

Lower Black Butte Trail perfect for “shoulder season” hiking

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With winter weather fast approaching, and with early snow already staking a claim at higher elevations, this is a good time to think about alternatives for this “shoulder” portion of the hiking season.

Four years ago last month, volunteers put the finishing touches on a new hiking trail on Black Butte. The “new” trail, however, was actually the re-engineering of a very old one.

Black Butte has been used as a principal Central Oregon fire lookout since 1910; and, back in those days, there was no mid-mountain trailhead. Everything headed to the summit had to make its way up a trail from the base — the same trail later used by the Civilian Conservation Corps to transport building materials to construct the 83-foot lookout tower built in 1934.

Once the mid-mountain trailhead was created at the end of a logging road half-way up the mountain, the vast majority of hikers used that newer trailhead as their jumping-off point. The old trail, however, never completely went away; and a small, but dedicated, cadre of hikers continued to use it. So, for years, many Camp Sherman residents and others started their Black Butte climbs from a more historic launching pad at the base of Black Butte, ascending all of its 3,200-plus vertical feet of climbing opportunity.

That much-longer route, however, was not maintained as an official trail. Over time, though, use of the old trail began to rise; so the Forest Service sought ways to facilitate use of the area and teamed up with the Friends of the Metolius to do just that.

At this time of year, by skipping the summit ascent, the lower portion of this longer trail makes for an excellent round-trip hike of about six miles, with 1,300 feet of elevation gain. For our trip, we took a lunch and ate at the picnic table at the mid-mountain trailhead.

This historic route still

has trees bearing some of the old-style white porcelain wire insulators that once carried the fire lookout’s telephone line that was in use at least as far back as 1912. Much of the trail is very well defined and easy to follow. Other portions had been overgrown and nearly lost among some of the confusing abandoned logging roads on the flanks of the extinct volcano.

One of the problems that delayed the final establishment of an official trail was the lack of adequate parking along the road leading into Camp Sherman. That issue was resolved by the construction of a new trailhead just beyond the turnoff for the Metolius Headwaters and the lower campgrounds.

Volunteers organized by the Friends of the Metolius installed new signage to guide hikers along the new/old route and helped further define the trail in areas that had been overgrown by manzanita and snowbrush.

Additionally, about 100 yards of new trail were constructed to tie the original trail to the newer, existing trailhead at the mid-mountain point. The lower trail now arrives at the mid-mountain trailhead, with a scramble up a steep bank — a bad spot in the trail that still needs some re-engineering.

For a complete Black Butte ascent from the base, completion of the project nearly doubled the elevation gain and more than doubled the total distance. The new

mileage was a welcome addition to the region’s trail inventory. It also created another hiking opportunity for this time of year, when a summit climb might not be the hiker’s first choice.

All of the lower mountain trail lies in the forest, and doesn’t see nearly as much snow as the upper part of Black Butte, which makes it a good choice for a challenging hike during the shoulder season. The first half of the trail is a fairly gentle uphill grade that gradually becomes steeper as it approaches the mid-mountain trailhead. The steeper section is also home to a stand of older incense cedar trees. One particular tree with unique character is a very old, extremely large cedar that is mostly snapped off. Still, it continues to grow and is producing new tops.

Another interesting item of flora on this lower portion of the Black Butte trail is the golden chinkapin. At lower elevations on the west side of the Cascades, chinkapin occurs as a tree over 100 feet tall, with trunks up to four feet in diameter; and its wood makes excellent furniture.

Here on the east side at higher elevations, however, it occurs principally as a shrub. Its narrow, evergreen leaves are two to four inches in length; and the plant’s creamy white flowers bloom throughout the summer. The chinkapin’s fruit is an

edible yellowish brown nut found inside a large spiny burr. Although I have been aware of the edible nature of these nuts, I had never actually eaten one until a few weeks ago. They are really quite tasty, but the needle-like spines that enshroud them can make the nutty reward a costly one.

The reconstituted trail is a dedicated hiker-only trail. No bikes. No horses. Toward that end, some of the deadfall blocking the trail was not removed. A few of the big downed trees were purposely left as barriers to other modes of trail traffic. However, the area has several other roads and trails open to equestrians and bicyclists.

The official trail number for this route is trail 4026, and there are enough crossroads and trails in this area, that — if you are not familiar with the route — it’s a good idea to keep an eye out for the frequent markers




PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The forest on the lower part of Black Butte makes for an excellent “shoulder season” hike when wintry weather makes the higher elevations less friendly.

showing that trail number.

The trailhead parking lot for the lower trail is located just off Forest Road 1430. To reach it, turn right at the fork in the Camp Sherman Road (Road 14) about 2.6 miles off Highway 20. After only a couple hundred yards, take the first right onto road 1430, then take the first right again into the trailhead parking lot.



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