

An excellent hike up Scott Mountain

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In the continuing search for forest that is still green, we once again headed to the west side of the Cascades, through the Milli Fire-ravaged east side of McKenzie Pass to the Scott Mountain Trailhead. This destination is occasionally overlooked but offers great views of the western aspects of the Three Sisters. As it turned out, even with our perpetually smokey skies, the view was superb.

The trailhead for Scott Mountain takes off from the McKenzie Highway just a few miles west of the pass. At 6,116 feet, this “mountain” offers sweeping views of the Cascades from an entirely different perspective than we usually see. Scott Mountain is named for Felix Scott, Jr., who was instrumental in the development of the Scott Trail over nearby Scott Pass in 1862. Scott Lake also bears his name.

The trail begins, appropriately enough, near the Scott Lake Campground. The hike passes through a mature mixed-conifer forest, predominantly featuring firs, hemlock and whitebark pine. The trail is well defined and mostly smooth, with a conifer needle carpeting. The trail has been recently logged out and groomed; and a portion, near the beginning, has been re-routed. The trail has so many nature highlights that you scarcely notice the time passing.

The first major landmark, after 1.4 miles and a measly elevation gain of only 380 feet, is picturesque Benson Lake. The lake appears suddenly when the trail tops an uphill grade. At that point, the trail curves to the right. For lake access, a well-worn path drops off to the left a short distance later.

Benson Lake lies placidly in a glacier-carved basin; and our destination, red cinder-streaked Scott Mountain, can be seen beyond the glacier-carved ridge on the north side of the lake. With a maximum depth of 55 feet, Benson Lake is 26 acres in size and lies at an elevation of 5,250 feet.

Another 1.1 miles up the trail are the Tenas Lakes, the largest of which may be reached by a short side trail to the left. This is an interesting group of at least nine small lakes and ponds. If you want to find all nine, it will take a bit of exploring.

The largest of the Tenas Lakes is only 4.5 acres, and the remainder are much smaller. The Tenas Lakes are about 300 vertical feet higher

than Benson Lake and have a maximum depth of only 19 feet. These lakes are a popular swimming destination. My water-loving hiking buddy jumped into the largest Tenas Lake on both the inbound and outbound legs of this hike.

A few hundred yards beyond the Tenas Lakes junction, there is another junction. The fork to the left leads to “The Knobs.” Bear right to continue to the Scott Mountain summit. The next trail junction is a little less than a mile from the Tenas junction; bear left here. From that point, it’s a little more than half a mile to the summit of Scott Mountain, and only about 300 vertical feet. Some of this trail is quite steep; but, at least, it’s almost entirely in the shade. When you suddenly run out of shade, you’re almost there!

This is a pleasant hike that is not all that difficult but still offers a unique wilderness challenge. The view from the top is stunning, and you’ll be in no hurry to leave; so this is a good place to eat lunch, which is exactly what we did.

The profiles of the western sides of the Three Sisters are entirely different and a very interesting change of pace. Plus, you can see Little Brother; at 7,810 feet, this little mountain wannabe hugs the northeast shoulder of his big sister Faith (North Sister). Little Brother is hidden from view in the town of Sisters. The Husband, at a jagged 7,524 feet, is also visible from this former lookout site. The

footings of the old lookout are still in place at the summit.

The summit of Scott Mountain is a spot where you will want to drink in and study the entire topography of the Oregon Cascades. Even the top of Mt. Hood was visible as a white triangle jutting up from the western flank of Mt. Jefferson. If it’s at all windy, which it wasn’t on our visit, there is a nice cove of stunted firs on the summit for a windbreak. On our visit, we used the trees for shade while we ate lunch.

This trail is equestrian-friendly, and I have seen horses at the summit on previous visits. Returning by the same route makes for an 8.2-mile hike. An alternate loop trail extends the hike to about ten miles total. To partake of the alternate, longer return, take the left fork at the trail junction on your way down.

At first, the alternate trail is somewhat featureless and tedious; but, after another trail junction, where you should turn right (west), it eventually reaches a flat, sandy path along the edge of the McKenzie lava flow. One treat on this route is a close-up view of a portion of the original wagon road over the pass, built by John Craig in the early 1870s. In this portion of his trail, he hacked and chipped a road right through the lava rock – then charged a toll for subsequent users. His efforts are still visible today.

From there, the longer loop trail continues west to Hand Lake; and the going is

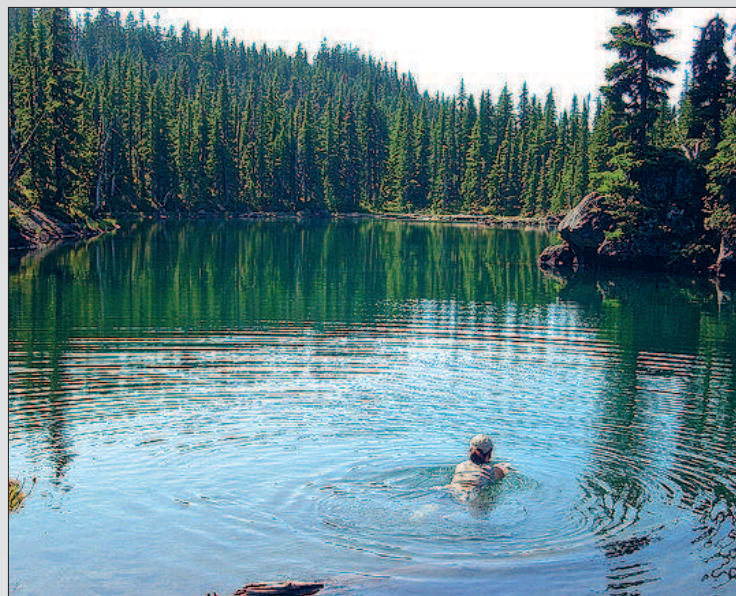


PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

The Tenas Lakes are a great place for a swim break.

much easier. There are gorgeous views of the Sisters in this area. The lava flow ends in Hand Lake, surrounded by a beautiful grassy basin late in the season; and, from that point, it’s about a mile and a half back to the trailhead parking lot.

On this occasion, however, we chose the more direct route back, taking the right fork after leaving the summit and retracing our steps. Besides, my friend was anxious to swim at Tenas Lakes again. This time, I was ready for a swim, too; and we spent more than an hour swimming and relaxing at the lake. All in all, we took a very leisurely

seven hours on this trip. At that slow pace, and with our many stops along the way, this was a relaxing and thoroughly fun jaunt in the woods. Who says that a hike has to be a speedy endurance contest?

To conquer either the eight- or 10-mile versions of this hike, take the McKenzie Pass Highway (242) west from Sisters. The trailhead is at the end of the Scott Lake turn-off, about 5.6 miles beyond McKenzie Pass on the right. A trip up Scott Mountain is a hike you shouldn’t miss. The trailhead parking lot is a fee-use area, and a free wilderness pass is required.

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