

Yapoah Lake narrowly escaped Milli Fire

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Yapoah Lake, which has always been a bit mysterious because of its off-trail and semi-secret status, mostly escaped the conflagration of last year's Milli Fire. Even though the flames burned all the way to Yapoah Lake's waterline in several places, the forest surrounding the lake remains a largely green oasis at the southwestern edge of the burn.

This lake first came to my attention three years ago, when a lady contacted me for information about the lake. I not only didn't have any information, I hadn't even heard of the lake before. Although the place is obvious on any map, it isn't that easy to find. Eventually, after some extensive investigation, I did find the remote, quiet, and scenic little lake. So, when I saw that the lake had been in the path of the Milli Fire, I wanted to know how badly it was hit; and, as it turns out, it wasn't too bad.

The trail into and through the surrounding area, however, is another story. The lower part of the Scott Pass Trail that leads to the lake was never exactly a scenic wonder; and the earlier Pole Creek Fire certainly didn't help. Even before that fire, however, this portion of the trail was mostly bug-killed lodgepole pine forest. Some of this area was not burned then, but that was hardly evident because it was mostly dead, anyway. In the wake of the Milli Fire, the section of trail nearest the trailhead parking lot hasn't really changed much from three years ago.

The early part of the trail is in good condition, but the forest is extremely dry. If you attempt this hike – and I can't really say I recommend it – the distance totals about

five or six miles, depending on how much wandering and exploring you do.

Upon entering the new Milli burn, the damage is quite mosaic, with many trees and other greenery surviving. Later, however, everything is burnt to a crisp; and the trail degenerates into several inches of fine dirt and dust. At times, it was like walking in soft beach sand, which can be a lot of work and generate a cloud of dust. At one point, we encountered a half-dozen mounted equestrians, who stirred up a veritable dust storm.

On the bright side, the trail was logged out early in the season, so there was very little deadfall to contend with. Another surprise was that new trail signs have already been installed to replace those that were burned. The trail forks about a mile and a quarter from the trailhead. At this first marked junction, stay left toward Scott Pass and Green Lakes; do not cross the creek on the right.

After less than a half mile, the trail forks again. Green Lakes are to the left; stay right this time. Yapoah Lake is off-trail to the southwest, but continue west toward Scott Pass for about another three quarters of a mile. Three years ago, this area was a lush and green fir and hemlock forest; today, it is mostly burned wasteland. The not-an-official trail to Yapoah Lake is actually more obvious than it used to be, even though the marker trees are now gone with the fire.

As it happens, we left the trail too early, resulting in much hard going on very steep slopes. In lightly burned areas, the carpet of dead needles can be very slick on a steep slope. We eventually found the lake, which had a considerably



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The basin holding Yapoah Lake is a remote and scenic spot that mostly survived the effects of the Milli Fire.

higher water level than during our previous late September visit. I tend not to be a big fan of GPS because users depending on it often fail to learn basic outdoor and orienteering skills. For this trip, however, GPS – or, better yet, a map app – is probably a good idea.

We came in on the steeply sloping eastern shore of the lake and ate lunch there before exiting from the north end. Although the fire burned down to the shoreline in this area, the grove of big old cottonwood trees was surprisingly unscathed. From that spot, the top of the North Sister can be seen peeking over a ridge south of the lake. In the areas where the fire crept down to the lake's edge, those portions of the fire are more like a very gentle underburn.

I don't really recommend this trip for the average hiker; but, for a seasoned and well-equipped outdoor adventurer, this can be an interesting outing. The lake itself is very beautiful; and the fact that it remains intact after the fire makes it quite a forest gem in

an area where few highlights remain.

To reach the Scott Pass Trailhead, take the McKenzie Highway (242) five miles west of Sisters to a left turn onto Forest Road 1018; there is a brown sign pointing toward the Scott Pass Trailhead and other features. About six miles later, turn right onto Road 1026; from here, it's a little over a mile to the trailhead. This is not a fee-use area, but free wilderness permits are required and available at a trailhead kiosk.

And, if you're wondering about the name "Yapoah," it is borrowed from nearby

Yapoah Crater, a rather striking cinder cone to the west, which juts up abruptly from the surrounding terrain. Most of the other peaks around it are forged into one continuous wall of alpine splendor – part of the Cascade Crest. Yapoah Crater, however, is set off by itself; and that's how it earned its name.

Yapoah is a native term that translates as "isolated hill." So, in 1924, that was the name assigned by Edwin T. Hodge, a University of Oregon professor who was studying the mountains that now constitute the heart of the Three Sisters Wilderness.

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