Mt. St. Helens Crater Rim, WA

Note:
Call the Gifford Pinchot National Forest for current information at (360) 891-5000 or visit the Gifford Pinchot Recreation webpage for the road and Sno-Park information. Please click here to review the Mt. St. Helens climbing info page.

The latest eruption at Mount St. Helens lasted nearly three and a half years and is over for now. On July 10, 2008, scientists lowered the volcano alert level from Advisory to Normal and the aviation color code from Yellow to Green following five months with no signs of renewed activity.

Vicinity Location: 51 miles northeast of Portland, Oregon in the Mt. St. Helens Monument.

Directions:
From Seattle take I-5 south and exit I-5 to State Route 503 at Woodland, WA. Drive through Cougar, Washington, to Forest Road 90 and then A left turn onto Forest Road 83, Make a left turn on to FR 81 then a right turn onto Forest Road 830 to Climber's Bivouac.

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 past Chelatchie Prairie and Amboy. At the junction of Lewis River Road and SR503, turn right and continue on SR503 past Cougar. SR503 turns into Forest Road 90. Make a left turn on to FR 83, then a left turn onto FR 81 then a right turn onto Forest Road 830 to Climber's Bivouac.

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You must have a Northwest Forest permit for parking. You must also have a climbing permit that you reserve ahead of time.

Instructions for permits vary by the time of year you plan to climb. November 1 through March 31, a permit is required and there is no permit fee. Climbing use is unrestricted, permits are not sold on-line. Register and pick up your permit at the Climbing Register at Marble Mountain Sno-Park. Permits are self issue and free of charge from November 1 through March 31st.

April 1 through May 14, a permit is required and the permit fee is charged. Climbing use is limited to 500 people per day and advance purchase and on-line registration is required through the Mount St. Helens Institute. You are also required to self-register at either Climbers Bivouac or Marble Mountain Sno-Park's climber registers.

May 15 through October 31, a permit is required and the permit fee is charged. A maximum of 100 daily permit holders are issues per day. Advance purchase and on-line registration is required. All permit sales and dates are final once sale has been completed. You are also required to self-register at either Climbers Bivouac or Marble Mountain Sno-Park's climber registers.

2018 Climbing Permit Sales will begin on February 1, 2018: Permits for the April 1 through October 31 climbing fee season are sold online, in advance on a first-come, first-served basis through the Mount St. Helens Institute.

There are outhouses available at the trailhead and two miles up the trail.

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Trail:
GPNF Trail 216A with connections to Trail 216 – Loowit Trail

Trail Maps:
Forest Service Map, Topo Map, Download Garmin .gpx file

Length and Elevation:
11 Miles Roundtrip, Elevation at trailhead – 3,700 Ft, Elevation at permit required point – 4,800 Ft, Elevation at the crater summit – 8,365 Feet

Review: September 27, 2006
The parking lot at Climber's Bivouac is paved and the gravel road to the parking lot usually gets graded each year. You will find people camping at the parking lot waiting for their turn to climb the next day. You have to bring your own water if you decide to camp here. Don't forget to have enough water for your climb. You will need at least 3 liters in warm weather and 4 liters in hot weather. Even with this amount, you will want to have a reserve for when you get back to your vehicle.

The trailhead is at the Northwest section of the parking lot. The first mile of the trail gently slopes up and is a pleasant walk through the woods. The next 3/4 mile steepens and begins to switchback and reaches the timberline. In about another 1/4 mile is the junction with Trail 216 which circles Mt. Saint Helens. About 1/5 mile further is the point where a climbing permit is required. This trail is patrolled by a ranger daily so you have little chance of not having your climbing permit checked by a Forest Service ranger.

From there the trail becomes a combination of rocks and volcanic ash. To the west of Monitor ridge is a crude trail that follows a gully up the mountain. The trail degrades to a rock scramble after about a mile.

Pay attention to the way you came up so you can take the same route back down. After passing the monitors the trail begins to reappear and the rocks get smaller. The last 3/4 mile becomes a gritty slog. Have goggles or glacier glasses to protect your eyes from possible dust. Have a dust mask for your lungs.

On a sunny day there are spectacular views of Mt. Rainier, Mt. Adams, and Mt. Hood. The view into the crater is breathtaking. Rocks tumble off the crater wall onto one of the only glaciers in the United States that is growing. You are one of the few that have made it to the summit. In all the world, only 100 people per day have this view.

You may want to head west to the true summit. You will find a small cairn and flags at the summit. If you are lucky you will see rocks fall off the new dome being extruded in the crater. Any rockfall creates a dust cloud and some of the clouds reach the crater rim.

A helmet would be a thoughtful option. There are a couple places on the climb where a rock could

hit you in the head. Trekking poles are a godsend on the last part of this hike. It is like climbing a giant sand dune.

The descent is much faster than the climb and some years there glissading to speed your way down. Be cautious about your descent and plan to use a GPS to make sure you come down the right way. On a cloudy or foggy day you can easily get off course and not know which way to turn to get back to the trailhead.

Missing the trail down could mean a very long trek back to the parking lot. East of the Monitor Ridge the Loowit Trail loses quite a bit of elevation and there are cliffs in several places.

Enjoy the photos!
Gallery Pics – 2002
Gallery Pics – 2006
Switchback Steve