

Oaks to Wetlands Trail, WA

Vicinity Location:

About 14 miles north of Vancouver, WA.

Directions:

From I-5, drive to Milepost 14 and take the Ridgefield/Pioneer Street exit #14 and drive west on Pioneer Street. You will drive through three roundabouts and continue heading west for a total of 2.9 miles from I-5.

Turn right at the flashing red light in Ridgefield and drive north on Main Avenue. Use the Ridgefield Wildlife signs to help direct you. After about 1 mile, turn left at the brown sign for the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, Carty Unit. Follow the gravel drive and park near the trailhead sign.

There is a pit toilet at the trailhead.

No dogs, no bicycles, and no jogging is allowed in the refuge.

Note: A \$3 use fee is required to enter the refuge. The fee doesn't apply if you hold a valid permit for Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge annual pass, Golden Access Passport, Golden Eagle Passport, Golden Age Passport, Duck Stamp, Washing and Oregon Recreation Pass, or a National Parks Pass with a Golden Eagle sticker.

Trail:

Oaks to Wetlands Trail with connections to Gee Creek Trail.

There is a geocache along trail at: N 45° 50.411 W 122° 45.150 Info at Geocaching.com

Trail Maps:

Topo Map; Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Map

Length and Elevation:

4 miles round trip. Elevation gain of 100 feet and loss of 100 feet round trip. Elevation at the trailhead at 70 feet, highest point is at 80 feet. Lowest elevation is 10 feet.

History: A nationally recognized archaeological site of the village of Cathlapotle is on the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. The Yakaitl-Wimakl, as the Chinook called it, or Great River, provided a rich variety of food for the Chinook People. The river provided an easy trade route from the ocean to Celilo Falls. The cedars and oak trees were made into tools, clothes, shelter, and food.

The Lewis and Clark expedition visited this area in November 1805 and March 1806. Excerpt from William Clark's journal from Nov, 5th, 1805: "a Cloudy morning Som rain the after part of last night & this morning. I could not Sleep for the noise kept by the Swans, Geese, white & black brant, Ducks &c. on a opposit base, & Sand hill Crane, they were emensely numerous and their noise horrid. We Set out at Sun rise & our hunters killed 10 Brant 4 of which were white with black wings 2 Ducks, and a Swan which were divided, we Came too and Encamped on the Lard. Side under a high ridgey land, the high land come to the river on each Side. the river about 1½ mile wide. those high lands rise gradually from the river & bottoms— we are all wet Cold and disagreeable, rain Continues & encreases. I killed a Pheasant which is very fat. my feet and legs cold. I saw 17 Snakes to day on a Island, but little appearance of Frost at this place."

Review: November 20, 2008, December 26, 2019

Park in the lot and get a map and wildlife checklist from the kiosks at the trailhead. Cross over the concrete pedestrian bridge over the 3 tracks of the Burlington Northern Railroad and you'll be heading towards the Oaks to Wetlands Wildlife Trail.

Soon you'll come to the Cathlapotle cedar plankhouse built in the style the Chinook Indians used. The Cathlapotle Plankhouse is usually open to the public most weekends from Noon to 4:00 pm on Saturdays and Sundays between March 29th to the October 31st. Check the plankhouse calendar page to make sure of open days. Docents will be available to answer questions and give tours. For further information contact the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge office at 360-887-4106. If the plankhouse is open, drop by to learn a little about Native American life in this area.

Continue past the plankhouse and you'll see a trail going down towards the lake. Follow the trail for about 100 feet and you will come to a sign directing you to turn right at the first fork in the trail. You will come to a signpost for Garry Oak Tree *Quercus garryana*. The next sign is for common waxberry or snowberry *Symphoricarpos albus*. The trail goes through the edge of the woods paralleling a service road.

At JCT1, make a left at the 4-way intersection. Just after you cross a wooden bridge and there is another wooden plank and railroad tie bridge after another 100 feet. Go straight at the next junction where the trail just enters the forest, heading northeast. The trail comes out of the woods and passes a couple more small trail junctions and continues heading northeast.

At JCT2 continue straight ahead and over the top of a small hill and continue on the main trail. The next junction, take a right and head towards the ponds in the distance. At JCT3, turn right and follow the trail as it loops around a small knoll and returns back to JCT3. Once you return to JCT3, turn right and follow the trail around another little knoll with a viewpoint of the marshes. This trail also loops around and rejoins the main trail at JCT4.

Just east of JCT4 is another trail that heads through the woods to the northeast over a small hill and dropping down to a marshy field. It shortly leads to a sign that says "Private Property Hunting Area - Trail Closed to Refuge Visitors October through February". Turn right here so you don't go past the warning sign. Follow the seasonal detour past a field that gets flooded in the fall rains and is frequented by Sandhill cranes, geese, and other wildlife.

At JCT5, turn left across a plank bridge and up a slight hill. At JCT7, turn left and follow the trail about 200 feet up and over a small knoll, then come to another overlook of the field. The viewpoint has a view across the length of the large field.

Back at the main trail, head southeast towards the trailhead and cross another plank bridge.

Now the trail leaves the marshy area and passes through a forest of second growth Douglas fir with Elderberries, Hazelnut trees, Cedar trees and blackberries. A tree called self-heal, *Prunella Vulgaris*. The trail crosses a small stream past more plant name labels. Take a small detour and enter a grove of Western Red Cedar trees at waypoint GRCG. The trail comes back in as the northern fork of JCT1. Turn left and follow your way back on the service road near the shore of the lake.

At JCT1 take a short side trip to the west and see a giant oak tree with Licorice Ferns growing on it.

At JCT8 turn right and follow the trail that winds between the woods and the pond. Walk towards the plankhouse to return to the trailhead.

Wander around all the trails and enjoy the birds, nutria, and other wildlife that live and visit the

refuge. These trails might not be the best for really small children because there is poison oak in the vicinity, the trails are uneven and the rocks can be slippery. There aren't any cliffs but small children could slip and fall on the rocks in the trail and injure themselves.

Parts of the trails are closed during the winter migration season.

Enjoy the Photos!

Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve