

Multiple hiking options along the McKenzie River Trail

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Although the snowpack is rapidly dwindling, it is still a good idea to stick to lower-elevation trails for the early season. Keep in mind that, even after the snow disappears, trail damage can occur when using higher-elevation trails that are still soggy with meltwater.

The upper McKenzie River waterfall trail is completely snow free. Plus, it's hardly more than a half an hour from Sisters. However, at just 2.6 miles, it makes for a pretty light-duty hike. To remedy that, we decided to insert some additional mileage by starting at Clear Lake to make the outing a bit more than a little stroll in the woods.

By beginning at Clear Lake and hiking the entire falls loop, the trip comes in at a more respectable 6.2 miles. This whole trail system is part of the McKenzie River National Recreation Trail, which extends more than 26 miles from Fish Lake to McKenzie Bridge; so, there is a lot of trail here if you want to add even more.

For this outing, we parked at the public parking lot near the Clear Lake Resort and headed south, staying on the west side of Clear Lake to add a total of 3.6 miles, round trip. Alternatively, the hiker can head north from that point and swing around the eastern side of the lake, adding another three miles for a total of 9.6 miles for both loops.

Clear Lake, Sahalie Falls, and Koosah Falls are popular spots to visit by vehicle; but this hike incorporates all these attractions and more. The first leg of our hike was only 1.2 miles to reach the

lake's outlet and the best possible view of the newborn McKenzie River, as it flows out of the lake. Here, the trail crosses the river on a substantial bridge. This spot always seems to inspire a little contemplative break as the crystal clear water placidly begins its journey to join with the Willamette and, eventually, the Columbia River on its way to the ocean.

The next stretch of trail is not difficult but may cause a little anxiety, because there is the sensation that you are going the wrong direction. Soon, however, the hiker comes to a well-marked trail junction to assure you that you are on the right path, after all. From that junction, it is a bit over a quarter of a mile to where the trail crosses Highway 126.

Another little jaunt of about that same distance brings you to the north end of the Sahalie and Koosah Falls Loop Trail. Here, we encountered a pleasant surprise: a brand-new bridge! (*See related story, pg. 25.*) At that point, I usually prefer to cross the bridge and follow the trail down the less-traveled west side of the river.

As the trail heads

downstream, it passes above Sahalie Falls, where the entire river seems to just disappear beneath your feet. From this point, it's about half a mile to Koosah Falls. Keep your ears alert for a noticeable increase in river noise or you may overlook a lesser-known waterfall along the way that suddenly comes into view over your left shoulder.

Unnamed, but usually referred to as Lower Sahalie Falls, this feature cannot be seen from any of the highway viewpoints and is visible only to hikers. People who do not hike this trail, and sightsee only at the roadside viewpoints for Sahalie and Koosah, will never get to see this hidden waterfall. All the falls in this area were formed by the same lava flows that created Clear Lake 3,000 years ago.

Farther south down the trail, Koosah Falls provides even more photographic opportunities. Rhododendrons in this area grow 12-15 feet high. Beyond Koosah Falls, the McKenzie River Trail eventually veers off to the right at the base of



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Sahalie Falls is one of the most popular attractions along the McKenzie River Trail. A viewpoint is also wheelchair accessible from the highway.

a giant eight-foot-thick fir. Take the fork to the left; and, within about 100 yards, the trail dumps you out onto the gravel road skirting the north edge of Carmen Reservoir, part of Eugene's Carmen-Smith Hydroelectric Project.

Follow the road to the left (east toward the highway) across the vehicle bridge, to join up with the other leg of the McKenzie Falls Loop Trail. A sign on a tree will point you back to the trail upstream along the east side of the river. From here,

it's less than a mile back to Sahalie Falls (via Koosah Falls) on this easy loop.

To access this hike, take Highway 20 west over the pass and turn left at the Santiam "Y." Three miles later, take Highway 126 left toward Eugene for another three miles. Then follow the signs to Clear Lake Lodge on the left.

If you prefer the shorter 2.6-mile basic loop, simply take Highway 126 a few miles farther to either the Sahalie or Koosah Falls viewpoints.