

Clear Lake, the perfect fall hike

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Unless a fall trip to New England is on your agenda, your best bet for viewing the brilliant leaf colors of autumn is a visit to Clear Lake. This is always my favorite local fall hike. Heck, it's everyone's favorite fall hike around here, and long-range weather forecasts suggest that there are still more excellent fall hiking opportunities to be enjoyed in the days ahead.

Just over Santiam Pass and only about a half-hour away, Clear Lake's fall leaves create a Cascade kaleidoscope of color not to be missed. Just because it's on the other side of "The Hill" doesn't mean we should overlook the nearby wonders of the upper McKenzie River.

Last week we took the relatively short drive over to Clear Lake. Unlike many of the area's remote hiking destinations, you can drive right up to Clear Lake. So, even if you're not inclined to hit the trail, this is an outing you can enjoy without ever leaving your car. But do! The loop trail is only 5.5 miles and offers terrific natural wonders.

For starters, unlike many Clear Lakes — and there are quite a few — this one actually lives up to its name. In fact, the intensely blue waters are so clear that you can see trees submerged when lava flows created the lake 3,000 years ago. These aren't petrified trees or lava casts; they're the real thing. The waters of Clear Lake are so cold that the microorganisms that cause wood to rot generally cannot survive here.

The excellent trail around the lake is nearly flat, except for some incidental ups and downs through the lava rock

on the southeast portion of the trail; and much of that section is paved! On this visit, we followed the trail counterclockwise around the lake, only because we usually go the opposite way. We also observed that traveling in this direction means never having to directly face the sun. When traveling south on the west side of the lake, the hiker is always in deep shade; and, when hiking north through the open lava flows on the east side, the sun is at your back.

Another observation we made is that most people seem to travel clockwise, so the disadvantage of this route is that you are more likely to encounter more of your fellow hikers going in the opposite direction; and there were quite a few. This place isn't exactly a secret. We arrived at 9:30 a.m., and we were only the third car in the small parking lot. A friend had been there earlier in the week and warned us that the place was packed wall-to-wall later in the morning. And, sure enough, by the time we returned, cars were overflowing into every nook and cranny of the area.

This popular lake resort destination is also home to a lodge, a small general store, cabins, and boat rentals. Some of the 3,000-year-old submerged tree trunks can even be seen right from the dock at the lodge. The facilities are open and available all year, although a tiny restaurant that operates only during the summer closes this week. Furthermore, we planned to treat ourselves to ice cream at the lodge's general store, but discovered that they were all sold out!

On the whole, the vegetation surrounding the lake is quite foreign to those of us who live at the edge of the High Desert. Thousands of

vine maples encircle the lake and provide brilliant red, orange, and yellow fall colors. The colors are especially bright this year, and we have seen other years when the colors did not reach the peak we saw on this visit. The fall temperatures and weather have apparently created just the right formula for prime color, but don't delay. The color display can change rapidly.

In addition to the brightly colored leaves, giant fir trees, some more than 20 feet in circumference, grace the forest. One of my favorite little trees is also native to the area. Pacific Yew is a lesser known "under-tree" growing in the shadows of the dense forests of the West. With neatly ordered flat rows of needles, like the teeth of a comb, yew resembles a cross between hemlock and grand fir but never reaches the grander dimensions of either. Unlike grand fir, the needles are pointed like sword tips; and, unlike hemlock, yew needles are longer and lie in a single, flat plane.

Although reported to reach heights of more than 75 feet, most are 20-30 feet tall, with diameters of only a few inches. There is one specimen on the east side of the lake that is a foot in diameter and nearly 50 feet tall. The bark of larger yews is smooth, flaky, and purplish in appearance. The slow-growing, tightly grained



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Fall colors abound at this bridge crossing on the Clear Lake Trail.

wood is extremely strong, yet limber. Yew has been used for centuries to make archery bows and canoe paddles.

Since October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, it is also appropriate to note the role of the yew tree's bark in the early development of tamoxifen, a pharmaceutical used to combat breast cancer. Tamoxifen, however, is now synthetically produced, which helped save the little species from decimation.

One of the most unique features of the hike is Great Springs. Clear Lake is the "official" headwaters of the McKenzie River, but Great Springs gives birth to the lake itself. By fall, other tributaries to the lake have mostly


dried up, but Great Springs pours 43-degree water into the lake without regard to the season. This deep blue pool near the northeast corner of the lake is a must-see; and, once you've come that far, you might as well do the entire loop since you're already about half way!

To access this hike, take Highway 20 west over the pass and turn left at the Santiam "Y" (instead of continuing to Salem). Three miles later, take Highway 126 left toward Eugene for another three miles. Then follow the signs to Clear Lake Lodge on the left. This is not a fee-use area, but the campground on the other side of the lake is.

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