

# A circumnavigation of Black Butte – on foot

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We were trying to decide where to hike last week and finally settled on climbing Black Crater. No sooner had we made that decision than the trail was closed due to the Milli Fire. So, we decided that it was time to hike into Four-in-One Cone, which — for some reason or another — we keep postponing and still have never climbed. Within a couple of hours, however, the Scott Trail - and pretty much everything else over there — had been closed, too.

So, we just decided to do Black Butte yet again. The next morning, I showed up at the Lower Black Butte Trailhead and parked my truck. A couple of minutes later, my hiking buddy showed up, leaned out the car window and said, “Want to try something different?”

We settled on doing some exploration on a different part of Black Butte, and we left our vehicles at the Metolius Headwaters parking lot and headed up the hill. Neither of us had a clue that it would be eight hours before we returned, tired but proud of what we had done.

Circumnavigation. That’s a big word; and, by the time we finished our day, we had hiked about a mile for every letter (go ahead, count them). We each ended up blaming the other for coming up with the idea; but, somewhere along the trail, we made the decision to just keep going until we had completely circled Black Butte.

Our first objective was simply to link up with the Metolius-Windigo Trail,

which we did with no difficulty; and that is when our eventual plan began to insidiously take shape. Instead of looping back on the north side of the butte toward Camp Sherman, we opted to head east toward Indian Ford Campground.

Most of the trail route around Black Butte is on old logging roads, and therein lies a problem. The old roads all look alike, and signage is extremely poor and not really designed for what we decided to do. Since we had not planned this particular adventure, I was carrying only a trail map of Black Butte. What I really needed was my gigantic Sisters Ranger District map from 1986 that shows every single little dirt track that was ever carved out in the last hundred years.

We arrived at the Metolius-Windigo/Indian Ford Trail junction and, out of about five trail/road choices managed to take the correct one to continue what would become our circumnavigation. After our hike, I reconstructed what the trip should have been, with all the best routing choices; and it came out to about 12.5 miles – definitely less than our version.

Not surprisingly, our version turned out to be more challenging; and, lacking that big map, we made some wrong choices. So, as a reward for our improvisational hike, we were treated to some extra mileage when we made those wrong turns. Actually, we were doing okay until, somewhere on the south side above Black Butte Ranch, we came to another five-way intersection. There actually was

some signage there, pointing vaguely toward Upper and Lower Butte Trails, but it was unclear because there were at least three choices.

We concluded that the “Upper” Trail must be the highest one. Right? Well, actually, no. As we discovered much later, the correct choice was really the middle one. After some steep climbing, watching the Milli Fire on Black Crater, and a welcome lunch break, we encountered a switchback that never actually switched back again; and we were headed east. We had already been east. We wanted west.

A post-hike check of the big map showed that this old road ended about another three quarters of a mile up the butte and to the east, but we turned around before reaching the end of it. Back at the switchback, we took off cross country, traversing northwest and downhill, figuring that we would eventually hit the lower trail – which we did, of course; but it wasn’t as easy as that.

The off-trail brush wasn’t too bad, but I still ended up with some cuts and scratches. The tough part was the extremely steep slope, which — with a slick pine needle top layer — made for poor footing and tough going. We didn’t make very good time on this stretch. With a good cell phone signal on the south

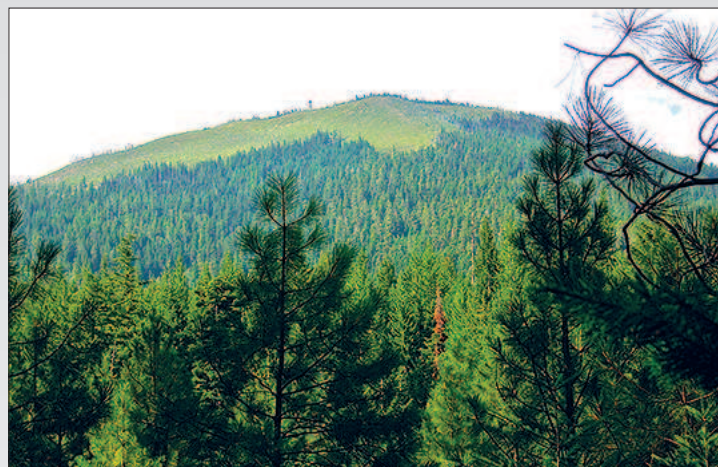


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

A circumnavigation of Black Butte can produce some unfamiliar views, such as this one of the northeast slopes of this Sisters Country landmark.

side of the butte, we also took the opportunity to advise our spouses that we would be on the trail a lot longer than we had originally planned.

It was a relief to hit the actual trail (another old road), and start to make better time and finally leave the views of Black Butte Ranch behind us. Instead, we now caught glimpses of Mt. Washington and Three Fingered Jack off to the west. With a real trail surface under our feet, we felt like we were really cruising; and we blew right on by the next trail junction, even though it was very well marked with rocks, log barriers, and tape. We thought it was the junction of a different trail.

As a result, we logged yet more unnecessary mileage before we hit another

switchback headed uphill and east, once again realizing that we were no longer headed in the desired direction. So, back we went to the trail junction we had ignored and jumped onto that trail.

This was a single-track trail obviously constructed to link those two particular old logging roads. Like our previous route to connect to a lower road, this newer trail traversed downhill and north. The terrain was similar to our previous traverse, but being on a real trail made a world of difference.

Soon, we were back on another old logging road and making good time again. Eventually, we were certain that the trail was on one of the old roads that cross the

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