

OUTDOORS

10 best Ore. outdoor adventures of 2017

Eclipse, wildfire and snowstorms made for an off-beat year

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This was a strange year for Oregon's outdoors.

Wildfire, snowstorms and the solar eclipse dominated headlines for much of the year, making it an offbeat season to be out exploring.

That's reflected in my annual list of the best outdoor adventures of 2017. So many trips were tied to news events — mainly wildfires — that this list feels a little more topical than normal.

But there were also plenty of hidden gems to be found.

This year brought me to a ghost town with hot springs, up a mountain named for the gods, and into a forest of trees that looked as though they belonged in a Dr. Seuss book.

Here are my 10 favorite trips from 2017.

10) Eagle Creek Trail

This beloved pathway was at the center of the most high-profile wildfire in Oregon this summer.

On Sept. 2, a teenager allegedly tossed a firecracker off the trail, igniting the Eagle Creek Fire, which eventually ate through 50,000 acres of forest in the Columbia River Gorge.

I was lucky enough to have brought my daughter and parents onto the trail during the spring. The trail won't ever look quite the same and won't reopen until 2019 at the earliest. That why I'll savor the pictures I took that day.

Our trip, of course, was bland compared to the adventure of 10 Salem teenagers who were trapped by the wildfire overnight and watched the fire grow from close range.

Here's my favorite quote from the story about trapped teenagers:

"There were times when I thought we were going to die," said Abby Bork, the youngest member of the group at 15 years old. "But it actually turned out being a lot of fun."

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9) Detroit Lake SUP

Detroit Lake didn't seem like a great place to bring a stand-up paddleboard.

But the motorboat-filled reservoir ended up being more interesting than expected to explore on a SUP. Add to that how much my kids loved playing around on it, and you have a nice combination of adventure touring and kid-friendly utility.

Here's how it worked: we camped at Southshore Campground on the south end of Detroit Lake this summer. During the heat of the day, the kids used the SUP as a fun inflatable toy. They paddled around, climbed on and jumped off it.

At night, the adults took the SUP to explore some of the fun inlets and coves on the edges of Detroit Lake.

8) Wallowa Mountain kid-friendly hikes

The only problem with the Wallowa Mountains of northeast Oregon is the lack of kid-friendly hikes.

The most spectacular mountain range in Oregon — with the state's largest backpackable wilderness area — often requires long and difficult treks to see the good stuff.

But on a trip in May, I explored two exceptions to that rule — Hurricane Creek and Iwetemlaykin State Heritage Site.

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Hurricane Creek Trail offers a flat and scenic route into the Eagle Cap Wilderness, with waterfalls and mountain views aplenty. The trip can be a six-mile day-hike or a longer backpacking trip.

Iwetemlaykin is the easier of the two, located right next to Wallowa Lake, with a 1.2- to 2.4-mile trek possible below stunning views of mountains and a good feel for the area's history.

7) Snow Camp Lookout

This lookout, which you'll be able to rent for the night in 2018, sits at the crossroads of two of Oregon's largest wildfires.

On one side of Snow Camp Lookout, located west of Brookings, is the blackened wasteland left by last summer's Chetco Bar Fire, a 190,000-acre inferno that was Oregon's largest blaze of the year.

On the opposite side, you can look at the green flora and small trees regenerating in the scar of the 2002 Biscuit Fire, which at 500,000 acres was one of the largest fires in state history.

