

Life *in the* Valley

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Choose Chush

Waterfall hike shows off views of Three Sisters



The Middle and North Sister are seen from Chush Falls Trail. PHOTOS BY WILLIAM L. SULLIVAN / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

WILLIAM L. SULLIVAN
SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

The prettiest waterfall hike near Sisters not only has a new name, it now has a new trail.

Chush Falls had been known as Squaw Creek Falls until the Oregon Board of Geographic Names changed it in 2005.

Then a wildfire in 2012 burned most of the canyon, blocking the bumpy access road with sooty deadfall. I relegated the trip to the “More Hikes” section at the back of my hiking guidebook, where I hide boring or fragile destinations.

Surprise! The Forest Service recently opened a clever new trail into Chush Falls that makes the trip great fun. And this summer’s Milli Fire west of Sisters did not make it to the area at all. But you’ll need to get out there soon before snow covers the trail, usually by Thanksgiving.

Why the new name?

Hidden in a box canyon of the Three Sisters Wilderness, the falls’ creek has been visited by Native Americans for thousands of years. Pioneers dubbed it Squaw Creek, using a term with derogatory connotations.

A spokesperson at the Sisters Ranger District said comments were split on changing the name to Chush Creek.

“Some say, ‘This is stupid. I’ll never call it anything but Squaw Creek.’ Others say, ‘You should have done this long ago.’” The subject still ignites strong opinions among oldtimers, although many people only know the new, official name.

The dangers of the creek

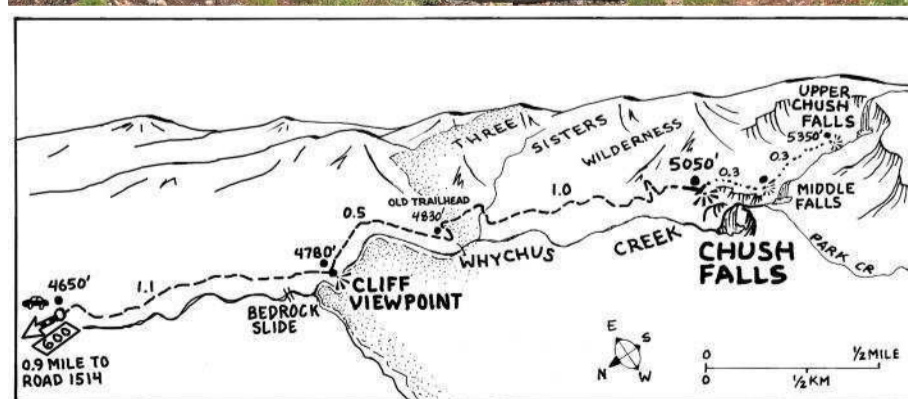
The creek originates high on the slopes of South and Middle Sisters, tumbles over the three waterfalls, rushes through the city of Sisters and descends through a desert canyon to the Deschutes River.

The Army Corps of Engineers worries that Whychus Creek’s headwaters are at Carver Lake, a deep glacial cirque pool high on the side of South Sister, one of Oregon’s most active volcanoes. Dammed only by an unstable sand moraine, Carver Lake could spill in an earthquake. That could send a mile-wide flood downstream and wipe out half of downtown Sisters. Warning signs urge visitors to move away if the creek starts to rise.

Creek’s early history

The first written record of the creek dates to 1855, when engineers called it Whychus Creek, using a phonetic spelling of a local Sahaptin Indian word that means “a place to cross the water.”

Later settlers dubbed it simply Squaw Creek. Although “squaw” originally meant “young woman” in the Narragansett Indian language of the Rhode Island area, the word has increasingly been considered pejorative



Top: The South Sister and Middle Sister are seen on Chush Falls Trail in summer. The trail is usually passable until Thanksgiving. **Center:** The creek bends on the trail to Chush Falls with Three Sisters in the background. A fire moved through the area in 2012. **Bottom:** Map of Chush Falls.

by native tribes.

Oregon became the sixth state to ban the term “squaw” from public place names in 2001. Oregon had the most “Squaw” place names of any state, with a total of about 180. In all, the U.S. had 480 Squaw Creeks, and Oregon had 89.

The new trail

The new trail visits a spectacular viewpoint above a riverbend on an overhanging rock ledge. Then the official

trail ends after a somewhat obscured view of a 60-foot waterfall that bulges out across a curved cliff like white lace stretched tight over a knee.

The only part of the trip that’s rough is driving over the sharp rocks of the bumpy access road for the final 0.9 mile.

To find the trailhead, drive east across Santiam Pass on Highway 20 to Sisters. In the middle of downtown, turn south on Elm Street. Follow Elm Street (which becomes Road 16) for 7.3

paved miles.

Then turn right on wide, washboard gravel Road 1514 for 4.7 miles. Ignore a left fork after 2.8 miles, keeping right on the main road.

Just before a “One-Lane Bridge” sign, turn left on rough gravel Road 600. Ignore a dirt camping spur to the right. Drive slowly because of the large sharp gravel rocks in the road.

After 0.9 mile, you’ll reach a nice gravel parking turnaround at road’s end.

Park here and hike the trail ahead. This path dips along Whychus Creek through woods that were partly burned in 2012. Many big trees remain, but this lower part of the canyon is mostly snags, snowbrush and views. Expect to see the top halves of all three Sisters — North, Middle and South. Summer wildflowers here include fireweed’s red plumes and pearly everlasting’s white buds.

After 1.1 mile, you’ll climb to a big open space where the trail curves left along a cliff with stupendous views of the churning creek’s chasm below. Adventurous hikers will insist on scrambling down 100 feet to the right to an overhanging cliff of shaly andesite. The perch has a scary view of the creek twisting hundreds of feet directly below.

Beyond this viewpoint, the trail continues on what was an old road for half a mile. When you see a “Trail” pointer shunting you up to the left, you’ll know you’ve reached the old trailhead.

Meeting the old trail

For the next mile, the original trail to Chush Falls climbs past side creeks. The farther you go, the more green plants you will find because the 2012 wildfire petered out here. Finally, at trail’s end, at an overlook of Chush Falls, the fire gave out altogether. Beyond this point, the upper part of the canyon has all of its trees intact.

A “Trail Ends” sign at the Chush Falls overlook tells you that it’s time to turn back.

Admittedly, the view of this wide, fan-shaped waterfall is not very good here. You can hear the roar of the entire falls, but you can only see about a third of the falling water.

It doesn’t help to scramble down a rough trail to the right because that route is closed for restoration and doesn’t really have a much better view.

You could clamber up a scramble trail to the left for 0.6 mile to find the upper two cataracts in Chush Falls’ array, but that route is so steep and rugged that it’s for adventurers only.

The best choice is to accept the view of Chush Falls and return as you came. The scary viewpoint half a mile back should satisfy all the danger seekers in your crowd.

What’s cool about the Chush Falls Trail is not just the waterfall. The new trail shows off parts of the creek canyon that have long been hidden. And because of fire, the trail is now a parade of viewpoints of the Three Sisters.