

# Fish Lake and the Santiam Wagon Road

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In our search for a hike with smoke-free breathable air, we thought we'd give it a try on the west side of the mountains. The results were marginal at best, but we still had a nice hike. We started at Fish Lake, which has long since completed its annual vanishing act. When I was last here in May, it involved a two-hour kayak trip on a beautiful lake teeming with waterfowl.

Last week, however, that same space formerly occupied by the lake had become a grassy meadow, with well-traveled trails across what had, not so long ago, been the lake bottom. The lake's peculiar geology causes this unusual annual phenomenon. Each year, the lake's basin fills with snowmelt; but the underlying lava and volcanic soils are so porous that the lake cannot sustain itself when the water input tapers off during the summer.

As a result, the lake goes dry each year. Still, there actually are fish in this seasonal lake. They survive by retreating into the lake's principal tributary, Hackleman Creek, as the water level begins to fall.

For our outing this time, we chose to retrace part of the historic Santiam Wagon Road. This is one of those hikes that you can tailor to your preference for that particular day. Given the heat and smoke, we decided — before we even started — to limit our outing to between 5.2 and 7.2 miles. It's 2.6 miles to the Hackleman Road Trailhead and 3.6 miles to Lost Prairie.

The Santiam Wagon Road was built in the 1860s and

stretched from Sweet Home across Santiam Pass, down Indian Ford Creek, through Camp Polk, and eventually reached the Deschutes River north of present-day Redmond. Little more than a wide trail, the road was a principal trade route between western and eastern Oregon through the remainder of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth.

In response to the increasing cross-state traffic, roadhouses appeared along the way, the largest of which was at Fish Lake. There, shelters were built to accommodate travelers; and the site is reported to have included a hotel, blacksmith shop, cabins, and a saloon. Starting in 1905, the site was also used by the U.S. Forest Service as a ranger outpost.

The structures remaining today date primarily from 1910 and 1924. Of special interest, however, is the pioneer grave of Charity Ann Noble, which significantly predates that era. In October of 1875, 19-year-old Charity Ann died in childbirth at this remote waystation when her family was trapped there by an unexpected early season snowstorm. Her infant also died, and they were buried together at the site.

The grave is less than half a mile from the parking lot and can be visited without the necessity of a formal "hike." On this occasion, though, after paying our respects at the gravesite, we continued on up the hill and farther along the historic wagon road. Last year, we walked another section of the wagon road, 20 miles farther to the west, near the site of the former Mountain House waystation.

This day, however, we had no intention of going anywhere near that far.

Trail guides and contour maps show very little elevation gain, but there are some notable ups and downs along this trail, especially if you are prone to wheezing in Central Oregon's 2017 blanket of smoke.

The most stunning feature of this hike is the trees. First of all, they are green and unburned; but, beyond that, they are gigantic. Rivaling the majestic Douglas firs of the better-known Hackleman Grove, another mile west of Lost Prairie, these are some of the most magnificent trees you will see anywhere in our region.

One disappointment is that, although the trail parallels Hackleman Creek the whole way, it is not visible anywhere along the route until it approaches the Lost Prairie Campground. West of the Hackleman Creek Road Trailhead (2.6 miles from Fish Lake), there is also a significant amount of road noise from Highway 20, which makes turning back at that point an attractive alternative.

If you continue on, however, the trail narrows to something more akin to a single-track, and the undergrowth becomes more lush. The trail crosses picturesque Toad Creek on a heavy-timbered bridge that looks substantial enough to hold an eighteen-wheeler. Continuing to Lost Prairie makes for a 7.2-mile round trip; and it is more than nine miles for a round trip to the Hackleman Grove.

If you are really ambitious, a round trip to Tombstone Pass would be a whopping 18

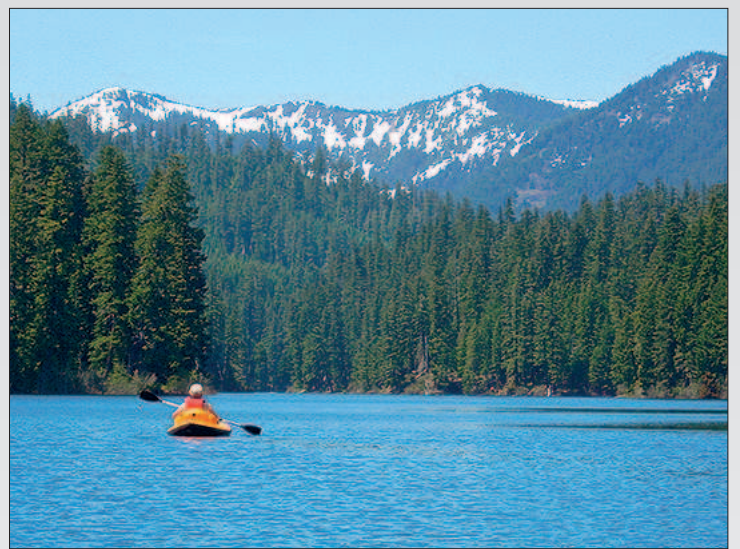


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

These photos of Fish Lake — here in May and below in August of this year — illustrate Fish Lake's annual vanishing act.

miles, but a judicious car drop at any of these locations halves the total distance. We chose to stick to our pre-determined limit and returned by the same route on the wagon road.

The old wagon road became obsolete in 1939 when the new Santiam Pass Highway was completed along its present-day route. This new road means that today you don't need to worry about becoming trapped, like Charity Ann, if you choose to visit the site of the old Fish Lake station.

To relive this bit of local history, to enjoy hiking the old wagon road, or to visit Charity Ann's final resting place,

travel west from Sisters over Santiam Pass on Highway 20 — fire conditions permitting.

At the Santiam "Y," take the left fork on Highway 20 toward Eugene and Corvallis. Three miles later, take the next left fork toward Eugene on Highway 126. The Fish Lake parking lot is about a mile farther on the right. The first road, to the Guard Station, is usually gated, so take the Forest Service-marked roadside turnoff that follows. The site and buildings continue to be used by the Forest Service as part of the Fish Lake Guard Station. The guard station also serves as an historic and interpretive site.



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Fish Lake in August of this year.

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