

TRAILS: Despite burned areas, popular trails are still open

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“The Black Crater Trail is the only trail that remains closed from the Milli Fire,” she said. “Although the Black Crater Trail is within a high fire burn severity section on steep slope, the Deschutes [National Forest] is optimistic about being able to open the Black Crater Trail at a future date. Hazard-tree removal at the trailhead and trail drainage work will need to occur prior to reopening.”

She also offered advice for trail users in burned areas that are open. “Forest users should use extreme caution when entering burned areas and should expect many trees fallen across the trails,” she said. “Portions of trail are damaged or blocked with down and dead trees.”

Racki urged caution because of “stump holes, standing dead trees, falling trees and limbs, flooding, debris-flow, and rock-fall. Avoid burned areas during high winds,” she warned. She also noted that “loss of trail tread is anticipated in areas due to lack of vegetation and increased runoff of water during storm events. Please stay on the trail to minimize post-fire impacts such as erosion and social trail development.”

The Matthieu Lakes Trail is a favorite, and one of the most popular trails in the entire region. Racki and this correspondent hiked in to

the north lake to evaluate the status of the trail: In spite of some significant damage, the ecosystem along the trail was not completely destroyed and the area retains much of its unique appeal. The forest surrounding both lakes remains untouched.

Fire damage along the trail is varied, with much of it having the spotty quality of a mosaic burn. Some pockets of trees were completely untouched by the flames; but one stretch of trail is very badly burned. Interestingly, one burned portion of trail is the area where there was a great proliferation of burls on the tree trunks. With all the ground vegetation and most of the lower limbs gone, the charred, grotesque arboreal malformations lend an eerie and striking presence reminiscent of a sculpture display. The Matthieu Lakes Trail is high on the list for priority clearing of downed trees; but the trail is quite passable with minimal obstacles at present.

The status of Lava Camp Lake Campground is another topic of particular interest since the fire. Although the campground has reopened, Racki reports “high burn severity where 100 percent tree mortality occurred in pockets of the campground. Three campsites were closed within these pockets of standing dead trees due to unsafe hazard-tree conditions. Eight of the original 11 campsites are still available.”

Area rehabilitation is in progress, and one site within the burned area remained

green and has been converted to a walk-in campsite. It now requires hauling camp gear about 300 yards from the end of the shortened access road. Racki said that the more remote site now provides a great opportunity for campers who seek a quiet place or for Pacific Crest Trail backpackers looking for a pleasant respite.

Campers will also find that parking for the remaining campsites has been revised. “We still need to install signing, and complete trail and clean-up work at Lava Camp Lake Campground, which we hope to complete this summer,” Racki said.

On the way up to the pass, the scenic McKenzie Highway looks very different now; and a wide swath has been cleared on both sides of the highway in burned areas, which seems to include most of the road on the Sisters side of McKenzie Pass. The bare dirt roadsides are a stark contrast to the lush green forests we had grown accustomed to. The roadsides are also punctuated by massive piles of dead forest debris. The current plan calls for the piled debris to be burned in the fall when conditions permit.



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Amy Racki, recreation team leader for the Sisters Ranger District, hiked the Matthieu Lakes Trail last week to assess damage from the Milli Fire.

Ian Reid, Sisters District Ranger, said “the Forest Service appreciates the public’s patience and support while we assess and remedy post-fire impacts to trails and recreation sites. While almost all of the fire area is open to the public, some inherent risk remains when hiking or riding in recently burned areas.”

So, while yet another of Sisters’ forest playgrounds has gone up in flames, there are still adventures to be

had and sights to see within the Milli Fire’s boundaries. Forest users are urged to exercise caution and good sense while visiting burned areas — both for their own safety and to avoid aggravating fragile conditions and the already lengthy recovery process. The public is encouraged to “KNOW BEFORE YOU GO” by contacting the Sisters Ranger District office at 541-549-7700 if you plan to visit the area.

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