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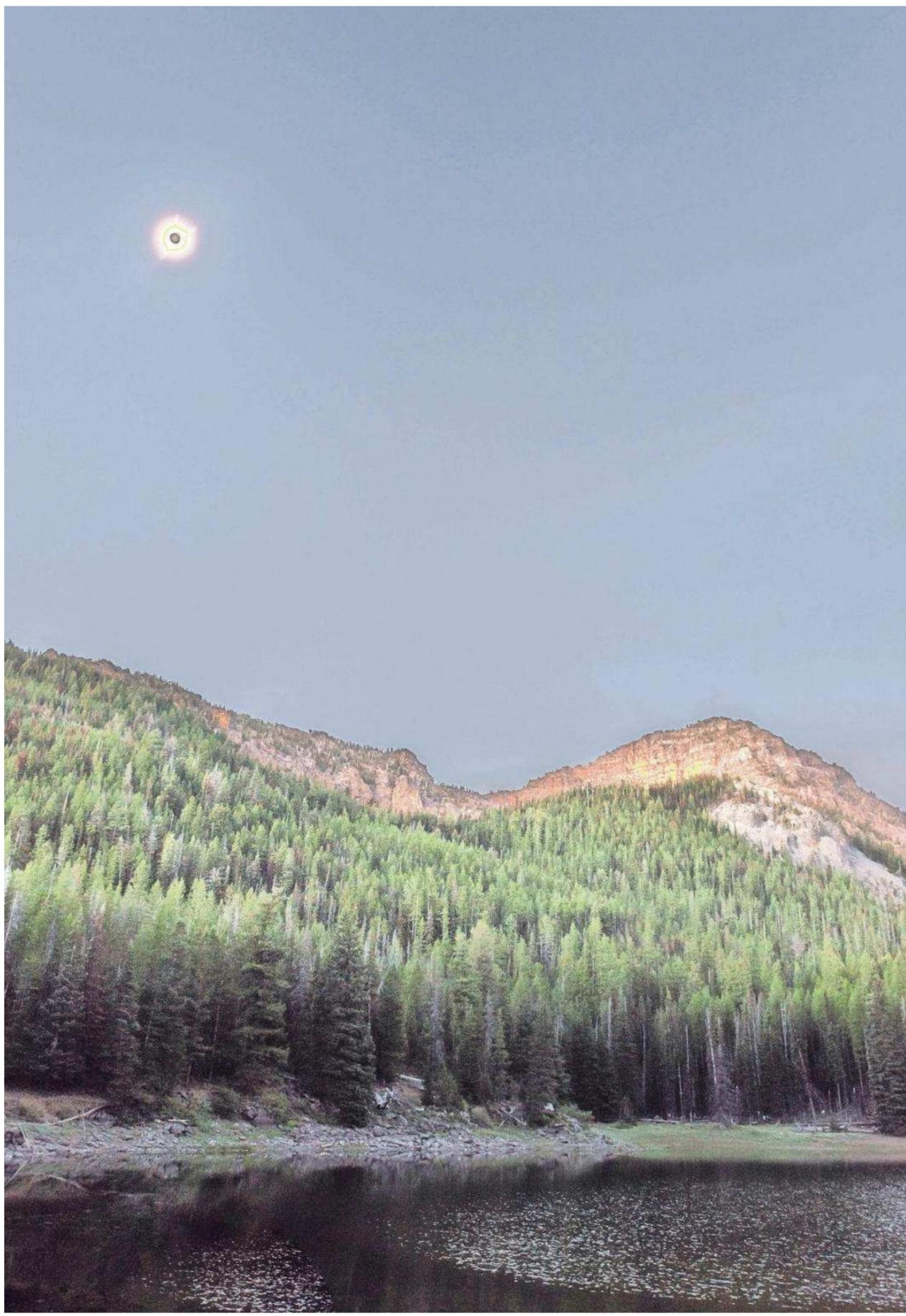
The small cabin where you can spend the night with reservations on Recreation.gov also features ocean views in the beautiful Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains.

But the most interesting thing is the views of destruction and rebirth in an ecosystem following wildfire.

6) Myrtle Tree Trail

In a remote corner of southwest Oregon, there's a patch of forest that feels like something out of a science fiction novel.

Squat emerald trees sprout antennae that stretch and twist into a canopy drip-



August's solar eclipse as seen at Strawberry Lake in Eastern Oregon. JEFFREY S. GREEN/DYNAMIC PHOTOGRAPHY



The North Fork of the Smith River is known for its jade-green water and red-rock canyons. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

ping with the pungent smell of fresh bay leaves.

