

Suttle Lake Trail is a pleasant, easy hiking experience

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The loop trail around Suttle Lake is an excellent nearby hiking opportunity that is sometimes overlooked simply because it's so obvious. Nestled along the south side of Highway 20, right where the road angles up the steep grade to Santiam Pass, it is easy to drive right on by this pleasant hike. However, it's worth noting that this trail is ideal for an early season tune-up hike.

(Note: There is currently an algae bloom in the lake and the Forest Service has placed a caution sign for anyone planning to recreate in the lake).

At about three and a half miles in length, this easily accessible loop trail is flat, scenic, and well-maintained. In fact, extensive trail maintenance and reconstruction is underway.

The trail can be accessed from either the west or east end of the lake and almost anywhere along the south side. Only the north side of the lake is not accessible by vehicle.

For this outing, we chose the first public access opportunity by parking near Cinder Beach, the public day-use area at the east end of the lake, near the resort. The last time we hiked this trail, we hiked around the lake counterclockwise; so, just to make things different, we went clockwise this time.

This easy forest trail never leaves the shoreline of the scenic lake. If you have kids, relatives, friends, or visitors who have been hard to sell on experiencing the great outdoors or are averse to climbing hills, this is the hike you have been looking for!

To pick up the trail from this point, simply walk back across the access bridge over Lake Creek and take an immediate right at the trail sign. Initially, the trail follows Lake Creek to where it begins at the outlet of Suttle Lake. Lake Creek is a tributary of the Metolius River.

Here, the Suttle Lake Resort can be seen across the way; and the trail passes through some very scenic areas and a couple of nice fishing spots on its way toward the Blue Bay Campground and boat ramp. Some of the newly reconstructed trail sections can be seen along this stretch.

From Blue Bay on, a succession of campgrounds lines the south shore and wraps around the western end of the lake. The campsites were lightly populated last week but will become increasingly

crowded as the summer season unfolds. The west end is home to another public day-use area and two more of the lake's four boat ramps.

The trail becomes a bit vague upon entering Link Creek Campground, but all routes eventually lead to the very nice – and relatively new – footbridge across Link Creek. For a time, the old footbridge had been removed, and it was necessary to cross the creek on the vehicle bridge; but that is no longer the case.

Link Creek “links” Suttle Lake to Blue Lake. In the fall, thousands of kokanee swarm into the creek to spawn. Fishing is not allowed in this creek, but Suttle Lake is open to fishing all year. Today, efforts are underway to restore salmon runs to the region, but it remains to be seen if, and when, sockeye will once again swim in the waters of Suttle Lake.

In the meantime, Suttle Lake's sockeye survive in their tasty, landlocked form as kokanee “trout” and are prolific enough to warrant a 25-fish-per-day catch limit! Any kokanee much over a foot is a big one, but that's a far cry from the 33-inch eight-pound salmon of its genetic potential.

Continue around the west end of the lake and past the parking lot to pick up the continuing trail beyond the boat ramp. Here you head east along the north shore of the lake. Last week, heavy trail reconstruction was underway here; so, if crews are working, stay alert for changes in the trail. Cyclists should dismount in construction areas.

Midway along the north shore is a stretch where the B&B fire of 2003 crept to the lake's edge. Fortunately, most of Suttle Lake's shoreline escaped the flames that devastated the landscape in this area. Some nice views of Mt. Washington can be seen from the north-shore trail. Also along the north shore, evidence of another natural event can still be detected. Some years ago, the hillside above — and a large chunk of Highway 20 — slid down to the lake.

Bald eagles and osprey are frequently seen at Suttle Lake. Barrow's goldeneye ducks, and many other waterfowl are often in residence, as well. The trail returns to the starting point by continuing on toward the road bridge across Lake Creek.

Before construction of dams on the lower Deschutes River, Lake Creek once formed a pathway to the sea for native sockeye salmon. Sockeye usually require a

lake in their spawning system, and Suttle Lake provided that feature. Springs at the bottom of Blue Lake form the principal water source for the system, although Suttle Lake also has some springs of its own.

“Suttle Lake” is a misspelling of its intended namesake, John Settle. Settle was a Lebanon-area pioneer who was a principal figure in the development of the early Santiam Wagon Road during the mid-nineteenth century. By the time the misspelling was noted, however, it was deemed too well established to be changed.

To enjoy this hike, take Highway 20 west from Sisters for about 13 miles. The highway makes a 90-degree left turn; and, about half a mile



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

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later, signs point to a left exit for Suttle Lake. Pass the forest information kiosk and follow the signs at a right turn toward Suttle Lake Resort. The public access to Cinder

Beach is across the bridge and straight ahead. You may also wish to visit the resort and restaurant, which are to the left after crossing the bridge. Fees are not required to park.

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