Ruckel Ridge / Ruckel Creek, OR

Notice: 9/24/2023 – Ruckel Creek Trail (#405) and Ruckel Ridge Trail is still closed. More information at U.S. Forest Service – Link

Vicinity Location: 37 miles east of Portland, Oregon in the Columbia River National Scenic Area.

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 bathrooms 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:
Trailhead elevation: 120 feet. 4500 feet gain, 4,500 feet loss. Highest point 4,100 feet

Length and Elevation:
13 miles roundtrip. Elevation at the trailhead is 120 feet. Elevation gain is 4,330 feet and the loss is 330 feet to the junction of Benson Way #405B and the Pacific Crest Trail #2000. Total gain and loss is 8,500 feet in elevation change. High point is about 4,130 feet.

Ruckel Ridge Trail: 4 miles one-way to Ruckel Creek Trail. Elevation gain is 3,900 feet. and the loss is 300 feet one way. Elevation at Ruckel Creek Trail Junction is 3,725 feet.

Ruckel Creek Trail: 4.2 miles one-way to Ruckel Ridge Trail. Elevation gain is 3,800 feet. and the loss is 200 feet one way. Elevation at Ruckel Creek Trail Junction is 3,725 feet.

Trail:
Buck Point Trail #439, Ruckel Ridge Trail, Benson Way Trail #405B, Benson Spur Trail #405C, Pacific Crest Trail #2000, Benson – Ruckel Trail #405A, Ruckel Creek Trail #405, Gorge Trail #400.

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

Review: September 16, 2008

Walk up the road about .1 mile towards the campground and look for the Gorge trail #400 on the left side of the road. Follow the trail as it winds towards the freeway and then turns to the east. Just after the end of the fence, make a right that goes on a footpath into campsite 11. The footpath is just before Trail #400 goes sharply downhill.

Walk uphill past campsite 6 and take a left on the Buck Point Trail #439 The trail switchbacks up the side of Eagle Creek valley and comes to a viewpoint under the powerline. Follow the trail up to a junction about 150 feet away and take a right at the fork. If you take the left fork, there are some good views of the gorge but the trail soon dies out. The right fork of the trail drops down, crosses some moss-covered rocks, then switchbacks up a slope of basalt scree to the base of a rock cliff. The trail goes around the cliff then climbs steeply up through poison oak to the top of the cliff. Once on top of the cliff, there are fine views of the ships plying the Columbia River and Beacon Rock in the distance.

Climbing up the ridge the trail grade varies between gentle and very steep. There are several viewpoints along the ridge. At one point there is a user trail junction to the left. The side trail goes about 150 feet up to the top of the ridge with views to the east of the Bridge of the Gods and White Salmon.

At waypoint JC1, N45° 38.085', W121° 53.048', you can drop down and go around the narrowest and steepest part of the Ruckel Ridge Trail. Look down to the right and you can see where the trail drops steeply down then skirts the ridge. If you choose to climb over this portion of the ridge, you will have to turn around and use your hands on the rocks.

From here, the trail continues to climb up the ridge. There are several places where the trail drops down and you may think you are near the top, but then the trail climbs again. At about the 3,000 foot level is a small clearing on top of some rocks which gives a good viewpoint of Bonneville Dam. After this viewpoint the trail climbs very steeply up the rocky ridge for a while. The trail enters into the Mark Hatfield Wilderness just as it begins to level out and turns to the left slightly. The trail is a bit indistinct on the top, but it generally heads off to the east and downhill a bit, heading towards Ruckel Creek. In 2008, there were one-way orange blazes about head-high marking the trail. In the winter these blazes would probably be covered with snow and not of much use in marking the trail. There are a few deadfalls to negotiate but in about 5 minutes you should be able to hear Ruckel Creek. The trail drops down, crosses the creek, then climbs gently and curves to the left to join Ruckel Creek Trail in about .2 mile.

Walking along Ruckel Creek Trail you pass a small campsite and fire ring in about .2 mile. Just on the left is trail 405B – Benson Way. Continue on Ruckel Creek Trail about .1 mile to the next junction. After about .5 mile, the trail crosses Ruckel Creek and climbs fairly steeply for about .25 mile then levels off. After about .3 mile you pass a junction to Benson Spur trail. This part of the Benson Plateau has a lot of beargrass with hemlock saplings growing under a canopy of hemlock and fir trees which shuts out most of the undergrowth. This part of the trail isn't blazed so one or two feet of snow will completely obscure this trail.

Travel on Benson Way, which is located on the west side of the plateau, through the forest. For a nice view of Mt. Hood, continue south a bit on the Pacific Crest Trail towards Smokey Springs Camp to waypoint JCVPH, veer off-trail and uphill a bit to a rocky clearing with great views of Mt. Hood. From the junction, heading back to the Benson Plateau, the trail climbs gently, then levels out. This part of the trail has trees with all their lower branches dead and it makes for an eerie scene. All the dead branches gives the trail a haunted feeling.

Junction 405A, Benson Ruckel Trail is a small trail and angles back off the Pacific Crest Trail and is a

little hard to see. It is easy to walk past this trail junction. Trail 405A is mostly level and in about 1.5 miles it intersects the Ruckel Creek Trail. Turn right and go downhill along Ruckel Creek, which you can hear in the background.

Ruckel Creek Trail has a few ups and downs as it begins to drop down off the Benson Plateau. The trail is lacking maintenance with deadfalls and the tread sloughing off a bit. The trail descends steep, dusty switchbacks and you'll be glad for the rocks in the trail. This trail is steep enough so the dust makes it slippery in the summer and rainfall makes it slick in the winter and spring.

On the way down you can guess there will be steep switchbacks ahead. When you first start to descend you are near Ruckel Creek but later the trail is so far above the creek that you can't hear it anymore and the trail even climbs a bit in a couple of sections. Once the trail passes the hanging meadows and turns east, the trail goes down, down, down the many steep switchbacks. Finally the switchbacks become less steep and the trail goes beneath the powerline, goes back into the woods, and you can hear Ruckel Creek again.

The final switchback takes you down along the bank of Ruckel Creek and leads you out to the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail. From there, take a left and walk about .5 mile to the junction to trail 400 which goes along the edge of the campground and back to the parking lot. A noisier but flatter alternative is to walk the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail along the freeway and around the hatchery back to the parking lot.

The loop up Ruckel Ridge and down Ruckel Creek Trail is frequently used for early season mountain climbing practice because of the narrow and steep ridge. I think these trails have the most poison oak of any trails in the gorge. You will brush up against some on this hike. Take a bottle of rubbing alcohol and some cotton balls along to wipe off the poison oak sap. You can also use commercially available poison ivy washes.

This trail is definitely not recommended for children or dogs due to the poison oak and the roughness of the Ruckel Ridge Trail. If you take a child or a dog then be prepared to provide help over a couple of the dropoffs and be aware your child or dog could fall off one of the many cliffs and precipices.

Enjoy the photos!!

Gallery Pics

Switchback Steve