

Life *in the* Valley

sanews@salem.gannett.com

Trade in your chills for thrills

22 Oregon winter adventures that are offering everything

ZACH URNESS
SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

It may sound crazy, but you could make the argument that the best time to explore Oregon's outdoors is during the winter.

Yes, it's rainy, snowy and pretty much always cool. But it's those elements, plus the lack of crowds, that make it such a glorious time to travel.

Waterfalls are booming or covered in ice. Old-growth forests are at their mossy best. And hot springs feel just a little bit better amid chilled temperatures.

Here are 22 of my favorite winter outdoor adventures in Oregon.

Weather will vary considerably, so always check roads and conditions before you go and be prepared.

If you can't find the right people to ask about conditions, email me at zurness@statesmanjournal.com and I'll do my best to help.

Crater Lake ski or snowshoe

Winter is king at Oregon's only national park. Forty-four feet of snowfall blankets this collapsed volcano, making it one of the snowiest inhabited places in North America.

Roads are typically, but not always, plowed to the Rim Village. The lake is only visible 50 percent of the time, so planning is key.

Once you've spotlighted a good weather window, there are a few options. You can join a ranger-guided snowshoe trip on Saturday or Sunday (call 541-594-3100 for reservations). It's also easy to do it yourself, by snowshoeing or skiing from Rim Village along Rim Road — a large snow-covered road.

Best yet is snow camping along the rim of Crater Lake.

Snowy waterfall hunting

There's something special about a waterfall covered in ice and snow. In Oregon's Cascade Range, there are a handful of waterfall hikes that transform into snowshoe adventure after snow reaches their elevation.

A few favorites include Sahalie and Koosah Falls on the McKenzie River, Proxy Falls up McKenzie Pass Highway, Tamanawas Falls on Mount Hood and Tumalo Falls near Bend.

Hager Mountain Lookout, hot springs and cowboy steak

This might be my favorite winter road trip and adventure in Oregon. It takes you to the Oregon Outback in the state's southcentral area.

The road-trip starts with a challenging snowshoe climb to Hager Mountain Lookout, a rustic cabin perched above 7,000 feet and heated by a woodstove. You must reserve a night at this mountaintop abode in advance on Recreation.gov.

Reward yourself after climbing down by stopping at Cowboy Dinner Tree on the way out. The best steak or chicken dinner you've ever had is served at this tiny, rustic spot that only accepts cash, requires reservations and is only open Friday and Saturday.

Finally, treat your sore muscles (and bulging belly) with a night or two at Summer Lake Hot Springs. On the drive home, be sure to stop at Fort Rock State Park.

Santiam Pass sno-parks

Just looking for a quick day in the snow? The Santiam Pass sno-parks, east of Salem and Detroit, have you covered. These portals to ski, snowshoe and snowmobile trails require purchasing an annual permit for \$25 or day pass for \$4.

There's a family snow-tubing hill, a snowshoe trip to panoramic mountain views, ski trails through old-growth forest and even a cabin where you can snowshoe in and spend the night.

Here's a guide to each of the sno-parks on Santiam Pass.

Coast Range waterfalls

You don't necessarily need snow to make a great winter adventure. Oregon's smaller mountains, the Coast Range, celebrate everything about the state that's lush and green.

The best hikes in the Coast Range traverse rainforest to giant, booming waterfalls that swell with winter's 100 inches of rain. These hikes are often a challenge to reach, but offer major rewards.

Favorite overall hike: Kentucky Falls

Best hike with kids: Sweet Creek Falls

Closest to Salem: Niagara Falls

Most photogenic and easy to access: Golden and Silver Falls

Each of those options will take you on major adventures in a celebration of everything rain-related.

Warner Mountain Lookout

Travel four to 10 miles through the snowy wilderness to this mountaintop Marriott with views of Diamond Peak.

U.S. Forest Service personnel occupy the lookout during summer months, keeping watch over Willamette National Forest for signs of fire. From Nov. 1 to May 15, though, the 14-by-14 abode is available to rent on Recreation.gov.

You'll need to carry in all of your supplies, and the trip is entirely uphill, so be prepared for a major challenge here (unless you chose to snowmobile in, which is allowed).

Chilly Oregon hot springs

Travel through the winter forest and then take your clothes off for a dip in the thermal hot springs that bubble to the surface in a few places around western Oregon.



