

Flatiron Rock: an easy hike in the Badlands

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Although we're seeing trails opening up in the high country, it's still worth taking note of alternative areas that are (nearly) all-season hiking destinations. After all, not every day lends itself to a high mountain expedition.

The Badlands Wilderness east of Bend is always 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.

This is the sort of hike that can be undertaken at the spur of the moment; and that's exactly what we did on this occasion, late last month. True, the Badlands Wilderness is comprised of juniper desert of the sort that is not exactly in short supply around Central Oregon. Still, it's a friendly tract of dedicated land that is always just out there waiting for you.

The hike to Flatiron Rock is a nice little jaunt of 5.8 to 7.2 miles, depending on which variant you travel. The differing lengths depend on to what extent you utilize the Ancient Juniper Trail option. If you skip it altogether, it's 5.8 miles; take it just one way, and it's 6.5. Taking that option both ways brings the total to 7.2; we took a 6.5 mile one-way version, which completes a loop

at the southern end of the trail, thereby limiting backtracking on the same trail.

From the roadside trailhead, we headed north on the Ancient Juniper Trail, which takes off to the left of the trailhead kiosk. For the more direct, shorter version, start off by going to the right of the kiosk. On our way back, we would return by that route, for the mid-distance loop option. By way of full disclosure, we also took the loop trail through and around Flatiron Rock itself, bringing our total to about 7 miles.

Not surprisingly, the Ancient Juniper Trail passes many old and scenic juniper trees along the way and offers interesting insight into the desert ecosystem. The Badlands area also features trailside soils covered with plant life called cryptogamic crust. This layer of biotic matter is composed of a variety of living species that include lichens, algae, fungi, mosses, and cyanobacteria that all share the habitat and are collectively called cryptogamic crust. It is extremely fragile.

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.

An interesting phenomenon we 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.

All of these trails are flat and easy, with plenty of two-track mileage to walk side-by-side. If a very short hike is what you're looking for, yet another option is to just take the loop at the southern end of the trail. For the 3.1-mile loop, simply return south to the parking lot at the trail junction (1.9 miles from the start), where the Ancient Juniper Trail returns to the Flatiron Trail. From there, it's only 1.2 miles back to the parking lot.

When we hit that junction, we continued north to the Homestead Trail junction, which we ignored to continue north on Flatiron for another 1.6 miles, where we found ourselves at Flatiron Rock. This is also the junction of the Castle



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

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

Trail. The trail sign indicates that the Flatiron Trail continues north, but Flatiron Rock itself is right there on your left. So, unless you want to make your hike even longer, you have arrived at your destination.

A nice little loop trail to the left leads up into the fort-like lava structure known as Flatiron Rock. Ascending the slight slope up to the rock, we found ourselves on a trail channeled between

lava-rock walls, with many cracks, crevices, tiny caves, and a jumble of interesting rock formations. We stopped for a leisurely lunch, then continued to explore farther west inside the structure. Eventually the trail looped to the left, around the big rock pile, and headed back east.

By following the trail along the contour of the rock walls, we eventually looped

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