

Demaris Lake and the Pole Creek Burn

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Demaris Lake isn't really on the way to anywhere else, so it tends to be kind of off the general public's radar screen. Also, it's a little longer hike than some of the more popular destinations, and it can only be reached by hiking through the devastation of the Pole Creek Fire.

On the other hand, I've never seen another hiker at Demaris Lake, so — unless everyone runs up there after reading this column — it's usually a place of solitude. A round-trip to Demaris Lake clocks in at just under 11 miles, and the elevation gain is only about 1,000 feet, which — over five miles — really isn't much at all.

The first time I traveled this trail, in a past century, the hike started in a healthy lodgepole pine forest. For the last couple of decades leading up to the Pole Creek Fire, however, pine beetles had turned the area into a decaying, unmanaged fire trap of ugly, mostly dead trees. Given the condition of the forest, it was really only a matter of when, rather than if, a fire would occur.

That foreordained fire ignited three years ago and quickly consumed the dead lodgepoles and took thousands of acres of healthy wilderness firs and hemlocks with it. Only scattered trees survived, but some areas are already showing early signs of regeneration. Other areas still look as bleak and dead as they did when I explored the area a few months after the fire.

On the plus side, the Forest Service has done a good job of reestablishing the trail. On my first two forays into the area after the fire, the trail was so completely obliterated in places that it was difficult to follow. Today it is well-established and well-traveled, and deadfall on the trail is minimal.

After leaving the trailhead parking lot, the first trail fork

is on the right at 1.4 miles and should be ignored, unless you want to turn north to McKenzie Pass. Four years ago, at this junction, firs and hemlocks would have largely supplanted the scraggly lodgepole mess; now everything is burned. Another half mile will bring the hiker to Soap Creek. I remember hoping that the fire might have been contained there, but that didn't happen.

At some point in the last year or so, water runoff — accelerated by the lack of vegetation — has silted in the creek at the former crossing; and the channel has moved. My first thought was that the log bridge had been washed away. Instead, it was the creek that moved; the bridge is still where it was. The water flow is so diminished this year, however, that the creek is easy to cross. Last week, it was flowing with that silty, cloudy appearance that gave Soap Creek its name.

An important trail junction sits on the south side of the stream. Bear right here or, 12 miles later, you'll find yourself on Century Drive. Take the right fork toward Demaris and Camp Lakes. Another mile or so will finally bring you out of the burn and into a land of actual living trees. Hemlocks predominate in much of this area.

The final important trail junction on this hike is also at a stream crossing. At 2.6 miles from Soap Creek, the trail crosses the North Fork of Whychus Creek. The crossing here is on multiple fallen logs that have somehow stayed in this spot for several years, in spite of the meltwater that comes roaring down from the snow and glaciers of the Middle Sister.

Once you've negotiated the crossing and climbed up the stream bank, take the Demaris Lake trail to the left. Do not go right to Camp Lake, which is 2.4 miles up the other trail. Camp Lake is the first of the Chambers Lakes. The others are higher, and unnamed, sitting astride

the Cascade Crest between the Middle and South Sisters.

The left trail fork runs less than a mile to Demaris Lake and sometimes downhill. You're at the lake almost before you know it. In this extremely poor water year, the lake is at the lowest level I have ever seen. All around the shoreline, many feet of the normally submerged lake bottom are exposed. As a result, the water is much shallower and warmer than usual.

Hardly anyone knows how the lake was named. Curiously, the Oregon Geographic Names Board didn't have an answer for me when I inquired about it, neither did the Oregon Historical Society. The Forest Service was similarly stumped, even though all three organizations noted that the name has appeared on maps of the area for many years.

Historical Society records did note a John Demaris who homesteaded near Prineville in the late 1800s, near Steins Pillar on Mill Creek. After a bit of research, I discovered that the lake appears to have been named for Gail Demaris, who operated a pack string of horses in this area during the middle of the last century. Gail was the grandson of the John Demaris noted in historical records.

Ray Demaris, of Prineville, told me that his first cousin, Gail, "Ran a pack string and hauled fish into the



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The extended shoreline of Demaris Lake shows the impact of Central Oregon's drought.

lakes in five gallon cream cans. The Fish & Game had him do it, and he found the lake. So, they — the Fish and Game people — named it after him."

Green boggy meadows with springs gurgling from the ground give birth to the South Fork of Whychus Creek just south of the lake. One of these meadows has roiling springs surging up through the sand in the clear bottom of an infant stream. This meadow system leads to, and produces, a spectacular curtain-like waterfall spilling over a rock face below. I did not visit these features this year, so I cannot attest to how well they are holding up in this drought.

Another quarter mile downstream, the by-then

well-formed South Fork shoots out into space for a free fall of nearly a hundred feet. Southeast of the lake is a rock cliff that provides a panoramic view of the glacial valley stretching all the way from the mountaintops to the High Desert. It is a view worthy of any national park.

To access this hike, head out Highway 242 (toward McKenzie Pass) and turn left onto Forest Road 15 not far after Sisters Middle School. Follow the signs 10.5 miles to the Pole Creek Trailhead. If you do not have a forest pass, self-serve passes are available. Wilderness passes are also required and are free at the trailhead. Since hunters are already afield, it is always a good idea to wear orange and make plenty of noise.

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