

Little Belknap Crater is a study in lava-lands geology

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The Dee Wright Observatory, the lava-rock “castle” at the summit of McKenzie Pass, is one of those iconic features of our area that we often show off to visiting friends and family. The observatory was completed in 1935 as a Depression-era project of the Civilian Conservation Corps. It was named for the project’s construction foreman, who died before it was completed.

The structure, with its mountain-spotting windows and self-guiding nature trail that features volcanic geology, looks out across one of the area’s signature lava flows. However, in spite of all the people who come here, relatively few visitors to McKenzie Pass take the time to venture much farther out into the lava field.

This interesting 5.2-mile round-trip hike to the top of Little Belknap Crater is most easily accessed from a trailhead a bit more than a half mile west of the pass summit. This trailhead, on the north side of the highway, is actually an access point for the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). This hike utilizes 2.4 miles of the PCT, which leads north toward Santiam Pass from this trailhead.

Except for most of the first three-quarters of a mile, this hike is over broken lava rock. The going is rough. You should pay attention to foot placement or you might risk bruising or twisting something. I would recommend footwear with fairly stiff soles. Even so, your feet may take a beating.

According to geologists, the lava in this area was laid down about 2,600 years ago and, by some accounts, is overdue for another eruption. The first part of the hike travels across two hillocks that were just high enough to remain above the last eruption of molten rock as the lava flowed around them. As a result, two islands of

vegetation were created within the barren landscape. This “island effect” is even more apparent when seen from the top of Little Belknap.

On my first visit to Little Belknap, several years ago, I encountered a couple from North Carolina, and I wondered how they happened to end up on this hike. They told me that they were passing through, and someone at the Dee Wright parking lot had told them they should venture farther into the lava landscape, rather than just see it from the road. That was good advice then, and it remains good advice, today, especially for those of us who live here and haven’t made this trip before.

The journey over the forested islands is a pleasant one; but, as soon as the trail leads out across the open lava, the going can be a lot less pleasant, particularly on a hot day. Carry plenty of water.

The trail climbs steadily at a modest pace and passes innumerable varying examples of lava deposition. At the 2.4-mile point of the hike, there is a clear, signed fork in the lava-rock trail. Here, the trail to the summit of Little Belknap leaves the PCT, so take the right fork; and it is less than a quarter of a mile to the summit from this point. If you go left, you will run into real dirt and trees again; and that means you have taken the wrong fork.

Most of the final trail segment is pretty easy; but there is a relatively short, but steep, scramble up some rock ledges to reach the top. For those with an aversion to heights, there are NOT any precipitous high cliffs or slopes to deal with in reaching this summit of about 6,300 feet.

At the end of the trail there is a snow-fort-style rock shelter built at the summit, complete with wooden bench seating. It is a great place for a lunch break. Be sure to take the time to survey the surrounding country and, in particular, the treed “islands” in the lava that you hiked through on the way in. The distant Dee Wright Observatory is also interesting to see from this perspective.

There are some great views up here, forest fire smoke permitting. Looking east, it is easy to see how the region’s severe forest fires of recent years have changed the landscape for generations to come. In this case, the 2006 George Fire and the 2007 G.W. Fire have taken a heavy toll in the immediate area.

On the way back down from the summit, it is interesting to explore lava tubes along the trail. It is possible to walk all the way through one, a distance of less than a hundred feet. The tunnel under the lava rock is very dark, and there are obstructions; so a light source and extra care are



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Little Belknap Crater may not seem so little on a hot day!

recommended if you choose to explore.

Compared to the surrounding irregular lava flows, the walls of the lava tubes appear smooth; but they are quite rough, in spite of their appearance, and have many sharp edges. Another lava tube in the area is purported to be the most recent primary lava vent. This tube is vertical and has a deep, dangerous drop off into the darkness. There are no barriers of any kind; so use extreme caution, and keep children and pets away. Even on a warm day, very cold air flows from this unusual volcanic feature.

Speaking of pets, they are not recommended at all on this

hike, because of the very abrasive and sharp-edged lava rock forming the surface of the trail.

There are spectacular mountain views all along this stretch of trail, and I was particularly intrigued with the close-up view of the eastern slopes of Belknap Crater (the big one). This is a very interesting little hike.

McKenzie Pass is 15 miles west of Sisters on Highway 242, and the trailhead for this hike is about a half-mile beyond the summit. This area is part of the Mt. Washington Wilderness Area, so a free wilderness permit — for 12 or fewer persons — is required and can be obtained at the trailhead.

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