

# Matthieu Lakes: No. 1 hike recommendation

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I am frequently asked to name my favorite hike, and that's a really difficult task. On the other hand, I have an unhesitating response if someone asks me, "We only have half a day, where can I take my friends on a hike to show them the best of our area?"

The answer to that question is a no-brainer. I tell them to hike the Matthieu Lakes Trail, a pleasant outing in the Three Sisters Wilderness that does not involve a major expedition. It's a great hike for people who aren't really looking for a hard-core all-day adventure; and it has it all: mid-range distance, a modest level of difficulty, wilderness, lush green (unburned) forest, wildflowers, huckleberries, swimmable mountain lakes, and sweeping close-up mountain views.

This six-mile loop sits just on the Sisters side of McKenzie Pass. The Forest Service lists it as an "easy" hike, but I would consider it "moderate" because of some steep sections. It is suitable for children, but you will probably end up carrying toddlers. The outing can also be shortened to a quick 4.6-mile in-and-out hike by visiting only North Matthieu Lake.

Less than a quarter of a mile from the trailhead, the route meets the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) at a wall of lava rock. Turn left (south) onto

the PCT and continue for another half-mile until the trail forks to the right toward North Matthieu Lake. If you miss the fork, it's no big deal, because the two trails merge again farther up the grade; but you would have bypassed the first lake.

The trail heads up a moderate grade through a mixed conifer forest of hemlock and fir. The forest floor has lush ground-cover, including low-bush huckleberries, making it more reminiscent of a West-side forest. Of course, the "West side" is only a half-mile away. As the trail climbs, it passes several ponds; it is well maintained and the going is pretty easy.

The Matthieu Lakes are scenic mountain gems. The first, North Matthieu Lake, is 2.3 miles in and is surrounded by dense forest. The unusual spelling of these lakes can be traced to Francis Xavier Matthieu. From Montreal, Canada, Matthieu was among several French pioneers in the Oregon Territory who met at Champoeg in 1843 to establish Oregon's first provisional government. Matthieu and his fellow Frenchmen voted to join with the Americans, cementing the American claim on the Oregon Territory. Their action sounded the death knell for British interests in the region. Matthieu died at the age of 100 in 1919, still an Oregonian.

The lakes were named for him in 1924. From the north lake, the

summit of the North Sister can be seen peeking over a ridge to the south. On the day of our visit it was really hot, so we took advantage of the opportunity and jumped right in. After a refreshing swim, we continued on toward the south lake, following the trail around the east shore.

South Matthieu Lake is another mile of mostly uphill trail. The total elevation climb from the trailhead is only 800 feet, but it seems like more. The trail rejoins the PCT just before reaching the lake. South Matthieu Lake sits right in the saddle of Scott Pass, which is a feature of significant historical interest in Sisters Country.

The mountain view from Scott Pass and the south lake is truly majestic and is a great place to celebrate your hike with a well-earned lunch break. As might be expected, we jumped into the water again and, this time, swam in the company of some interesting amphibians, slippery little newts with external gills.

If you're up for a little extra exploration, continue a short distance on the PCT. Try to imagine bringing a herd of a thousand cattle and several wagons over this very steep pass. That's exactly what Felix Scott, Jr., did here in 1862. He was instrumental in pioneering an early east-west route through this area. Scott Lake, Scott Mountain, Scott Pass and Scott Trail are all named for him.

On the return route from

south lake, we took the right fork, or "high road," north of the lake, staying on the PCT. Soon we found ourselves traversing a steep red cinder slope. Keep an eye out below, and you'll have a great bird's-eye view of the north lake, which you passed on the way in.

Once you're back inside the forest, notice the bent trees lining the sides of the cinder hillside. Many of the tree trunks have a prominent curve toward the downward slope before they reach vertically to the sky. When these trees were young, heavy snows weighted them down-slope until they were tall enough and strong enough to overcome this seasonal force; but their early history is preserved in the misshapen trunks.

The return is a pleasant one, and you will soon find yourself back at the trail junction where you turned off to the north lake. Continue north on the PCT, and take note of the numerous burls disfiguring tree trunks and limbs in this area. Burls are most often formed by the trees' response to insects or disease.

When you reach the clearly marked return to the Lava Lake trailhead, take a right and return to your vehicle.

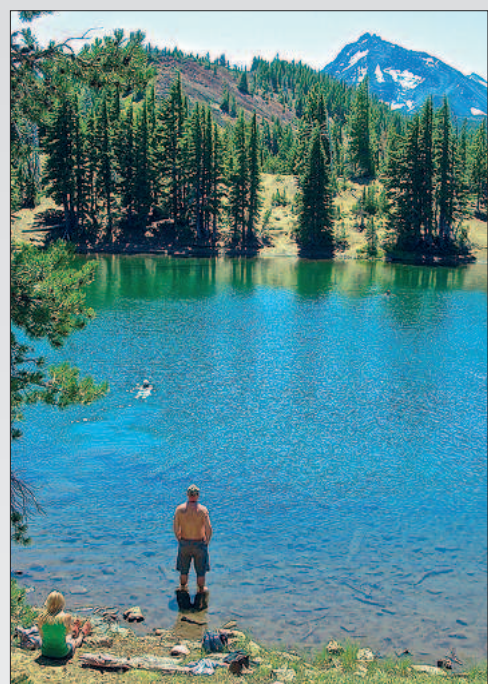


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

In the shadow of the North Sister, hikers take a swim break in South Matthieu Lake.

You'll know if you've missed the turn, because the trail will soon set out across a portion of the lava field. The entire loop can be easily completed in a few hours, including sightseeing, swimming, and lunch breaks.

The trailhead is easy to reach from Sisters. Drive out the McKenzie Highway (242) for a total of about 14 miles. Turn left onto a gravel road toward Lava Camp Lake after milepost 78; it's also clearly marked for the Pacific Crest Trail. If you reach McKenzie Pass, you've gone a half-mile too far. Turn right at the "horse use area," which is about 0.3 mile off Highway 242 and before Lava Camp Lake. The trail begins at the loop parking area. Free wilderness permits are required, and available, at the trailhead.

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