

Hiking a Diamond Peak in the rough

ZACH URNESS
STATESMAN JOURNAL

In a state filled with symmetrical mountains, Diamond Peak is something of a mess.

The 8,743-foot mountain rises above Willamette Pass like the armored back of a stegosaurus (my favorite dinosaur), its jumbled mass of peaks and plugs making it difficult to even identify the summit.

Yet the mountain is so unique — and so prominent in the skyline east of Eugene — that I've always been fascinated by it.

And so, earlier this year, I decided my summertime goal was to climb Diamond Peak.

The trip up this misshapen mountain is an interesting one. The climb is non-technical, meaning ropes aren't required. But with no established trail leading to the summit, a decent amount of wilderness route-finding is required.

Diamond Peak is a classic "scramble" — more difficult than hiking but not quite mountaineering. The trip is physically demanding, requiring 4,100 feet of climb and 10 to 12 miles of hiking, depending on the route (more on that later).

I've been in pretty questionable shape all year — being a father allows less time for working out — so I devoted three weeks to running and doing squats at the gym to prepare.

In early September, it was time to see if this family man could still make his way up a major Cascade Peak.



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Tyler Dodds celebrates reaching the summit of Diamond Peak.

Getting started

The best time to climb Diamond Peak is late August, September or early October. Snow is mostly gone, and you'll have decent odds of clear skies.

There are two main trailheads: Rockpile and Summit Lake, both south-east of Oakridge and Eugene. The area is a long drive from Salem, so I'd suggest camping one night and climbing the next morning (see suggestions below).

Plan six to eight hours for the climb. A handheld GPS device is strongly recommended — I use the Garmin Oregon 400t. A good pair of thick-soled hiking boots is also helpful, as you'll be ascending sharp, crumbly lava rock. I use trekking poles but also carry a pack large enough to store them and fit each of the 10 essentials, plus 3 liters of water and extra food. Make sure to leave your itinerary with someone beforehand. Don't climb alone.

To the mountain

One of the best things about climbing Diamond Peak is the relative solitude.

More famous Cascade Range peaks like South Sister and Mount McLoughlin are often crowded. Mount St. Helens requires a permit to climb.

Diamond Peak, by contrast, offers a quiet experience even on perfect weekends, with rarely more than a dozen people headed toward the summit.

We started from the Rockpile Trailhead and got a nice warm up, hiking 2.7 miles to pretty Marie Lake. This is where the decision comes.

There are two routes up Diamond Peak's south slope. One requires more navigating but is shorter (around 10 miles round-trip). The other requires a longer hike (12 miles) but follows a more

obvious climber's route.

The shorter route is described in the book "75 Scrambles In Oregon: The Best Non-Technical Ascents," by Barbara Bond, while the longer one can be found in William Sullivan's "100 Hikes / Travel Guide: Central Oregon Cascades."

We decided to take the shorter and more adventurous route.

It began by heading due north, into the forest, from Marie Lake. There is some flagging, marking the route, but it's inconsistent, and we navigated among the trees and rocky cliffs via compass and GPS.

After reaching treeline, we picked up a climbers' trail — a faint bootpath marked by occasional rock cairns. The route zig-zagged uphill, through a sun-baked desert of pumice and scree that caked us in dust.

The upward march was grueling, but with each step, the view improved. Summit Lake spread out below, surrounded by green forest, and the narrow spire of Mount Thielsen pierced the horizon.

We stopped for lunch below a lonely, gnarled tree at 7,400 feet. Above us was a landmark that appeared to be the summit. I knew it wasn't — it was Diamond Peak's "false summit" — but I couldn't bring myself to tell my climbing partner Tyler Dodds. The climb to the false summit isn't great fun. Loose rock slides below your feet. There's no shade. And the view isn't that dramatic.

As we finished this grueling section of climb and were about to crest the false summit at 8,400 feet, I turned to Tyler and said: "Prepare to get depressed."

It was an odd thing to say, since the moment offered the most spectacular view of the trip so far. The gigantic bowl of Diamond Peak spread out below us in a huge multi-colored crater carved by glaciers thousands of years ago.

The depressing part was what rose

overhead. The final stretch climbed 300 feet along a narrow ridge guarded by a series of gendarmes — rock pinnacles blocking your path.

We began the final push. The gendarmes required using our hands to pull ourselves up, around and through the rock obstacles. It wasn't difficult, but it was an extra challenge on a trip that's mostly about endurance.

The final stretch follows crinson rock to a wide summit, at 8,743 feet, which showcases a sweeping panorama and the mountain's long, rocky, stegosaurus-like top. Two separate eruptions, around 100,000 years ago, created this lava crown atop Diamond Peak, with glaciers carving out the unique spires and bowls that highlight this chaotic geologic scene.

Tyler and I spent about 25 minutes taking photos at the summit. We picked out the major Cascade Peaks in the distance, from Mount Jefferson and the Three Sisters in the north, to Crater Lake, Mount Thielsen and Mount McLoughlin in the south. Then we headed down. The decent of Cascade Range peaks is a joyous thing because you can "boot-ski" down the loose rock that was such a pain to climb. I used the GPS to retrace our route, and we arrived back at Marie Lake, where we'd stashed a few celebratory beers.

Climbing Diamond Peak makes for a challenging day, but with the right information and equipment — and some time at the gym beforehand — it's one of Oregon's most unique adventures.

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for eight years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at zurness@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Zach Urness or @ZachsORoutdoors on Twitter.

Diamond Peak climb

What: A nontechnical "scramble" climb up an 8,743-foot shield volcano south of Willamette Pass and southeast of Oakridge. The route requires some off-trail navigating but no technical ability.

Length: 10 to 13 miles, depending on route

Climb: 4,100 feet

Difficulty: Very strenuous

Gear recommended: A handheld GPS device makes navigating much easier. A good map and compass also are important, along with thick-soled hiking boots and the essentials.

Best time to climb: Late August, September, early October

Helpful books: "75 Scrambles In Oregon: The Best Non-Technical Ascents," by Barbara Bond, and "100 Hikes / Travel Guide: Central Oregon Cascades," by William Sullivan

Permits: Must fill out a free wilderness permit

Places to car camp nearby: Summit Lake campground, Timpanogas Lake campground

Backcountry campsites near climb: Marie Lake, Rockpile Lake

Directions (to Rockpile Trailhead): From Oakridge, head east on Highway 58 for 2 miles and turn right at a sign for Hills Creek Dam. Follow this paved road half a mile and then turn right onto Forest Service Road 21. Follow this paved road 29 miles. Turn left on Forest Service Road 2149 and follow it for 3.5 miles. Then turn right on Rockpile Road 2160 and follow it 2.1 miles to a parking pullout on the right and a sign for the trailhead.

Coordinates: N43 29.011 W122 10.612 / 43.483517, -122.176867.

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