

# Early season hiking in the Badlands

By Craig F. Eisenbeis  
Correspondent

With all the snow we've had this past winter, it looks likely that the mountain trails are still several weeks away from opening up. So, the Badlands Wilderness east of Bend is a great place to get out and do some free-range roaming. The Oregon Badlands Wilderness is a fairly recent addition to our nation's wilderness areas and was officially established in 2009 by President Barack Obama.

For this hike, we selected a 7.7-mile loop beginning at the Badlands Rock Trailhead. As it turned out, we unintentionally ended up with a slightly different result — but more on that later.

I generally consider the Badlands to be an all-year hiking destination, but that wasn't exactly true this past winter. Actually, we originally planned this hike in November, but were snowed out.

We have plenty of juniper desert closer to Sisters, so I haven't really made a point of visiting the Badlands in recent years. In fact, the last time I was out there, the Badlands had not been declared wilderness; and I was with Forest Service Geologist, the late Larry Chitwood, for whom one of the Badlands trails is now named.

From the trailhead, we headed due north and soon encountered a trail junction with the Homestead Trail (on the left), on which we planned to return. Continuing north, the terrain was flat and unremarkable. Of course, "flat" was quite welcome since this was an early season hiking tune-up! The trail is very obvious and well worn, with a sandy base.

An interesting phenomenon noted along the way was a tendency for many of the most successful juniper trees to grow atop rock piles and

outcroppings. Obviously, the microclimatic conditions among the rocks, and the junipers' ability to send roots down into tiny rock crevices, combine to ensure the trees' success.

At the three-mile mark, we came to the trail junction at "Badlands Rock" itself. The spot is marked only by a trail sign that indicates that the Badlands Rock Trail continues north. However, our plan was to take the unlabeled Castle Trail west to begin the looping portion of our hike toward Flatiron Rock. This trail is clearly marked on maps, even though there are no trail signs.

On this trail section we began to notice significant portions of trailside soils covered with a potpourri of plant life called cryptogamic crust. This layer of biotic matter is composed of a veritable casserole of living species that include lichens, algae, fungi, mosses, and cyanobacteria that all share the habitat and are collectively called cryptogamic crust.

This type of biotic layer is common throughout the Columbia Basin and functions as a soil builder and stabilizer. The spongy layer helps protect soil from erosion, absorbs moisture, and provides nitrogen and other nutrients for plant growth. When this cryptogamic crust is disturbed, the soil becomes more susceptible to erosion; and pieces broken away from the crust are unlikely to reattach. Minor disturbances to the crust may regenerate in five to seven years. Major damage to the crust, however may take more than a century to recover.

After what turned out to be less than a mile on the Castle Trail, we found ourselves at another huge rock outcropping. Since there were no other other landmarks showing on the BLM maps, we assumed that it must be Flatiron Rock. That

assumption was incorrect.

Later, when it became apparent that this uncharted rocky landmark we encountered had sent us off course, I wondered if the unknown elaborate rock structure was actually the "castle" on the Castle Trail. I subsequently contacted two separate BLM officials who professed no knowledge of any rock "castle" on the Castle Trail. Further research indicated, however, that they were quite wrong.

According to the website of OregonHikers.org, we had, in fact, found "The Castle," which we explored extensively — including "The Labyrinth," where we stopped for a leisurely lunch. The Labyrinth is a large and quite magnificent maze of rock formations filled with cracks, crevices, monoliths, tiny caves, and a myriad of other fascinating rock formations. Sweeping vistas of Central Oregon and the mountains are visible from the upper buttresses of The Castle.

None of this is visible from trail level, and The Castle appears rather nondescript from below. Therefore, it is necessary to ascend up into The Castle in order to experience this unique feature. It is a rather delightful surprise to climb up and, incongruously, find yourself in the bottom of what can only be described as what appears to be a canyon!

After climbing upward, it



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Badlands Rock is seen here at the junction of the Castle Trail.

is almost disorienting to find yourself surrounded by rock walls towering many feet above you. All the more surprising is to find all this in the midst of what otherwise seems to be a rather ordinary landscape. It is certainly one of the premier highlights of the Badlands and should not be missed.

Because of the cartographic confusion, we never reached Flatiron Rock on this outing. Instead, we followed what turned out to be a user trail that headed in the right direction (south-south-east); and, eventually, we were simply rerouted back to the Badlands Rock Trail, by which we had entered the area.

In order to successfully complete our intended loop past Flatiron Rock, the hiker must actually continue west and pass to the north of The Castle. Appropriate trail signage — and recognition of The Castle on BLM maps — would make this an easier, and less confusing,

adventure.

Of course, the upside to all of this is that we now have a ready-made new plan to hike the area and explore it from the other side of the loop to further confirm what we discovered and connect our own new imaginary dots on the landscape. There are several other significant trails through the Badlands, so the hiker has many options to choose from. Equestrians are also welcome on these trails. Since this is a dedicated wilderness, however, mechanized vehicles are prohibited.

To reach the Badlands Rock Trailhead, simply take Highway 20 for about 18 miles east of Bend. The trailhead is on the left and is marked by a BLM sign. Cross a metal cattle guard and proceed north for one mile on a paved road to the BLM trailhead on the left. Note that the correct turn-off from Highway 20 is about two miles beyond the Flatiron Trailhead turnoff.

**YOUR YEAR-ROUND IRRIGATION EXPERT**

- Backflow Installation & Testing
- Winterization
- Nelson Horse Waterers
- Underground Field Irrigation
- Residential Irrigation Services

**miller**  
IRRIGATION  
541-388-0190  
LCB#8234

ARTIST: Casey Gardner

**FRI, MAY 12**  
**COMMUNITY ARTS CELEBRATION**  
Parade 4pm • Art Stroll 4-7pm  
Community Art & Music at The Belfry  
Doors 7pm • Free

**SAT, MAY 13**  
**ART AUCTION & PARTY**  
Ponderosa Forge & Ironworks  
6pm • Dinner  
Live Music • Auction  
Call for ticket information

**COMMON CANVAS**

A community-involved art project. Take part in the fun:

**CREATE**  
your own postcard artwork. Pick up a postcard at Sisters Art Works (204 W. Adams Ave.) and create the door you want to open this year.

**PARTICIPATE**  
Decorate our community door (yes – a real door!) at The Belfry Friday, May 12

**BID**  
Silent Auction of "Opening Doors" art pieces at Sisters Art Works through Friday, May 12

Details on these community art projects at [www.sistersfolk.org/commoncanvas](http://www.sistersfolk.org/commoncanvas)

[www.SistersFolk.org](http://www.SistersFolk.org)  
541.549.4979

# CIVIL WAR!

*Reenactment*

**Saturday & Sunday**

**May 20 & 21, 2017**

House On Metolius Meadow, Camp Sherman, Oregon

[www.nwcwc.net](http://www.nwcwc.net)