trail junction along the creek. It appears to be large enough for two tents.

There is a junction with trail 425 or Oneonta trail 424 to Nesmith Spur road.

The trail follows along the stream with only a pair of switchbacks to traverse. Cross the stream on a single log bridge that has a railing.

There is also a small campsite on the east side of the creek. Remember campfires are not allowed

within 200 feet of trails in the Scenic Area at any time of the year but gas stoves are allowed.

Until the bridge across the creek just upstream from Triple Falls is replaced, there isn't a good way to cross the creek. It is inadvisable to cross during high water because you could be swept over Triple Falls to your death.

Take the short side-trail for a nice view of Triple falls, the bridge in the distance, and the plunge pool at the bottom. Just before the falls is a small stream and waterfall.

At JVPO, 45° 34.846' N, 122° 04.425' W is a small user trail that goes uphill at the turn of the switchback and goes to a tiny waterfall about 75' off the trail. See if you can find this trickling waterfall.

Drop down through several switchbacks to the junction to trails 428, 434, and 424. Take a right at this junction. Continue descending switchbacks to the wood-decked steel bridge over Oneonta Creek. Pause to admire the 60 foot waterfall just upstream from the bridge as you cross Oneonta Creek. Climb the switchbacks on the other side and about halfway up the switchbacks, look towards the Columbia River and I-84 for a glimpse into the narrow, 200 foot deep Oneonta Gorge.

The trail climbs up and then levels out, then drops down to go behind Ponytail Falls. While walking behind the falls, stop to admire the blocks of basalt above your head. This is a great place to enjoy a cool breeze on a summer day. The trail continues past some nice viewpoints at the top of the cliffs that look to the east. There is also a sign to be taken as a note of caution. It is a concrete memorial to Glenn Replogo who fell from the cliffs in this area in 1988.

After going down a few switchbacks, you come to a trail junction. Trail 400 continues to the right. Turn left and walk downhill back to the parking lot.

This trail is for advanced hikers because of the cliffs, stream crossings, rough trails, and poison oak. Dogs may have to be lifted or carried on some portions of Devil's Backbone.

Enjoy the photos!!
Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve