

A new twist on Whychus Creek Trail

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Three weeks ago, the Forest Service opened a new handicapped-accessible trail to a scenic overlook above Whychus Creek south of town. It's a very easy loop trail of about a mile. In the process, however, another trail — in Whychus Draw — was also opened. Although it is less than half a mile in length, it opens up the area to an entirely new hiking opportunity.

The trail in Whychus Draw takes off from a spot adjacent to the new overlook. In all the years I've been wandering Whychus Creek, I had never actually been up or down the "draw."

Since the "new" Whychus Creek Trail opened four years ago, I've traversed it dozens of times since it's the perfect place to go for a close-by, impromptu outing in the woods. Both the Whychus Creek and Whychus Draw trails are designated for foot traffic only: no horses or bikes.

The last time I took the Whychus Creek Trail was just a few days before the formal opening of the new overlook, and the signpost marking the trail junction that heads up the draw was already in place. Knowing that it was not "officially" open, I resisted the temptation to explore on that day.

So, last week, my son and I decided to have an "official" look at the new trail. After stopping to enjoy the view at the new overlook, we headed down into the canyon on the new trail. Almost immediately, the trail enters landscape burned by the Rooster Rock Fire in August of 2010. More than 6,000 acres were burned here.

This route offers a shortcut down to the most upstream mile of the Whychus Creek Trail. With this new access, the hike to the junction with the Metolius-Windigo Trail can be shortened to a round trip of about four miles. It also provides new opportunities for different one-way car-drop possibilities.

The trail down Whychus Draw joins the main trail at ground zero for the Rooster Rock Fire near the creek.

The trail junction here is at a sharp bend in the main Whychus Creek Trail where it switchbacks for a long hillside traverse above the creek. This was one of the new portions of the trail that was laid out by the Forest Service and largely completed by Boy Scouts in the late winter and early spring of 2012.

All along this section lies a wild, tumbling creek deserving of the "Wild and Scenic" designation. Although outside the official boundary of the Three Sisters Wilderness, this stretch offers all the beauty and grandeur of wilderness; but, it's still close to town and — for the most part — is pretty close to being an all-season trail.

Portions of this trail segment were intentionally left somewhat rough to limit access to foot traffic only, with a goal of minimizing human impact to the area. On one trip through this section, I encountered four bicyclists who had ignored the warning signs prohibiting cycling on this trail.

The cyclists found themselves rather boxed in and wanted to know how to get out. After I explained the topography to them, they were forced to carry their bikes up Whychus Draw. Although it is only about a mile to the road at that point, there was no established trail then, and it was pretty rough going.

Whychus Creek is largely the product of seasonal snow and ice melt, so the flow varies wildly from time to time; and that aspect of the stream is quite apparent on this segment of the trail. Of particular note on this hike are the streamside rocks, beautifully sculpted by the rock- and silt-laden high-water flows that occur with regularity.

Multiple falls and rapids roar through narrowly carved cuts in the rock, or pass beneath log and debris jams that bear witness to the force and volume of dramatic seasonal

stream flows.

Wildflowers are not abundant but are still in evidence all along the trail. The last stretch of trail terminates at a junction with Metolius-Windigo horse trail and is also the location of two dispersed camping sites that can be reached by a quarter-mile trail from the end of Road 880.

This access point also creates the possibility of a car drop for a shuttle return, to either the Whychus Overlook Trailhead or the Whychus Creek Trailhead. Road 880 can then be used to reduce the hikes to two- and three-mile one-way options, respectively. Before returning toward the overlook, we wandered down the Metolius-Windigo Trail to where the horse ford crosses the creek, as the trail continues on its way north.

This hike offers dozens of great stopping places along the stream for lunch or simple contemplative moments. There are perches where long stretches of the creek can be seen tumbling down from the mountains. From a few spots, the mountains themselves are visible; and there are many,



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Rocks along Whychus Creek are scalloped and sculpted by centuries of wear from silt-laden glacial waters.

many views of falls, rapids, and pools.

The return hike was a different view of the same country, but there are new sights every step of the way.

Two surprises awaited us after we returned to the Whychus Draw junction — one good, one not-so-good. The not-so-good surprise was that the first part of trail up the draw was a lot steeper than I remembered on the way down!

The nice surprise, however, was an unexpected peek at an unexpected peak. While approaching the overlook through a relatively barren

section of the burn, we could see the summit of Mt. Hood! Our first reaction was, "What the heck is that?" But there it was on the skyline, partially visible at the notch between the northern shoulder of Black Butte and Green Ridge.

To reach the Whychus Creek Trailhead, turn south off Highway 20 (Cascade Avenue) onto Elm Street, which becomes Three Creek Road (also Forest Road 16) and continue south for about 4.2 miles to a small gravel parking lot on the right. The Whychus Overlook Trailhead is about 5.4 miles down the same road.



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