

Eagle Creek - Wahtum Lake Loop, OR

Notice: 7/8/2021 - Ruckel Creek Trail #405 has been completely closed since the summer of 2017.

Directions:

From Portland, Oregon, take I-84 east for about 40 miles and take exit #41 for the Eagle Creek Recreation Area. The exit is just after the highway tunnel. Follow the road to the right about 50 feet and park in the parking lot on the left.

From Hood River, Oregon, take I-84 west to exit #41 and return to the freeway eastbound. The exit is just after the tunnel.

There is no westbound exit at Eagle Creek.

To return to Portland, follow the signs to merge onto I-84 East. Exit at Cascade Locks, go under the freeway and make a sharp left in about 50 feet. Merge onto I-84 West towards Portland.

Overnight parking is available at the main parking lot, near the campground host.

The bathroom is in a stone building near the trailhead and water is available at the trailhead in the summer months. Only portable toilets at the trailhead are available during the winter at the trailhead for Eagle Creek.

A Northwest Forest Park permit is required to park at the trailhead.

Length and Elevation:

28 miles roundtrip. Elevation at the trailhead is 120 feet. High point is about 4,645 feet. Total elevation gain is 6,420 and loss of 6,420.

Day 1 - 5 miles. Elevation gain 880 ft, loss 120 ft. Ending elevation is 960 feet.

Day 2 - 8.5 miles. Elevation gain 2,975 ft, loss 200 ft. Ending elevation is 3,724 feet.

Day 2 side trip to Chinidere Mtn. - 2.6 miles. Elevation gain 910 ft, loss 910 ft. Ending elevation is 3,724 feet. High point is about 4,645 feet.

Day 3 - 12 miles. Elevation gain 1,650 ft, loss 5,200 ft. Ending elevation is 120 feet.

Trail:

Eagle Creek Trail #440, Pacific Crest Cutoff Trail, Chinidere Mountain Trail #445, Pacific Crest Trail #2000, Benson Way

Trail #405B, Benson Spur Trail #405C, Ruckel Creek Trail #405, Gorge Trail #400. Connections to Eagle-Benson Trail #434 and various other trails.

There is at least one geocache along this trail at: N 45° 38.263 W 121° 53.204. Info at Geocaching.com

Trail Maps:

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

Review: May 19, 2014

We started our trip by parking at the parking lot near the Eagle Creek National Fish Hatchery. We parked as close as we could to the campground host hoping to deter thieves. Parking up at the Eagle Creek Trailhead overnight is a bad idea because of car break-ins.

Aaron, Duncan, Jeremiah, and I got all our gear together and walked up the road and saw some salmon in the creek. The creek was wide, swift, and deep and I was glad we wouldn't be trying to ford it later on.

Starting up the trail you cross a bridge and pass by a petrified tree stump. I missed it when I walked by, but the other guys called me back to see it.

Friday evening is a good time to head up the trail because there are fewer people than on the weekend. Even so, the parking lot was pretty full.

It wasn't long before the trail is high above the creek. We were making good time and it wasn't long before we reached places where the trail has been blasted out of the cliff. I walked carefully with my hand near the cable because I didn't want to trip with my pack on.

We stopped at the junction for Punchbowl Falls, dropped our packs, and wondered if anyone would bother our packs. We decided that no one would try to carry out any of our packs and if they did, we could easily catch up with them.

Down at the creek, we walked upstream and tried to get a view of the falls. The water was so high from spring runoff that we had to walk on rocks and through a little water to get a view of the falls. I was unhappy that another tree has fallen into the canyon by the falls. I hope that when the water gets lower, you can get a better view of the falls.

Back on the main trail, we soon came to the overlook for Punchbowl Falls. There is sign that mentions the fine for people trying to kayak over the falls or jump off the cliffs. From the overlook you can see where people have walked to the edge of the falls.

Heading up the trail you come to more basalt cliffs where the trail was blasted into the cliffs. Construction of the trail started in 1916 and was completed 3 years later. After about 3.5 miles, the trail crosses High Bridge, which is about 120 feet above the creek. From there, it seems like a short time before the trail crossed back to the east side of the creek.

From the 4 ½ Mile Bridge, it is less than ¾ mile to Wy'East Camp. It took us about 2 hours to backpack 5 miles thanks to the gentle elevation of the trail. We picked a camp above the trail and we were the only ones in the area. There was plenty of room for our tents and were happy there weren't any bugs. That made Aaron happy because he brought his hammock. After we got set up we used the fire pit to have a small campfire. There was even a rusty iron grill at the fire pit. Outside of the wilderness, fires are allowed once you are 200 feet away from the trail.

