Horsetail Falls to Larch Mountain



Review: 6/18/2004
On a beautiful sunny day I drove to the Horsetail Falls trailhead in the Columbia River Gorge. It is in the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area so you don't need a Forest Pass to park. The easiest way to get to the trailhead is go East from Portland to exit 28 on Interstate 84. Take exit 28, which is the Bridal Veil exit. Head East towards Multnomah Falls on the Columbia River Scenic Highway. Follow this road for about 5 and ¼ miles to the parking lot for Horsetail Falls. I parked and walked across the road to sit by the falls and feel the cool mist.

The path is wide and well traveled and easy to navigate to Ponytail falls. Near the falls is a short trail that follows the stream to a place you can sit and get some nice photographs of the falls.

Continuing on the trail, you walk behind the falls and you can admire the blocks of basalt above your head. The trail continues gradually onward and parallels the Oneonta Gorge. Soon you switchback down to cross Oneonta Creek. You get some great views of the narrow gorge and after you cross the creek, you can drop off of the trail for a view of another waterfall. Now, of course, you have to re-gain the elevation you just lost through another series of switchbacks. Stay on trail #424 by following the penciled-in note pointing left to the Triple Falls. You get a wonderful overlook of the falls plunging off the cliff. Spring is best for the water volume over the falls.

I continued up the Oneonta Trail and encountered more switchbacks going up the valley. There is a spring that comes out from underneath the trail at about 2600' elevation. My GPS showed the spring at N45°33.739′ Lat, W122°03.895′ Long. It looks like it flows all year but I haven't seen it mentioned in other trail reviews.

There are several trail junctions and I turned right and started going the wrong way on the Franklin Ridge trail, #427. The correct way is to continue on trail #424 by turning left. The next junction is about ½ mile away and then I took trail #446 for a short distance and I crossed Multnomah Creek which flows all year. At the next junction I took trail #441 to Sherrard Point at the top of Larch Mountain. The last mile or so of this trail has no undergrowth and everything is brown, even in the spring.

I talked to some hikers at the top and they were hiking a loop around the crater. They started further down the trail and had hiked the way I wanted to use on my return trip. (Note: I drove up to Larch Mountain 7/28/04 and the trailhead for this loop is not obvious. I don't think there is a fee to park at the lower trailhead on Larch Mountain Road. Be aware that it costs $5 to park in the Larch Mountain parking lot. The Northwest Forest Pass is not valid here.) We traded information and I found the top of the Oneonta Trail, #424. The trailhead is located about 3/10 of a mile down the road from the parking lot. Look for a break in the white guardrail. You should see the trailhead sign. The trail was much less gloomy than the top of trail #441. This trail had several beautiful patch of avalanche lilies. Most all of the deadfall had been cleared and I noticed mountain bike tracks down the trail.

After awhile the trail levels out on an old road grade. After about a mile the road turns back into a trail and again heads downhill and hooks back up to the trail I came up on.

The day was getting late and I hurriedly retraced my tracks back to Triple Falls. Now that the sun was low, the total shade made for much better lighting to take pictures of Triple Falls. It was a good thing these were the longest days of the year because I didn't get back to Horsetail Falls until just after 9pm.

I snacked on the rest of my trail mix on the drive back home and sipped on my water while heading into town on Interstate 84.

This is a long hike with about 4,500 feet of elevation gain. I think the distance works out to 17 miles. Be prepared for rain as there were thunderstorms North of the Columbia River. This trail has plenty of switchbacks, but they aren't terribly steep, as it climbs out of the Gorge.

Switchback Steve
Link to Photos