

Social distancing on Jack Creek Trail

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Columnist

The coronavirus and social distancing have affected us all. Unlike downtown city dwellers, however, we have a lot more freedom to move about, without risking that dreaded human contact. My hiking buddy and I resolved not to let the current situation completely freeze us out of one of our favorite activities.

Still, virus cautions have disrupted our usual routine. For example, carpooling is now out; so, more distant destinations with two vehicles are less attractive since we can't take turns driving just one car. Car drops for one-way hikes are also out. As a result, we've been opting for shorter, closer outings; and you can't get much closer or shorter than the Jack Creek Trail.

The Jack Creek Trail is a short, flat trail in a park-like setting, with a truly remarkable natural phenomenon as a destination objective. I have even seen families with strollers on this trail. To the hardcore hiker, though, it might be a stretch to call it a hike. Maybe an "outing in the woods."

Although often overlooked because of the larger and better-known Headwaters of the Metolius, the birthplace of Jack Creek has many of the same qualities as its more famous nearby sibling. One difference, however, is that it's possible to walk right up to the very spot where the stream gurgles fully formed from the hillside.

As with the Metolius River and most of its other tributaries, Jack Creek has its origins in the winter snows of the Cascade Range. The snowmelt, however, doesn't simply run along the surface. Rather, it seeps down through

the volcanic soils and rock to emerge, years later — usually many miles from its origin.

In the Metolius Basin, basalt lava flows have been overlaid by alluvial deposits of sediment and gravel. Cracks in the underground basalt layers serve as aquifers to bring the Cascade melt waters back to the surface. In the case of the Metolius Basin, these cracks tend to deliver their water flow all at about the same elevation level, in this case, about 3,200 feet. Most of these outlets, like Jack Creek, are on the west side of the Metolius River.

To observe this interesting phenomenon and get a close-up look at the headwaters, there are three trail options to choose from. One is easy, another is even easier, and the third is *really* easy.

To take an easy three mile round trip, leave your car near the Jack Creek Bridge and walk along the creek, then through the campground. The sound of the creek is always within earshot, and the forest is beautiful. For a shorter, two mile version, park at the west end of the Jack Creek Campground and follow the wide, flat, smooth trail upstream for one mile. The trail is not paved, but it is about as close as you can get to a sidewalk in the woods. It should be noted, that as we get farther into summer, the trail can become dry and dusty.

For the *really* easy walk, there is another access point, from which the headwaters can be reached at the end of a well-maintained trail that is only about a half mile from the parking lot. This trail joins the main streamside trail near a rustic log bench.

The 2003 B&B Fire touched the area on the north side of the creek, and

the effects are still apparent. Several trees have fallen upstream of the bench trail junction and, as of last week, had not been cleared. The area along the creek itself is unburned, and magnificent old growth pines and firs tower above the trail.

Deer and elk are sometimes seen in the area, and wildflowers will soon be blooming. Both trails are perfect for a relaxing stroll and for introducing children to an "outing in the woods." The trails are even suitable for toddlers.

We were a little surprised to encounter about a dozen other people on this walk, which is the most I've ever encountered here. Apparently, we weren't the only ones looking for an escape from housebound seclusion.

To find these relaxing little hikes, drive west from Sisters on Highway 20 for about 12 miles. Turn right onto the (paved) Jack Lake Road (Forest Road 12). Do *not* take the subsequent Round Lake turn off (about a mile on the left); instead, continue on Road 12 for a total of just over four miles. At that point, the road curves to the right; take the Jack Creek turnoff to the left (Road 1230). It's easy to miss this turnoff if you're not paying attention.

This next portion of the Jack Creek Road is ostensibly still paved but is in horrible condition, so drive with great care. It soon crosses the Jack Creek Bridge, and the "pavement" ends. Park here for the three-mile hike. For the two mile option, turn left after crossing the Jack Creek Bridge onto Forest Road



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Scenic Jack Creek gurgles fully formed from the ground.

1232, where a sign points toward "Head of Jack Creek." This is a good gravel road. Take the second turnoff into the Jack Creek Campground.

To reach the trailhead for the very easy short stroll,

drive about a mile farther west on Road 1232 and watch for well-marked junctions bearing left to "Head of Jack Creek." Follow the signs to the parking area on Road 400.

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