

Cowhorn trail provides great views for little effort



INTO THE OUTDOORS

BY JAYSON JACOBY

Last week I wrote about the trail to the Saddleblanket Mountain lookout, a trip in which the lookout itself — and not the view from the end of the trail — was the main attraction.

But abundant views of both the Old and the High Cascades are the main attractions of the trail to the more conventional lookout building atop Little Cowhorn Mountain, about 15 miles north of Saddleblanket. This is a hike to be done on a clear day.

To be functional, the Saddleblanket lookout had to be built 80-feet tall. Such extravagance wasn't necessary at Little Cowhorn, where the views are impressive from the start and only get better.

To get to the Cowhorn trailhead, drive to the Fall Creek Road via either Jasper or Lowell. About 19 miles from the Fall Creek Dam take road 1830 (the road signs reads "Gibraltar Road") to the left. Follow this rather steep gravel road, keep left at a "Y" junction and proceed to road 1817, which is the level left fork at another "Y" junction. Follow this road one mile to the trailhead sign, which is on the right side of the road at a small saddle with parking room for several cars.

The trail winds through a young, thickly overgrown forest for the first half-mile, switchbacking occasionally but climbing in a mostly gentle grade. There are views to the north and south at various points as the trail ascends the western ridge of the mountain.

At about one-half mile, the trail enters a small open area from which the top of the mountain — as well as the many interesting rock formations on its upper slopes — can be seen.

From the clearing the trail climbs more steeply, winding up Cowhorn mountain's west face. The forest changes from young second-growth to mature Douglas Fir, intermixed with a few cedar and hemlock trees. Views in all direc-

tions except east are extensive, and the trail passes directly beneath and between a series of rock pinnacles, some of which rise 30 feet and more above the trail.

At about the one-mile point, the trail switchbacks a final time and reaches a saddle. A short spur trail to the left leads to a small promontory with excellent views of the Cascade peaks, but the main trail turns to the right.

From the saddle the trail skirts the sheer cliffs of the mountain's north face, following a narrow ledge with a vertical drop of a hundred feet. This stretch isn't dangerous, and there's even a small handrail provided, but care should be taken with small children.

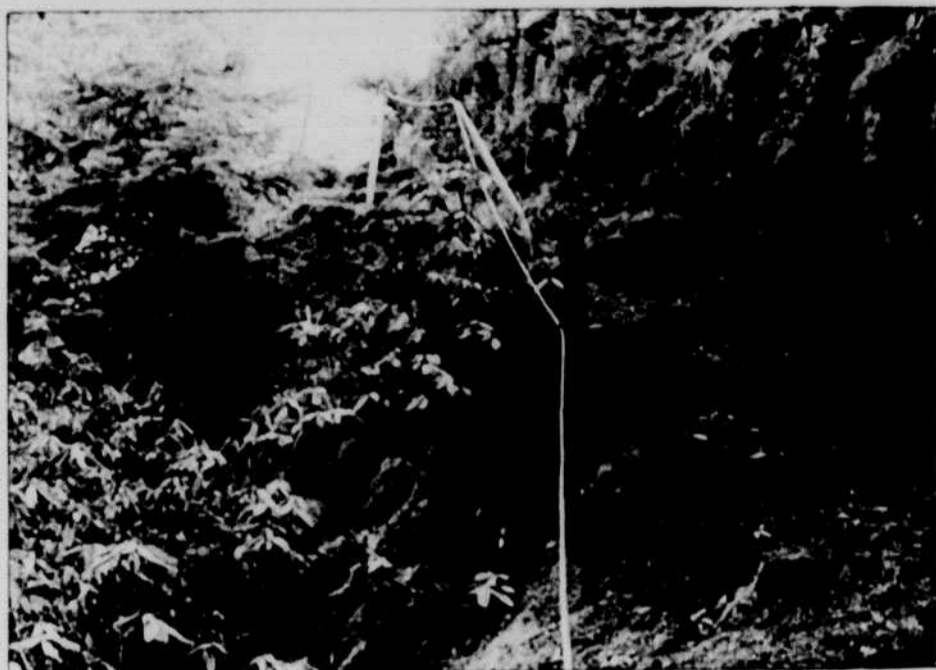
The summit is only a few hundred yards from the saddle, and the view is a full 360 degrees. The densely forested Old Cascades stretch to the horizon to the north and south, and the Willamette Valley and Coast Range can be seen to the west. But most impressive are the vistas of the high peaks of the Cascades, which include all the major summits from Mount Hood to Mount Thielsen.

The lookout building, like its distant neighbor on Saddleblanket mountain, is no longer manned. The original building was erected in 1923, but the current version was built in 1959. The wood structure is open for hikers wanting to escape the weather, and there is even a notebook for visitors moved to words by the views outside.

Although the Cowhorn trail gains 900 feet of elevation on its way to the summit, it's only a little more than a mile long, and with the excellent views and interesting trail-side scenery most of the way up, overall it makes for a fairly leisurely afternoon trip.

And I highly recommend allotting enough time for a picnic lunch at the lookout building. The view from the top is truly one of the best anywhere in the Cascades. With such rewards for so little effort, it's a hard trip to pass up — especially with the beautiful weather we've had for the past few days.

Jayson Jacoby is a sports reporter for the Emerald.



Photos by Jayson Jacoby
At just a little more than a mile long, a hike up the trail (above) along Little Cowhorn Mountain makes for an enjoyable day in the great outdoors. Many of the interesting rock formations (left) on the upper slopes of the mountain can be seen from the trail, and the view from the top (below) is astounding.



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