Diamond Lake proves a great place for some winter snowmobiling. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

There are a handful of hot springs open to the public all winter long. One favorite is Terwilliger Hot Springs (also known as Cougar) on the McKenzie River east of Eugene.

Some hot springs, at higher elevations, might need to be reached via ski, snowshoe or snowy hike. That often includes Umpqua Hot Springs and occasionally includes Bagby Hot Springs.

Always check conditions in advance.

Trillium Lake ski or snowshoe

Enjoy views of Mount Hood on a ski, snowshoe or fat bike tour around popular Trillium Lake near Government Camp.

The trek around this lake, best enjoyed on a week-day when crowds are smaller, is 5 miles. It starts from a small parking lot with a donation box (help offset the cost of grooming trails). The trail then drops steeply downhill on snow-covered roads to the lake, then takes off around it.

This is a moderately challenging adventure.

Fat bike over the snow in Central Oregon

Few places have embraced fat biking on the snow like Bend and Central Oregon.

There are multiple places to ride, mostly found along Cascade Lakes Highway west of Bend. The best option is to stop at a local bike shop to rent a bike and get advice on where to go.

I rent my bikes from Hutch's Bicycle Store in Bend for \$45 each per day. My favorite place to ride is Wanoga Sno-Park, which has groomed fat bike trails once the season gets rolling, and Dutchman Sno-Park, where there's a great ride to Todd Lake.

Cape Lookout whale watching

To be completely honest, I've always found whale watching on the Oregon Coast a little boring.

The practice of driving to ocean overlooks and scanning the horizon for nature's most majestic animal has its appeal, but the standing around gets old pretty fast.

That's why the combination of hiking Cape Lookout and whale watching is so appealing. You can enjoy one of the coast's best trails (4.8 miles round-trip) while hiking to one of its best places to spot whales.

From mid-December through mid-January, you can watch 20,000 gray whales as they travel south to the warm lagoons of Baja Mexico.

Spring watching begins in late March as the gray whales travel north on their way towards Alaska.

Diamond Lake snowmobiling

Frosted-white evergreens zip past, and frozen wind howls against your face during a snowmobile trip over the mountains or into the forest surrounding Diamond Lake Resort.

The unofficial hub of Southern Cascade snowmobiling is home to 300 miles of groomed trails, including connections to routes that run from Bend to Klamath Falls.

The two most popular trails are the 20-mile route to the north rim of Crater Lake and the climb up 8,376-foot Mount Bailey.

Diamond Lake Resort offers snowmobile rentals, along with a guided service and a recovery service for those who get their sled stuck off trail.

Opal Creek hikes

The hikes in Opal Creek Scenic Recreation Area, east of Salem, are jam-packed with people during the height of summer.

All of that changes in a big way during winter.

This area of waterfalls, old-growth forest and gem-clear rivers stays mostly free of snow, except for rare low-elevation snowstorms.

The Opal Creek, Little North Santiam and Henline Falls trails are all winners. For a possible snowy mountain climb, try Henline or Whetstone mountains trails.

Salt Creek Falls adventure

One of Oregon's tallest waterfalls covered in snow and ice — plus a family snow-tubing area — is the highlight of this trek near Oakridge.

The classic option is an easy 1.4-mile out-and-back snowshoe trek to 286-foot Salt Creek Falls, a breathtaking sight in winter. From the Sno-Park, all that's required is trekking a summer access road to the falls.

After visiting the falls, you have some options. For a longer and more difficult adventure, venture onto Diamond Creek Loop on a 5-mile trek past another snowy waterfall.

Or, if you're with kids, head back to the sno-park



A group of skiers take a break in front of a mountain skyline at Ray Benson Sno-Park. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

and drive to the snow-tubing hill.

Finally, for even greater adventure, cross over Highway 58 onto Fuji Mountain Road and climb 4 miles uphill to a three-sided snow shelter offering epic views of Diamond Peak. Spend the night here if so inclined, as a loft sits above a wood stove.

Stop at the Middle Fork Ranger district in Oakridge for advice and a Willamette Pass winter recreation map. More info here.

Oxbow Regional Park

Fish for winter steelhead or hike through old-growth forest at this wonderful park west of the Portland Metro Area.

The highlight of this park, which requires an entry fee, is the winter steelhead you can land on the Sandy River.

But if the fish aren't biting, go hike the network of trails that follow the river and delve into old-growth forest.

