

Following the McKenzie

"What nature delivers us is never stale. Because what nature creates has eternity in it."

— Isaac Bashevis Singer

Spring in Oregon is the outdoor lover's paradise.

Opportunities abound for enthusiasts to fill their leisure time hiking, fishing and camping, and threaten to infringe on non-leisure time as well. A short drive from Eugene can transport one to a place perfect for such outdoor pursuits — the utopia that is the McKenzie River Trail.

Built as a National Recreation Trail in 1976, it was the first of its kind in Oregon. The 26.5 miles of riverside pathway provides access to several breathtaking sights and also to the Paradise, Olallie, Trail Bridge, Ice Cap and Coldwater Cove campgrounds. The trail begins 5.5 miles east of Eugene on Highway 126, 1.5 miles past the hamlet of McKenzie Bridge, and ends one mile from Clear Lake on the Old Santiam Wagon Road. A gentle 1,500-foot climb awaits the hiker, and not to worry, the trail is closed to all stock and motorized traffic. Near the end of the trail a recent addition adds another 5 miles by circling Clear Lake.

The trail has a long history, stretching back 3,000 years. According to Phil Raab of the U.S. Forest Service, the area below Koosah Falls has yielded some archeological finds known as

"lithic scatter sites." These sites have produced a variety of small objects, including pieces of obsidian left from tools manufactured by early inhabitants.

The Tamolitch Valley also contains evidence of the trail being used as an important travel corridor in earlier times.

About ten years ago, the U.S. Forest Service began construction on what is now the lower half of the trail. The upper half was built in 1980.

Over three miles of the connecting loop around Clear Lake were built by a lone volunteer, Raab says. The entire loop will be dedicated and the volunteer identified in a formal ceremony June 5.

Use of the trail varies from section to section. Raab estimates that 1,000 hikers per year use the full route, "and that's an optimistic outlook," he adds. The stretch between Ice Cap Campground and Clear Lake has 5,000 users per year. But use of the trail near McKenzie Bridge by joggers and summer residents adds to the figure.

As for trail facilities, traditionally all campsites are open by Memorial Day weekend. Many open with reduced services in time for fishing season, then expand to full service by the holiday, Raab says. Small portions of the trail close during winter snows, but it is rare to find the entire trail closed.

Equipment required for the hiking trail includes only the basics. For the upper end of the trail, Raab recommends sturdy hiking shoes, a day pack with minor essentials, and, of course, a map of the trail. The lower portion, from the trailhead to Paradise bridge, can be hiked in tennis shoes.

For the hiker coming from town, Lane Transit District offers buses that go to the McKenzie Ranger Station in the morning and return in the afternoon. "It gives the hiker that doesn't want to drive up an opportunity to get in five or six hours of hiking," Raab says.

"It's a neat concept. The trail is a raw gem waiting to be discovered."

But statistics alone cannot convey the sense of peace one can find on the trail. That is an experience all its own.

The adventure begins with a relaxing drive through such proverbial "wide spots in the road" as Waltherville, Leaburg and Vida, twisting beside the McKenzie's course and offering spectacular views of rushing water, the Goodpasture Covered Bridge, and occasionally the Three Sisters peaks when the sky is clear.

The trail officially begins at an unpretentious little sign just over a mile past the McKenzie River Ranger Station. A few steps off the highway takes one into what appears as the heart of the wilderness, and only the roar of the river breaks the silence.

The trail is narrow, but the vegetation has been trimmed enough to allow hikers to travel single file. As the sun filters through the magnificent old growth, a full range of typical Western Cascade slope flora and fauna thrive below. Thimbleberry, sallow, trillium and the fragile lady's slipper orchid can be spotted. At this time of the year, Oregon grape and wild rhododendron are in full flower. Lichens cover the rocks with their mosaic patterns while the mountain runoff creates tiny grottos, teeming with life. Fall is also a spectacular time on the trail, when magnificent color abounds.

Wildlife watching is sporadic on the trail, but you can see coyote and an occasional black bear now and then. Deer and elk

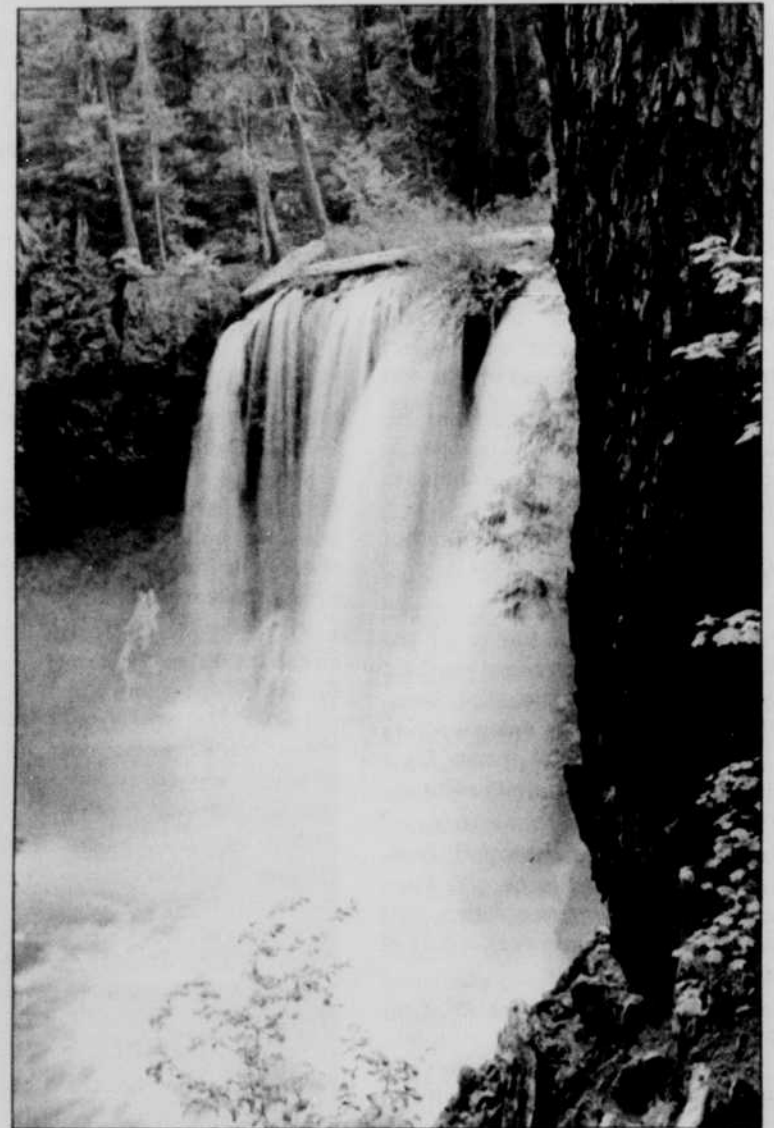


Photo by John Giustina

Koosah Falls (above) is one of two spectacular falls on the McKenzie River Trail. The narrow Trail Bridge (below), was built from a single log. It is located above Sahalie Falls.

are common during winter months and migrating ducks use the reservoirs as stopovers. Squirrels and other small mammals are year-round sights.

At the six-mile mark the trail crosses Buck Bridge and switches to the other side of the river. Farther up you discover the Eugene Water & Electric Board's spawning channel, and just past the channel you find the rustic Trail Bridge, created from a single log. Below, the river is wide and turbulent, but the clarity of the water is remarkable due to the filtering performed by the volcanic rocks on the bottom.

The most breathtaking sights on the trail, and well worth the 21-mile hike to get there, are the Koosah and Sahalie waterfalls. If you happen to possess a faint heart or are "weak of sole", however, you can gain highway access to Sahalie around the 22-mile mark.

An ominous thunder warns the approaching hiker, and suddenly the McKenzie spills over a sheer drop into a violent, churning pool. The wind wafts a cooling spray upward, refreshing the air. The water at the bottom of the pool appears carbonated, a mass of bubbles. The aquamarine blue of the pool seems almost artificial, but you'll find nothing like it outside of nature.

The trail climbs precariously between the falls, much steeper

and more winding than its previous miles, but after scarcely a mile, awe-inspiring Sahalie Falls appears.

The trail ends at Clear Lake, aptly named for the visibility that divers claim extends to 200 feet. Fishermen sometimes complain that the divers are all too visible to the fish inhabiting the icy waters, hampering the area's angling.

Other sights along the trail include the numerous bridges, the Fish Lake Guard Station, which was originally built as a pack station for horse travelers, and the wild rhododendrons that embellish one of Oregon's most scenic and rewarding areas.

— MELISSA SCHUKAR



Photo by John Giustina

