

Wildflowers abound in Cone Peak Meadows

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
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This is a great time of the year for wildflower viewing. However, due to the poor snow year, blooms are occurring earlier than ever; so, there is no time to waste if wildflowers are an interest of yours. Few places have more to offer in the wildflower arena than Cone Peak Meadows.

Among wildflower enthusiasts, Cone Peak is well known; but, for the casual wildflower observer, it may be off the radar. The trail is 35 miles west of Sisters on Highway 20 and is easily accessed on paved roads. At less than 5 miles round trip and an elevation gain of 1,000 feet, this trail is an excellent family outing. In fact, several family groups were on the trail when I was there last week.

This hike takes off from the parking lot at the summit of Tombstone Pass and drops down onto Tombstone Prairie before heading up the south side of Cone Peak. The trail crosses Highway 20 at milepost 64, but don't attempt a shorter hike by parking there, because there are numerous "no parking" signs on the highway.

Use care in crossing the

highway. Although narrow and winding, this is the longest U.S. Highway in the country, stretching from Newport, Oregon, to Boston Massachusetts; and many cars travel through here at speeds well in excess of 55 mph.

After crossing the road, the trail heads east for a little over half a mile before switchbacking up Cone Peak. Yes, there are switchbacks; but none of this trail is as steep as the one up Black Butte, nor is there as much elevation to be climbed.

Most of this trail is in a beautiful shaded forest that is worthy of admiration, even without the goal of wildflowers. Ferns and dense forest plants abound. Twice, little voles scurried across the path in front of me. You don't have to wait for the meadows to start seeing wildflowers. There are many flowers on the forest floor. Among the more prominent forest flowers last week were the red columbine, wild rose, and tiger lily; although the trillium blossoms were already spent.

The most obvious forest flowers right now are on the acres of thimbleberry bushes, which are in full bloom. The prolific white thimbleberry blooms promise a bumper crop of thimbleberries this year; but then it takes a lot of thimbleberries to amount



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Iron Mountain is seen here from Cone Peak Meadows, one of the Northwest's richest wildflower areas.

to much. They are certainly edible but are neither very juicy nor especially tasty. They look kind of like a flat, dry raspberry.

Towering firs dominate the forest on Cone Peak's slopes. Both Douglas fir and multiple true firs are found here, along with hemlock. Midway through the switchbacks, however, there are groves of an unusual tree, which – while native to Oregon – is not very common. This is the Alaska yellow cedar.

Most yellow cedars here

are not very large. Larger, old-growth specimens, however, can be found at nearby Echo Mountain. The shaggy bark and flattened needle clusters make this an easy tree to spot.

As the trail nears the meadows, there are some mini-meadows in the forest that have formed around some rock outcroppings near the top of the switchbacks. When the trail finally leaves

the forest, it emerges into a vast openness of meadows, with expansive views in all directions.

The trail wanders upward through the meadows and eventually crests at a natural stopping point, where it dips down again and heads toward the saddle that joins Cone Peak to Iron Mountain. This area is a great place

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