Climb Mount St. Helens

Make your way up the broad slopes of this volcano with its top missing, either to ski or to challenge yourself with a trek to the summit.

In summer, you need a permit to climb this popular mountain and they can be difficult to come by. But in winter, this isn't required.

From Nov. 1 to March 31, self-register at Marble Mountain Sno-Park. There is no fee for permits during this period.

To climb in winter, make sure to have skis or crampons, and an ice axe. Be prepared and in good shape before you attempt it. For more information, contact the Mount St. Helens Institute at (360) 449-7883.

Redwoods road trip

The best time to visit the world's tallest trees is during the middle of winter, when the crowds have slimmed down and the primeval forest is dripping wet.

My favorite park is Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, just south of the Oregon and California state line.

There are heated cabins, yurts and campgrounds at the park, along with nearby hotels in Hiouchi and Gasquet.

Here's a list of my favorite redwood hikes.

McDowell Creek Falls

Silver Falls State Park makes a wonderful winter destination, but I actually prefer this less-visited destination.

Whether it's the lack of notoriety or remote location, the feeling you get arriving at McDowell Creek Falls Park is that of stumbling upon a hidden gem.

Located 10 miles north of Sweet Home, the unassuming park is home to four spectacular waterfalls found on an easy, fun, trail home to unique bridges and viewing platforms. Dogs on leashes are welcome.

The 1.8-mile loop passes Royal Terrace Falls, Majestic Falls and Crystal Pool.

There's a map at the trailhead and the trails are well maintained.

Ecola and Oswald West State Parks

In the summer, the trails of these two spectacular state parks on the Oregon Coast are packed to the breaking point.

But in winter, all that changes.

These two parks are about a half hour apart in the Cannon Beach area and often filled with solitude

during the year's coldest months.

My favorite trails at Oswald West include Neah-kahnie Mountain, Short Sand Beach and Cape Falcon.

At Ecola, Tillamook Head is a great destination, along with Indian Sands Beach.

Winter kayaking

As Oregon's population has grown, I've often heard people grumble about not being able to enjoy the state's most beautiful places without being surrounded by crowds.

Obviously, these people have never been winter kayaking on Oregon's rainy-season rivers and creeks.

Yes, it takes a drysuit and you'll still probably be cold. But for my money, there is nothing better than winter kayaking. As the rain falls, it becomes possible to navigate down tiny rivers and creeks where the beauty would blow your mind.

You'll need the correct gear and ability to get started safely, so consider getting more information from the Willamette Kayak and Canoe Club. Other good options include Next Adventure or Alder Creek Kayak and Canoe in Portland.

Madras Mountain Views bikeway

On the right day, this Central Oregon scenic bikeway might be the best winter ride in the state.

Sunny days with temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees happen with some regularity in Madras. The views of seven major Cascade Mountain peaks highlight this 30-mile, mostly flat route that also passes views of Lake Billy Chinook.

The ride begins and ends at Sahalee Park in downtown Madras. It follows a collection of low-traffic roads west of town in a farmland setting.

"On the right day, it's sunny and so nice in the middle of the winter, especially for us valley dwellers," said Alex Phillips, the bicycle recreation coordinator at the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

Drift Creek Wilderness

The largest old-growth rainforest in Oregon is home to a carpet of moss and lichen that swallows everything without legs and can be accessed by two semi-difficult trails east of Waldport.

The Harris Ranch Trail and Horse Creek Trail both drop 3 miles into the remote canyon of Drift Creek, a tributary of the Alsea, in a landscape that receives 120 inches of rain per year.

The Harris Ranch Trail is a bit easier to access (it's a short jaunt off Highway 34) and offers better access to Drift Creek's riverside beaches, while the Horse Ranch Trail offers slightly larger trees.

Commercial ski areas

There are six major resorts in northwest Oregon, each little different. In addition to downhill, many offer Nordic skiing, snowshoeing and snow-tubing.

Here's the list: Hoodoo, Mt Hood Skibowl, Timberline, Mt Hood Meadows, Willamette Pass and Mt. Bachelor.

Download the enhanced Explore Oregon app from Apple's App store or Google Play for detailed descriptions and directions to outdoor adventures throughout the state. Send us your feedback!

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for six 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 Facebook at Zach's Oregon Outdoors or @ZachSOOutdoors on Twitter.