

# Life in the Valley



## Quiet Fay Lake trek offers best balance of beauty, solitude

**Zach Urness** Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

There is nothing overwhelming about the snowshoe route to Fay Lake.

Honestly, that's part of what makes it appealing.

The trip takes you into silent forest, past the snow-covered North Santiam River, and to the small clearing of Fay Lake.

The trip is challenging but not backbreaking, scenic but without mountain views, and, most of all, quiet.

The trek begins at Big Meadows Road, on the side of Highway 22 east of Detroit, just before you reach Maxwell Sno-Park. The road is typically plowed out to provide room for parking.

The only concern here is snow. At just 3,500 feet, snow has been inconsistent during the past five years. It's best during a nice cold snap, following a dump of low-elevation powder.

The trip was suggested by Lee Slattum, longtime trip leader and snowshoe chair for the Salem-based outdoor club The Chemeke-tans.

He described the route as a nice alternative to the often more crowded sno-parks in the Santiam Pass area.

### Route to North Santiam and Fay Lake

There are two options in terms of how far you want to travel.

The trek to Fay Lake is fairly difficult, especially if you're breaking trail, at 6.7 miles round-trip and 700 feet of elevation gain.

An easier option would be turning back at the scenic viewpoint over the North Santiam River. That route is 3.6 miles round-trip with just 200 feet of climb.

Before starting a trip, make sure to download a map online (the map of Maxwell Sno-Park shows this route) or pick one up at Detroit Ranger Station.

Either way, the trip begins on Big Meadows Road and follows the wide, snow-covered road 1 mile to a major junction. Here, there are roads going in many different directions.

For this route, swing a sharp left, onto Road 2257, following signs pointing to Big Meadows Camp.

The best part of this route begins here, as the road narrows and you have a more narrow, intimate pathway to follow through snow-covered fir and hemlock.

At mile 1.5, you'll reach a horse camp and lots of signs, while at mile 1.8, you'll reach a bridge over the North Santiam River. It's a beautiful spot in winter.

The river is still pretty small at this point in its journey and snow covers much of it. White trees lean across the river and boulders are piled high with snow.

I stopped at the scenic spot for a bar and water, then continued on through the increasingly narrow and snowy pathway toward Fay Lake.

The toughest part of the journey is beyond the North Santiam crossing. The road climbs uphill at a steady pace, ascending 300 feet in 1.6 miles.

You'll also pass some roads that branch off. The main route is



One of the highlights of the snowshoe route to Fay Lake is the snow-covered North Santiam River. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

marked by blue diamonds and, presumably, a few ski and snowshoe tracks.

Eventually, the lake comes into view, an open snowy clearing in the middle of the forest. I've never been to Fay Lake during the summer, but apparently it's stocked and a good place to fish. In winter, there's not much to do here except admire the view and lay in the sunshine.

I traveled there on a bluebird winter day and, after the shady forest for most of the route, the sunshine at the lake was welcome.

I set up a seat in the snow and ate lunch in the glow of the lake — so bright it looked like a bowl of milk — and savored the silence. No sounds of cars, people or cell phones.

The trip back went quicker, as I followed the snowshoe tracks I'd made on the way in. The entire trip took about four hours. That's a good ratio given the drive is about an hour and a half from Salem.

The snowshoe route to Fay Lake couldn't be called spectacular — with no mountain views — but it's a wonderful, quiet adventure with

some nice sights.

### Fay Lake snowshoe / ski

**In a nutshell:** Follow snowed-over roads through the forest to a view of the North Santiam River and Fay Lake.

**Difficulty:** moderately challenging

**Distance:** 6.7 miles round-trip to Fay Lake; 3.2 miles to North Santiam River view

**Climb:** 700 feet to Fay Lake; 200 to North Santiam

**Sno-Park permit required?** No

**Directions:** From Salem, follow Highway 22 east, past Detroit and Marion Forks. Just before you reach Maxwell Sno-Park, look for a plowed-out spot on Big Meadows Road. That's your parking spot.

*Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 10 years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at [zurness@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:zurness@statesmanjournal.com) or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsO-Routdoors.*