We retired pretty early and I used my technique of putting my backpack under my feet to prop them up just a bit. I sleep on my side and my hips didn't hurt during the night. It was warm enough that I left my bag unzipped and used it as a blanket.

The next morning we found out Dunkin's pad had a leak and his pad was flat after just a couple of hours. He sat by small stream by camp for a couple of hours during the night. We were happy to not see any rain and no critters had

bothered our food. We made breakfast and I watched with interest as Aaron heated water with his Fancy Feast alcohol stove. We had a variety of stoves from the homemade stove to a Jet Boil stove for making breakfast.

We left camp about 8:30 and headed up the creek. It wasn't long before we passed the junction for Trail 434 leading up to the Benson Plateau. Soon after that we passed Blue Grouse campground which had some campers. They were planning to head back out, we guessed because of the rain in the forecast.

From here, we passed over my favorite section of the trail. It starts where the trail is blasted out of a cliff of columnar basalt. You walk over pillowed domes of basalt lava. I like to walk slowly on this part to enjoy the geology and so as not to slip. The next scenic spectacle is the approach to Tunnel Falls. During spring runoff you first see a big waterfall coursing down the cliff. Spoiler alert: as you approach the falls on the trail blasted out of the cliff, you see a dark hole in the cliff. The trail enters a dark, drippy tunnel behind the falls. I think the view is best after you go through the tunnel as the wet trail curves around the cliff. You go around the corner and boom, the trail points right to Twister Falls. I love the way the trail passes the falls then is suddenly almost the same level as the creek. We noticed one of the blasted out sections had a pocket in the rock about every 20 feet and realized it was from where the rock was hand-drilled and the dynamite was placed for the blasts. It must have been a hard job to hang off the cliffs and drill those holes.

Once past Twister Falls, the trail becomes rougher because most of the day-hikers turn around here and head back to the trailhead. After about a mile we reached the junction for Wahtum Lake. We headed up the trail which climbs gently up the side of a ridge. I saw a couple of plants that I had never seen. The blue Oregon Anemone was especially pretty.

About 5 miles in, we came to the Mark O. Hatfield Wilderness where you are required to fill out a wilderness permit during most of the year.

The trail crosses a couple of creeks and there were some deadfalls to negotiate. One of the deadfalls, we went uphill to cross and Duncan slipped and got a good slash in his hand. We were low on water so I went back and filtered some extra water. This time, I went below the fallen tree and I will keep that lesson in mind that it could be safer to drop down off the trail and climb back up rather drop down a steep bank. By the time I got back, Jeremiah and Aaron had Duncan's cut cleaned and bandaged. Luckily for Duncan, the cut was just at the top of his palm so he could still use his trekking poles.

I was surprised how pretty this section of the trail is. Streams cascade across the trail and the grade is very consistent. I think it is amazing how well surveyed this trail is for being over 80 years old. We were getting rained on a little, but it didn't matter with the forest canopy overhead. We saw the outlet stream for Wahtum Lake and we knew we were close. I had been to the lake several years ago and recalled campsites near the outlet. These would be our preference because I didn't want to camp at the east end where the car campers go.

We passed by one campsite just below the outlet but we wanted a view of the lake if possible. It wasn't long before we found a couple of good campsites. We picked sites that wouldn't be in a puddle when the rains came. Some of the sites look nice but the water would flow off the trail right into the tent site. There was still a little snow around but it was almost all melted. The ground was still wet in the campsites but not muddy. Later in the summer it is probably hard to find campsites on weekends because you can drive to within a mile of the campsites.

One of our sites had another nice fire pit and it wasn't hard to go off-trail a bit and find some wood. While I was investigating, I found more campsites uphill, on the south side of the lake.

The rain had been pretty light, then in the evening, the sky cleared off and we decided to hike up to Chinidere Mountain for the sunset. We got flashlights and a few extra clothes for the cold and headed out. The crossing at the lake outlet is interesting because you have to walk over a log jam and when the lake is high, some of the logs sink below the surface when you step on them.

Once across, we switchbacked up towards the Pacific Crest Trail. We passed a few more designated campsites and then the trail got really steep. Part of the trail has an old waterline along it. We wondered if the pipe served the old lookout but some said the pipe used to supply water to the Wahtum Lake campground when it had a water supply.

It didn't take us more than 20 minutes to hit the PCT and turn left for the junction to Chinidere, which is just a few hundred yards up the trail. The trail branches off to the right then soon switchbacks towards the top on the south side.