The northwest is home to countless trees that fire the imagination, but none is quite so peculiar as the old-growth Oregon myrtle.

Myrtle Tree Trail, a charmed little pathway east of Gold Beach, is the best place to see trees that grow only in coastal forests of California and southwestern Oregon.

The hike is very short — less than a mile round-trip. It leads to a 400-year-old and 70 feet wide tree that you can crawl underneath.

5) Neahkanie Mountain and Oswald West

One of the tallest coastal mountains in Oregon, named for the gods of Native Americans who lived in its shadow, is also home to ancient tales of shipwrecks and hidden treasure.

Neahkanie Mountain and Oswald West State Park comprise some of the most beautiful scenery and fascinating history on the Oregon Coast.

Located south of Cannon Beach, the highlights are clustered in a state park with a number of cool places to explore.

The most popular spots include Short Sand Beach (1-mile hike), Neahkanie Mountain (3 miles) and Cape Falcon (5 miles out and back).

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4) Strawberry Lake eclipse

Concern about crowds flooding into Oregon for Aug. 21's total solar eclipse were overhyped, but the actual eclipse

was not.

Everything within the path of totality went into phantasmal darkness during the big moment, turning the ordinary into a pocket of the paranormal for two minutes.

The moment was doubly sweet for me, as I was watching the eclipse from one of my favorite spots in Oregon: Strawberry Lake.

Located in Eastern Oregon's Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, the lake is a cliff-walled wonder surrounded by waterfalls and clear creeks. It makes a wonderful backpacking destination any time of year, but during the eclipse it was particularly fun.

The cliffs surrounding the lake began to darken, first into shadow, then an odd shade of purple. As the temperature dropped, clouds appeared in the sky, where none had been previously.

As totality approached, a few stars appeared in the sky.

It was a magical moment in a spectacular place.

3) John Day Fossil Beds

Start with one of the best museums in Oregon, featuring the fossils of animals that roamed this landscape 30 million years ago.

Add some of the most beautiful and interesting hiking trails in the state.

What you have, all combined, is numerous reasons to visit the Sheep Rock Unit of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

This is especially true if you have children, as I do.

We started at the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center, home to a museum that engages all your senses.

Growls, squawks and hoots of mammals that lived in this once-lush environment millions of years ago come in over speakers. Giant murals showing rainforests, volcanic eruptions and all manner of beasts make you feel as though you're walking through scenes in a movie.

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The best part, though, were the fossils. The toothy skull of a "terminator pig" — which looks like a cross between an alligator and a sheep — greets you on your way into the building.

Another favorite was the skull of paratylopus, an early camel.

After the museum, we headed out to the spectacular hiking trails of the monument. The Blue Basin / Island in Time

hike was probably the best hike overall, but the many short routes are all worth checking out.

2) Ritter Hot Springs

"Welcome to Ritter, Oregon, here in the middle of nowhere."

That was how Mike Tillay welcomed me to one of the state's most unique hot springs in June, during a stop on a road trip across Eastern Oregon.

A century-old ghost town nestled along the Middle Fork John Day River — some 50 miles north of Mount Vernon — Ritter Hot Springs hasn't changed much since the stagecoach days.

People have been coming to this remote spot since the 1800s, lured by a thermodynamic gift believed to possess healing powers.

After soaking in the pool and tubs for a day, I understood why.

The hot springs water feels ... smooth. Almost silky.

Prices are cheap, the scenery is sublime and the vibe is mellow. I can't wait to go again.

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1) North Fork Smith River

It's a desert river that flows through the heart of a rainforest.

That's the joke, anyway, among river guides who paddle the North Fork Smith River, which begins in Oregon before crossing into northwest California near Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park.

The river is surrounded by some of the lushest forest and tallest trees on earth. Yet from a raft or kayak, this rapid-filled stream travels through barren red-rock canyons that feel as though they belong in Arizona.

How is that possible? To find out, the Statesman Journal and Oregon Field Guide joined a team of geologists and raft guides on a trip into the North Fork's remote canyon.

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!

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