

Exploring Scott Lake

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Highway 242 over McKenzie Pass has reopened. So, now is the time to take advantage of the wonders of the McKenzie Highway before it closes again for the winter. Our visit to Scott Lake actually took place last month; but wildfire traffic and wind damage caused the highway to be closed for several weeks, postponing publication of this article.

I've been to Scott Lake numerous times; but, other than a quick glance or a roadside post-hike swim, we had never really explored the place. Scott Lake is located just six miles beyond the Dee Wright Observatory at the summit of McKenzie Pass. Scott Lake is named for Felix Scott, Jr., who blazed Scott Trail over nearby Scott Pass in 1862. When he pioneered this route, he made the trip with more than a thousand cattle!

The jumping-off spot for Scott's namesake trail is located just east of Scott Lake, near the highway. Our trail this day, however, takes off just to the right of the Benson Lake Trailhead, along the west side of Scott Lake. This trail also continues on to Hand Lake. The last time my hiking partner and I trod this path, we were headed in the opposite direction, returning from a 10-mile loop over Scott Mountain. This alternate outing is considerably less adventurous — but more relaxing.

Truth be told, it's not much more than a half-mile to the northwest extremity of this oddly misshapen lake, but we elected options which resulted in substantial additional walking. The spot we

selected for our interim stop offered a great view of the western sides of the Three Sisters, an aspect entirely different from what we see from the east side — and a very scenic change of pace.

I've commented before that hiking with my friend is a bit like traveling with a water spaniel that leaps into the water at every opportunity, and this occasion was no exception. By the time I got into the water, my buddy was already halfway across the lake. I'm always a little slower to adjust to the water temperature, and I just kept wading farther and farther out. When the water reached my neck, I was almost halfway across myself; so I swam the rest of the way and caught up on the opposite shore.

Obviously, the lake is quite shallow and, as a result, relatively warm for a mountain lake that isn't much below the 5,000 foot level; although, now that it's October, it may be a little more chilly. With a soft, squishy lake bottom that churns up a cloud of silt with each step, the lake bottom appears to be utterly devoid of vegetation. Curiously, even at mid-day, fish were quite busy jumping.

The water level was very low, to the point where the northern end of the lake was separated from its more frequented south end. There is a channel between the lake's segments, but it was dry at its midpoint. The water in the channel's shallows approached bathtub temperatures.

An advantage of the low-water level was a pleasantly walkable rim all around the lake, where the silt had hardened to a surface not unlike the wet sand margin at an ocean beach. So, we

decided to walk back since our "hike" had been a pretty short one. On the way, we spotted an excellent adult specimen of the "vulnerable" Oregon spotted frog lazing in the warm shallows. "Vulnerable" means that this unique amphibian is subject to a high risk of extinction but isn't quite "endangered." Later, we saw another much smaller one that had just graduated from being a tadpole.

After exploring the lake's various lobes on the long walk back, we returned to the water for another swim, followed by a snack and a leisurely walk back to the trailhead. Except for a brief period when we first arrived, there was no one else on our portion of the lake.

On the return trip, I noticed that there are several nice walk-in campsites along the trail, giving campers a more private option than the campsites along the road at the southern edge of the lake.

To enjoy this experience, simply take the McKenzie Pass Highway (242) west from Sisters. Approaching the pass, there is the sad reminder of the Milli Fire of three years ago, and that the Santiam Pass — McKenzie Pass Scenic Byway has suffered yet another blow rendering it a little less scenic. I was also disappointed to see that a few of the survivor trees from the fire are still dying.

New sights include a burgeoning crop of post-fire ceanothus, and an interesting half-mile long roadside wall to reduce runoff and erosion along the base of a severely burned steep slope.

From the pass summit, continue west for about six miles and turn right (north) at the Scott Lake turnoff.



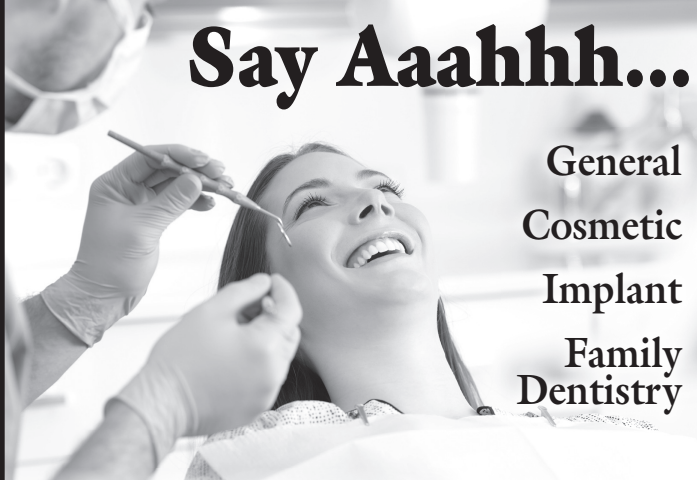
PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

West-side views of the Three Sisters accent the charm of Scott Lake.

There is a sign advising of the approaching turn, but there is an intervening turn-off, as well; so wait until you are actually abreast of the brown Scott Lake sign before turning off. The trailhead is 1.1 miles farther, at the end of a good gravel road.

This is a fee-use area; but,

on the occasion of our visit, there was a sign temporarily dispensing with the requirement. Masks are required where six feet of COVID-19 separation cannot be maintained, so bring your mask for passing on the trails. A kiosk at the trailhead provides other useful information of local interest.



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