

# Robinson Lake is a little-known jewel on the edge of wilderness

By **Craig F. Eisenbeis**  
Columnist

A few years ago, a reader contacted me and suggested that I feature Robinson Lake in one of my columns. It is a special place, he said, and he wanted others to be able to share the unique beauty and sense of wonder he experiences there.

His suggestion was a welcome contrast to the occasional complaint I get when one of my articles suggests a destination that someone would prefer to remain a secret. In fairness, though, I will say that such complaints are usually relatively good-natured. Usually.

Robinson Lake is a pretty little jewel, just barely — or rather partly — inside the western boundary of the Mount Washington Wilderness Area. In fact, the boundary line of the wilderness area runs right through the middle of the lake. It wasn't clear whether we were required to have a wilderness permit when we swam to the other side.

Our recent visit actually preceded last month's fire closures, so this account has been delayed until the area reopened. Fortunately, Robinson Lake and environs escaped September's devastating fires. So, the area is undamaged and ready for your enjoyment.

Since the lake's location puts it well on the other side of the mountains, most Sisters-area outdoor enthusiasts are not familiar with the place. Also, in spite of its claim to wilderness, it's just a pleasant little stroll from the trailhead; so, it's not exactly a major undertaking. However, it's a long drive for a short hike, especially so since we take separate cars now to comply with social distancing guidelines. Even at that, my hiking buddy has been about my only outside social contact in the last eight months!

A few miles below Sahalie and Koosah Falls on the McKenzie River, it's a fair distance off the highway. However, a road penetrates the forest to within about a half mile of the lake. As it turns out, the road has an excellent smooth gravel base suitable for all types of vehicles. It can be rather dusty, with an occasional pothole to keep you on alert and your speed in check.

The trailhead area has a profusion of Indian paintbrush that was well past its peak, but there were still some thimble berries along the trail. It was a poor huckleberry year, and what little there was is long gone. After spending time in our east-side forests, it's always a bit of a shock to suddenly

plunge into the lush, dense, green forests on the west side of the Cascades. Even with the cool beauty of the dark forest, though, the principal sensory impression is the magnificent scent of the deep woods.

Having witnessed the disheartening Sisters-area fires of recent decades, we had tended to consider the westside forests an inviolate refuge from such events. Sadly, that has not proven to be true, but Robinson Lake remains untouched. The forest path to the lake is very easy, short, and pleasant, with a few incidental ups and downs. As we neared the lake, a trail sign appeared at a fork in the path; and the lake itself is a short distance down the left fork. Surrounded by a mature, green, mixed-conifer forest, Robinson Lake is beautiful and serene.

We stopped for a snack on a comfortable log at the lake's edge, then went for our swim into the wilderness. Except for a few minutes, when a family of four showed up while we were swimming, we had the lake entirely to ourselves. The water was cool at first, but so pleasant that we spent an hour or so in the water and never felt chilled.

Now that we're well into October, I'm not sure that I would be all that enthusiastic about swimming. My hiking companion, however, is pretty much an all-weather water enthusiast and would probably not hesitate to jump in. The water level at this time of year is low, and the ground surrounding the lake is smooth, firm and grassy. The lake bottom is

soft, squishy mud.

If it takes a longer hike to pique your interest, it's an easy matter to explore farther up the trail and visit nearby Kuitan Lake. Even adding this additional destination to your itinerary, the resultant hike is still not much more than a three-mile round trip. The trail to Kuitan Lake passes through a lush and stately forest that brings to mind the image of a woodland cathedral.

Except for one long switchback (shortly after leaving Robinson Lake) that gains about 150 feet of elevation, the trail to Kuitan Lake is mostly flat and in good condition. After about a mile and a half, keep an eye out for a fairly well-established user trail on the left. Staying on the main trail here takes the hiker toward Hand Lake and the Old McKenzie Highway (242), a distance of about seven more miles — one way.

The trail into Kuitan Lake is a little longer and less well-established than the trail fork leading to Robinson Lake. Since this is not an "official" trail, the route becomes even more faint as it approaches the lake. Kuitan is another pretty little wilderness lake that is even smaller than Robinson Lake. These charming, yet easily accessed, wilderness lakes do not seem to be very widely known or heavily traveled.

To reach the trailhead to Robinson Lake, take Highway 20 west from Sisters to the Santiam "Y." Take the left fork to stay on Highway 20 for a little over three miles, then take the next left fork to turn toward



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Robinson Lake is a just short walk to the western edge of the Mt. Washington Wilderness Area.

Eugene on Highway 126. From there, it's about eight more miles (past Sahalie and Koosah Falls) to a turnoff on the left, which is immediately after mile marker eight. There, turn onto Forest Road 2664, which

is conveniently also named "Robinson Lake Road." A conventional green street sign marks the road. The gravel road leads 4.4 miles to the trailhead and an end-loop that includes a few informal campsites.

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