

Little Three Creek Lake is a nice family hike

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Columnist

Last week, we had planned to hike on the west side of McKenzie Pass, but since all the roads were closed due to the fires, we had to come up with a different plan. My hiking buddy, who was already sheltering at our place due to Camp Sherman's uncertain fire evacuation status, suggested we keep it simple with a short hike to Little Three Creek Lake. Off we went.

This is a great little hike for a spur-of-the-moment outing. Also, this trail might be a good choice for your visiting out-of-town relatives whose idea of an outdoor experience has previously been limited to a backyard barbecue. It's definitely more challenging than a city sidewalk but still suitable for toddlers. My three-year-old daughter didn't have any problem with this trail, although that particular hike took place 44 years ago.

The trail begins at a dead-end loop at the far end of the Driftwood Campground at Three Creek Lake (the larger one). The trail is definitely easy, but there are a couple of short, steep pitches, with some rough, rocky stretches. The trail itself is well-worn but not particularly well-marked or maintained. In many spots, the trail is braided by informal shortcuts that (usually) re-converge.

Since the fires were apparently discouraging or preventing much recreational travel, there was plenty of parking at the trailhead. On some other occasions we have had to park as far away as the lot at the beginning of the campground access road; so additional walking could be required on a more crowded day. As it happened we did not encounter a single soul on the trail or at the lake; we had the whole place to ourselves.

The hike to Little Three Creek Lake is billed as being about a mile one way, but it's hardly that if you don't do some additional exploration. In other words, this is a very short hike; but it still offers a sense of genuinely being in the mountains. Not every hike needs to be an endurance contest.

One of the features of this hike that always strikes me is that, at 6,700 feet, this is genuinely an alpine experience. Even in summer, there is always the feel that winter-like mountain snows may lurk just around the corner.

The trail from the campground turnaround loop winds through a mixed conifer forest that bears witness to the stress of surviving at such a high elevation. Alpine fir, mountain hemlock, and

whitebark pine are the predominant tree species. Many of the trees are twisted and stunted. Some of the trees look like bonsais; some hemlocks grow flat like ground cover; still others manage to grow straight and tall. One wonders what determines the fate of an individual tree.

About the time you're starting to feel warmed up, you're almost there. You'll see a little lake ahead on your left. Stop to enjoy its beauty, but don't stop there. That's not your destination. This little water feature is even littler than Little Three Creek Lake, which is just a little bit farther.

The expansive rock wall rising above these lakes is Tam McArthur Rim, which rises to more than 7,700 feet. It is the same high rock ridge, which, from Sisters, can be seen leading up to the east side of Broken Top. This distinctive geographic feature is named for Lewis A. "Tam" McArthur.

In 1914, Gov. Oswald West appointed McArthur to the Oregon Geographic Names Board. Two years later, McArthur became the board's secretary, a position in which he served for the next 33 years. During that time, he literally wrote the book on "Oregon Geographic

Names." Ironically, the rim that bears his name is probably one of the few prominent geographic features in Oregon that he never visited!

Little Three Creek Lake offers spectacular views and photo opportunities and also presents a great little crash course in the natural world, including plenty of wildflowers earlier in the season. From August into October, it's common to see thousands of tiny toads and frogs testing their new land legs. When these little creatures emerge from the water, they're not much bigger than a pinkie fingernail.

On previous visits, we have often seen dark masses that look like fresh cow pies, but they turned out to be swarming, seething globs of tiny toads. When approached, these swarming amphibians madly dash away through the grass in a toadlet stampede. On this occasion, there were only "mere" hundreds of (mostly) frogs.

When our second son visited the lake at age five, he was fascinated with the swarm of little amphibians. Due to an earlier incident that involved a cape, climbing a tree, and an unexpected inability to fly, his arm was in a cast; and several of the



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Tam McArthur Rim rises above Little Three Creek Lake.

tiny creatures slipped inside the cast, causing yet another unexpected problem.

This lake is very shallow in spots, and it's a great place to take a swim in the shadow of the mountains. It's also a perfect site for a woody picnic lunch and family outing in the great outdoors. Plus, the "real" wilderness is literally only a few yards beyond the lake. In 2012, the Pole Creek Fire reached nearly to the lake but stopped just short of it. Vestiges of the fire are quite apparent on the drive to the trailhead, but are hardly noticeable during the hike or at the lake itself.

To visit Little Three

Creek Lake, take Elm Street south from Sisters. After crossing Whychus Creek, the road becomes Three Creek Lake Road (Forest Road 16). Follow it for a total of about 16 miles, the first 14 of which are paved. Those two miles of gravel road are in poor shape this year but still passable in a regular passenger car. Turn right onto Forest Road 900 just before reaching Three Creek Lake. The trail begins at the end of this short road. This has been a fee use area, but I did not see any signs to that effect. I've seen several sites where pass requirements have been suspended this year.

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