

# A fall visit to Clear Lake is a must

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As soon as the calendar flips over to October, I start thinking about a visit to Clear Lake. Just over Santiam Pass, and only about a half hour away, there's no better place to see fall colors in our area. This is always my favorite local fall hike. As far as that goes, it's probably everyone's favorite fall hike around here — and the long range weather forecast suggests that there will be many remaining opportunities in October.

My hiking buddy and I do this hike almost every year about this time, but we decided to mix it up a little this year and threw in our kayaks as an option. Actually, just the possibility of visiting Clear Lake was a bit tenuous this year because access was restricted most of last month due to the fires and the ensuing road closures. Fortunately, the area reopened last week, and we were quick to take advantage.

We weren't the only ones who had that idea.

This visit to Clear Lake was the busiest day at the lake I've ever seen. We arrived in late morning last Saturday, and there was still plenty of parking; but, by early afternoon, the place was packed. Still there was plenty of space to socially distance. The skies were blue, the winds were calm, and the lake surface was like glass; so we decided to go for the aquatic option.

There were a few other kayaks and canoes; but, mostly, there was a lot of fishing going on. We decided to head north of the resort, since that area seemed to be less crowded.

There are quite a few Clear Lakes in this world, but this is one that 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.

While paddling along, it's impossible not to peer into the clear depths scores of feet below. The ancient trees are certainly the most striking objects of interest; but, this time, we saw something new. While it's not uncommon to see fish cruising the depths, this time we saw several salmon-sized trout — we're talking fish in the 24-to-30-inch range!

At this time of the year, surface tributaries to the lake have long since dried up, but Great Spring is still

pumping its very cold water into the lake and forming the "official" headwaters of the McKenzie River. We headed there first and entertained ourselves by paddling into the swift current emerging from the spring. Next, we lazily paddled to the north end of the lake, where — in the spring — Fish Lake Creek delivers water from... Fish Lake.

On our way back toward the resort, we witnessed squadrons of waterfowl practicing coordinated takeoffs and landings. The resort, with its small store and cabins is open all year; but the kitchen is now closed for the season. Since the area is around 3,000 feet in elevation, the lake is often snow-free in late fall and early spring.

Paddling south, past the resort, we encountered a multitude of hand-powered boats, most of which were engaged in fishing. Motorized boats are prohibited on this lake. A few of the boats were having almost non-stop fishing action. Brook trout and cutthroat trout reproduce naturally in the lake, and rainbow trout are regularly stocked. Most of the fish we saw being caught were rainbows, with a few nice-size brookies, as well.

The loop trail around the lake is only about five and a half miles long and offers terrific natural wonders. This excellent trail 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.

It seems that hiker traffic usually tends to be counterclockwise around the lake, but was pretty evenly divided on this occasion. Traveling counterclockwise 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.

For the most part, the lush, dense 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. Maybe because it has been such a dry year, the colors don't seem to be quite so brilliant this year, but it's still a beautiful sight. Perhaps colder fall temperatures will remedy that; the color display can change rapidly.

This is an outing you can enjoy without even leaving your car — but you should, even if it's just to stroll a short distance into the forest or walk down to the resort's dock, where some of the submerged trees are visible in the crystal clear water.

To reach Clear Lake,

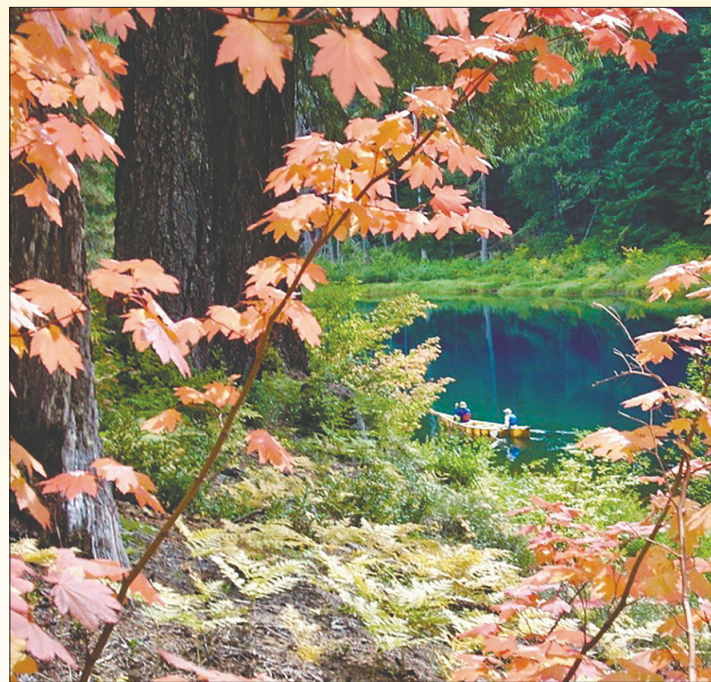


PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Fall colors frame a canoe gliding through the waters of Clear Lake.

take Highway 20 west over the pass and turn left at the Santiam "Y." Three miles later, take Highway 126 left

toward Eugene for another three miles. Then follow the signs to Clear Lake Lodge on the left.



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