The trail goes around the east side then comes out of the trees and scales a rocky slope to the top. This last part is an easy walk to great 360 degree views. We were treated to great views of Mt. Hood, Mt. Adams, and a little bit of Mt. St. Helens. We saw Indian Pits near the top but we couldn't tell if they were recent or actually made by Native Americans.

We put on layers against the wind but again, there were no bugs! The sun dropped below the clouds and the moon wasn't coming out until almost midnight, so we headed back to camp. We turned on our flashlights about halfway down then stopped near the first campsites to gather firewood.

We negotiated the sinking logs in the dark and got our campfire going. It was so nice to sit by the fire without any bugs. The wind was shifting around and I saw some sparks heading towards my tent. I hurried to pull up stakes and move my tent away from any possible sparks.

We talked around the fire and retired around 10:30 under a starry sky. We hoped the forecast was wrong, but around 1 am I heard the gentle patter of rain, then a stronger surge of rain. I was really glad I had moved my tent away from any chance of a stray spark.

I heard rain a few times and waited for it to stop in the morning, then got up.

It hadn't rained hard enough to make puddles and it seemed a good time for everyone to get up. No critters had bothered our food so we made breakfast. Aaron had his dreaded oatmeal and Jeremiah had some Mountain House. I had my mix of oatmeal and I don't remember what Duncan had.

We headed east, around the lake, keeping to the lower trail. The trail started climbing, as we knew it would. The gentle grade goes up past several seeps coming out of the hillside. Water flows out of the ground and water drips off the moss covered rocks.

Entering the forest, we soon encountered 3 large trees that had fallen across the trail. We all went downhill to go around the trees and it wasn't long before we reached the cutoff leading back down to Wahtum Lake, then the cutoff to Chinidere Mountain. A light rain was falling which made us glad we had summited last night.

We climbed for about an hour, then started descending. The trail generally descends along a ridge passing some open views where we just saw clouds, and about 1.5 miles from the Chinidere junction there are a couple of switchbacks dropping down off the left side of the ridge, then the trail comes back to the descending ridgeline.

We leveled out, came out to more cloud obscured views, and started climbing up to the Benson Plateau. After about .75 mile, we reached the upper junction for trail 434, leading down to Eagle Creek. There is some kind of collapsed log structure here which provided a bit of a windbreak for us. The forest floor from here to the end of the Benson Plateau is awash with Beargrass.

We walked another 0.4 mile to the junction for Benson Way Trail 405B (JCTBN). The junction is marked but is slightly obscure. Now we had to start paying attention to trail junctions so we can go down Ruckel Creek.

The next junction is in .7 mile and is a right onto Benson Spur Trail 405C (RCTC), continuing through the open forest.

In just .5 mile is the next junction for the Ruckel Creek Trail 405 (JCRC). In about .2 mile, the trail crosses Ruckel Creek. From here, the key is to stay on the north side of Ruckel Creek and follow it as it drops off the plateau.

The trail drops off the plateau gradually at first, with the sound of Ruckel Creek rushing downhill heard in the distance. Soon the trail gets steeper, then much steeper and you are concentrating on keeping from slipping on the dirt and using rocks for backstops.

Just when you think the trail is leveling off, the trail goes up. You leave the creek valley and climb up to cross over a series of hanging meadows. They have various kinds of wildflowers in spring and nice views of the Gorge on a sunny day.

As you leave the last hanging meadow and start down again, poison oak starts appearing in spots. Continuing steeply downwards there gets to be a lot of poison oak growing and some of it arches into the trail. Aaron and Jeremiah soon left Duncan and I far behind. There was a clearing where an ancient

rockslide was now covered in moss and a good place for a break. Duncan and I noticed the Indian pit in the clearing and sat down beside it. This low elevation pit lends credence to the belief these pits were used for spirit quests by the first people because I don't think this location was especially good for hunting.

After the clearing we climbed again then continued down. The steep descent has a few short and almost level sections, but most of this trail drops down along a spine with a few switchbacks thrown in as the trail gradually works its way back to Ruckel Creek.

Eventually there is a switchback that leads down to the creek where you can splash your face, then comes out on the paved bike trail. From here, head west a few hundred feet and take a left onto Trail 400. This route climbs up into the Eagle Creek Campground, follows a fence above the freeway, then drops back down to the parking lot by the fish hatchery.

In the high season, the restrooms are open and a drinking fountain is available for a cool drink of water. This is a classic hike with some great views and many waterfalls and streams. It is a good spring hike because there are no major stream crossings and most of the trails are well maintained. If you haven't hiked up Eagle Creek, prepare to be amazed by the efforts it took to create this trail by hand.

Enjoy the photos!!

Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve