

Echo Basin's unique ecosystem is marred by a very bad trail

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In spite of the rich rewards offered by the short hike to Echo Basin, the trail is in horrible condition due to very poor maintenance. It is so bad that, if it gets much worse, only the most agile hikers should even attempt it. Severe erosion has created areas of rocky trenches that once sported a very nice trail. Numerous "leg traps" dot the trail's entire length. Some of these traps consist of hidden holes that cannot be seen because the trail is so badly overgrown by the trailside vegetation.

It appears that the dead-fall has not been cleared in years. In addition to climbing over logs, hikers are sometimes forced to stumble through mazes of branches that require expert balance and care to negotiate. Most hikers would benefit from using trekking poles on this hike because so many issues are likely to lead to falls.

On the plus side, this is one spectacular ecosystem. The Echo Basin Trail works its way up Echo Mountain to the headwaters of Echo Creek. The beginning of the trail is one of those eroded spots where it is necessary to pick your way through a myriad of football-sized rocks that fill a narrow, washed-out little gully. Soon, however, the trail smooths out and follows a pair of abandoned logging cables up an old, overgrown logging road.

The grade is moderately steep. This dense, canopied, westside mixed forest is cool even on our hottest days; and

the gurgling of Echo Creek makes it seem even cooler. There is a rich variety of trees, and many wildflowers were blooming. One unexpected treat of the hike is the presence of a significant stand of old growth Alaska yellow cedars.

Oregon tree books say that the Alaska yellow cedar is scarce in Oregon and found only on the western slopes of the Cascades. Also, the tree rarely occurs south of Mt. Jefferson, so its presence here is all the more unusual. There are some very big old growth specimens on Echo Mountain, and they are easily recognizable by the shaggy appearance of the bark and needles. The needles are quite different in appearance from the other cedars we usually see in Oregon, and the tree has a rather confused taxonomic classification.

After about three-fourths of a mile up the mountain, the trail splits; and the right fork crosses Echo Creek on a nice footbridge. We took the right fork, and large cedars begin to appear shortly afterward.

Later, when the forest gives way to the open landscape of Echo Basin, the lush ground cover is a sharp contrast to that of the forest floor. In some areas, bracken ferns tower above head-height and all but obscure the well-worn trail. At one point, the trail becomes very, very steep, but only for a short distance. Don't turn back now, because it's about the same distance back in either direction. The total vertical climb on this hike is about 600 feet.

This unique, boggy, horseshoe-shaped basin is carved out from the sides of Echo Mountain, which appears to be an old blown-out volcano. At the apex of the trail, the entire soggy basin floor is alive with a myriad of tiny springs which give birth to Echo Creek. Wooden boardwalks have been installed in the wettest portions. Still, there are some deep holes and hazards to be avoided where the vegetation has overgrown the trail, so be careful and watch your step.

Late last month, the whole basin was a tapestry of color. The basin's meadow-bog is loaded with Indian paintbrush and many other wildflowers. We saw red columbine, fireweed, asters, elderberry, wild celery, devils club, and a host of other plant life. My favorite, however, was the salmonberry; and we plucked and ate the tasty berries along the way.

Salmonberries are a compound, yellow or light orange berry that resemble – in structure – a cross between a raspberry and Himalayan blackberry. The taste is kind of a blend between the two, as well. Because of the warm and dry year, all berries seem to be ripening early this year; and the salmonberries are no exception.

After leaving the mountainside basin, the trail plunges back into the forest and returns to the same bridge crossing where the trail forked on the way up. The total hike is only about 2.5 miles; but, even at this short length, the steepness and poor trail conditions force me to label this a

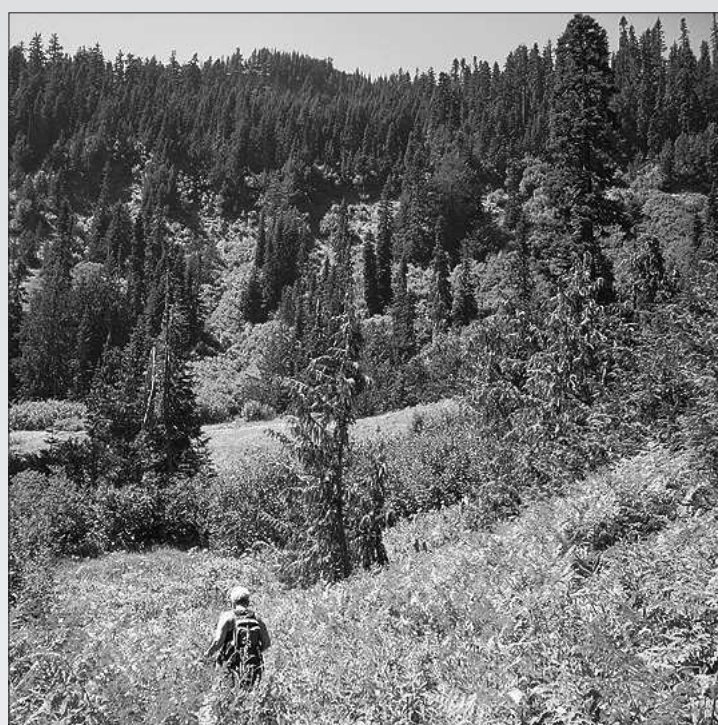


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Echo Basin opens from the mountainside to form an extensive bog and meadow system that gives birth to Echo Creek.

difficult hike.

This hike is easily paired with the even shorter — and much easier — nearby Hackleman Old Growth Trail, a halfmile farther west. The Hackleman Trail system highlights huge, old-growth Douglas firs. The trails are flat, and the core trail is even wheelchair accessible. Nearby Lost Prairie Campground is also a nice place to stop along this section of Highway 20, perhaps for a lunch break.

To reach the Echo Basin turnoff, travel west from Sisters to the Santiam "Y" and turn left to stay on Highway 20. Travel another 3.5 miles and stay straight on Highway 20 toward Corvallis. Past the Eugene

turnoff, it's another 5.1 miles to the Echo Basin Road (Forest Road 055). There is no advance warning for this right turn except that it is almost immediately after the brown sign that announces the upcoming Hackleman turnoff, which is on the left a half mile ahead.

A narrow, but good, gravel road trims two miles and several hundred vertical feet off the hike. Just before the trailhead, however, there is a gully in the road that would be very hard on a low-clearance vehicle. The trailhead is clearly marked by a sign on the right, but the parking area is little more than a wide spot in the road. This is not a site that requires a Forest Pass.



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