

# Square Lake: easily reached from PCT Trailhead at Santiam Pass

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There are many people in the area now who were not here when the B & B Fire burned nearly 100,000 acres in 2003. The scars at Santiam Pass are still quite evident, and the forest's full recovery is still generations away. To fully appreciate that recovery, it is necessary to examine it up close.

A good way to view the fire's aftermath is to hike from Santiam Pass to Square Lake. This is a relatively short hike, less than 2.5 miles each way, with a few moderate ups and downs but little overall elevation change. The trailhead is easy to access; and, if you're in a hurry, the hike only takes a couple of hours. There is no need to be in a hurry, however.

The trail takes off from a paved parking loop on the north side of Highway 20 at the top of Santiam Pass. There are two early trail junctions. The first is within sight of the parking lot and is where the short access trail meets up with the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Turn left (north) onto the PCT. A couple of hundred yards later, turn right (east) off the PCT at the next

junction where a sign points to "Old Summit Trail."

That's about all the navigation that is necessary on your way to Square Lake. The well-marked trail takes a pleasant course through the burned out forest. The forest floor is quite alive with bracken ferns and beargrass; and wildflowers are making inroads into the burn. Columbine, lupine, and scarlet gilia (skyrocket) are a few of the flowers blooming along the trail.

Lodgepole pine saplings are everywhere. I was surprised to see that some are already in the 10- to 12-foot range. A few spruce trees are also growing; and, farther in, where a few of the older, pre-fire trees survived, young firs and hemlocks are colonizing, as well.

Lodgepole pine, a pioneer species that quickly reclaims burned-over land, is predominant. Part of this is because the heat from a fire speeds the release of the species' seeds from its cones, and the sun-loving seedlings thrive in the open. Oceans of manzanita and snowbrush (*Ceanothus*) also cover the landscape in many areas. These plants thrive in post-fire habitat.

Nearly 13 years after the

fire, naked tree trunks still dominate the landscape; and they continue to fall, providing a constant challenge for trail-clearing crews. Judging by the fresh sawdust, I counted a half-dozen fallen trees that were recently cleared from the trail. On the other hand, an even larger number still cross the trail on the way to Square Lake. It is unclear why these fallen trees remain, since most are outside the wilderness area, where a chain saw could make quick work of them.

Isolated groupings of 8-10 survivor trees are scattered around the burn. Closer to the lake, a few spots in the lee of rock outcroppings shelter more of the older trees; and the lake itself helped lake-side strips of trees to survive, primarily on the north and east shores of the lake. Here, winds from the west drove the fire north and east, isolating some trees along the shoreline when the fire failed to completely burn back upon itself.

Approaching the lake, near a sign that marks formal entry into the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness Area, the trail descends into what appears to be an old glacial basin which cradles the lake itself.



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Three Fingered Jack juts up above the north shore of Square Lake, in the heart of the 2003 B & B Burn.

Crossing the little ridge before reaching the lake accounts for most of the elevation gradient in this hike. There is exactly one switchback.

The trail parallels the western side of the lake at a distance of a couple hundred yards and eventually meets up with the Round Lake Trail on the north shoreline. From there, the combined trail can be followed farther north toward Booth and Jack Lakes. Booth Lake was ground zero for that part of the B & B Fire. The hike in from Round Lake is about the same distance, but the long gravel road to that trailhead makes access to

that trail more tedious.

I had not explored the west and south shorelines of Square Lake before, since there isn't really a trail; so, on this visit, I took some time to do just that. Access to those areas involves a lot of meandering and climbing over downed trees. It was a beautiful, warm, and surprisingly mosquito-free day. A few fish were jumping; and, since it was a hot day, I decided to go for a swim.

The extremely clear water was definitely chilly, and I could readily tell that my

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