

Life *in the* Valley

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PHOTOS BY WILLIAM SULLIVAN/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Middle Sister is seen in April from the Park Meadow area.

Three Sisters' secret A snowy trek to Jeff View Shelter a beaut in spring

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Most of Oregon's Cascade peaks are solitary volcanoes, able to overtower perhaps a quadrant of sky. But the Three Sisters and Broken Top dominate a timberline Eden with mountains in nearly all directions.

Thirty years ago, I admitted in a "100 Hikes" guidebook that the secret spots of many Oregon outdoorspeople are hiding in this scenic vortex between Park Meadow and Tam McArthur Rim. I wrote that the area would never become crowded because the price of admission was a dusty 5-mile hike through tedious lodgepole pine woods.

A wildfire in 2012 burned most of those woods, making the trail even less inviting.

But Bend has boomed. So many recreation seekers have moved to this once sleepy-timber town that Park Meadow, Golden Lake and even the secret, nameless tarns above them are genuinely crowded on summer weekends. Don't go then.

Here's the real secret: This Shangri-La is utterly devoid of crowds if you dare to go when it's prettiest, in spring.

Finding beauty in spring's chill

To be sure, Park Meadow is under snow in early April. Golden Lake is frozen. The alpine brooks may not be not entirely silenced, but they gurgle from holes in the snowpack or meander beneath perilous snow bridges.

The mountains are prettier too. The Three Sisters may look like naked ash heaps in August, but in April, they are frosted fairy cakes, topped with rime frost and draped with powdered sugar slopes.

Trekking deeply into the Three Sisters Wilderness in snow requires serious winter camping gear, survival knowledge and a group of adventurers willing to undertake an expedition.

It's also possible to sample the scenery with a relatively easy day trip on the well-marked winter trail system from the Upper Three Creek Sno-Park. A good goal for a 5-mile snowshoe or Nordic ski lop is the Jeff View Shelter, an open-sided log hut that has a distant view of Mount Jefferson's snowy pyramid but also has a much closer view of the Three Sisters and Broken Top.

When to go? Depends on desired difficulty

To start, drive Highway 20 to the middle of downtown Sisters and turn south on Elm Street which becomes paved Road 16. After 10 miles, where a



Scott Hovis snowshoes on the north flank of Broken Top.

snow gate blocks the road ahead, turn left into a big Sno-Park lot. This sports center is busy from December through March, and for the day trip to the shelter, this is the season you'll want to go.

Adventurers heading deeper into the wilderness should wait until early April. By then, the Sno-Park lot is likely to be empty because the snow has usually melted away at that elevation. Even with this year's heavy snows, the April snowpack may be so patchy here that you'll have to carry your skis or snowshoes uphill a mile before you can use them.

The reason I recommend early April is not just so you can hike around with your skis like an idiot. If you are snow camping, the weather is reliably better in April, with 13 hours of daylight and far fewer blizzards. Once you have carried your skis up past the bare dirt, the spring "corn" snow is lovely for skiing.

Hitting the trail, finding the shelter

From the parking lot, cross the road and go downhill 100 feet — away from the snow gate — to find an old spur

road that serves as the artery of the winter trail system. Signboards and maps at all junctions make navigation easy. Keep left for 2 miles, then turn right to find the Jeff View Shelter.

Almost the entire area between the Three Creek Sno-Park and Park Meadow burned in a 2012 wildfire — perhaps 20 square miles of lodgepole pine forests. The winter trail system here is one benefit of that burn. Although there are miles of snags, you now also have views everywhere, including at the shelter.

The log structure itself was built of snags salvaged by an Oregon National Guard battalion as an engineering exercise. A barrel stove inside provides some cheer, but don't expect it to heat the three-walled building. Overnight stays are not allowed in the shelter, and it's designed to discourage people who might try.

The shelter is a good place to stop for lunch, enjoy the view and turn back.

For the hardcore

Experienced winter campers can continue without a trail, deeper into the wilderness. Don't go alone. Ideally you

should only go in a group of at least three. That way, if someone is hurt, one person can stay while the other goes for help.

I started my planning for this trip with four people. One canceled with a bad back, and another with a family conflict. That left only two of us. We decided to take a cell phone as our "third person." The area has good cell phone coverage. If something went awry, we could call for help.

From the Jeff View Shelter, we struck off cross-country directly toward Broken Top for 1.5 miles. There we found a snowy bend of Snow Creek where we set up a base camp. The 8-foot-wide creek is the wilderness boundary, but it also serves as a white-water highway for water ouzels, the cheery birds that fly up and downstream dipping for insect larvae.

The next day, with lighter day packs, we left our camp and followed Snow Creek upstream 2.5 miles to its source in a spectacular timberline snow bowl. On the left is the cliff of Tam McArthur Rim. We found even better views up to the right (the west), where a pass offered a front-row view of Broken Top and all Three Sisters.

The following day, we set out from base camp in a different direction, contouring west from Snow Creek 2.5 miles to Park Meadow, a snowy sheet with frosted cakes in four directions.

In the middle of the meadow, Park Creek forks. Our goal was Golden Lake, so we followed the smaller, west fork up a steep snow gully for a mile. The only tracks we found on this route belonged to a river otter. It had apparently galloped on a circuit of high lakes to clean out the winter's supply of groggy fish.

Golden Lake is breathtaking in summer, despite the crowds that have discovered this secret spot. But it's all the more stunning in April, dressed in white, completely silent.

As a guidebook author, the most common question I am asked is, "What is your favorite hike?" Outdoorspeople dread this question and its corollary, "What is your favorite place?"

No one wants a secret spot spoiled by crowds, so it's tempting to dodge the question. I have written two entire books to assuage people. The book "Oregon Favorites" describes the best hikes by month, and "Oregon Trips & Trails" describes them by region.

But the truth is, there really is a best place and a best time.

It's in that trailless wonderland on the north slope of Broken Top, in early April, in the snow.

Don't tell.