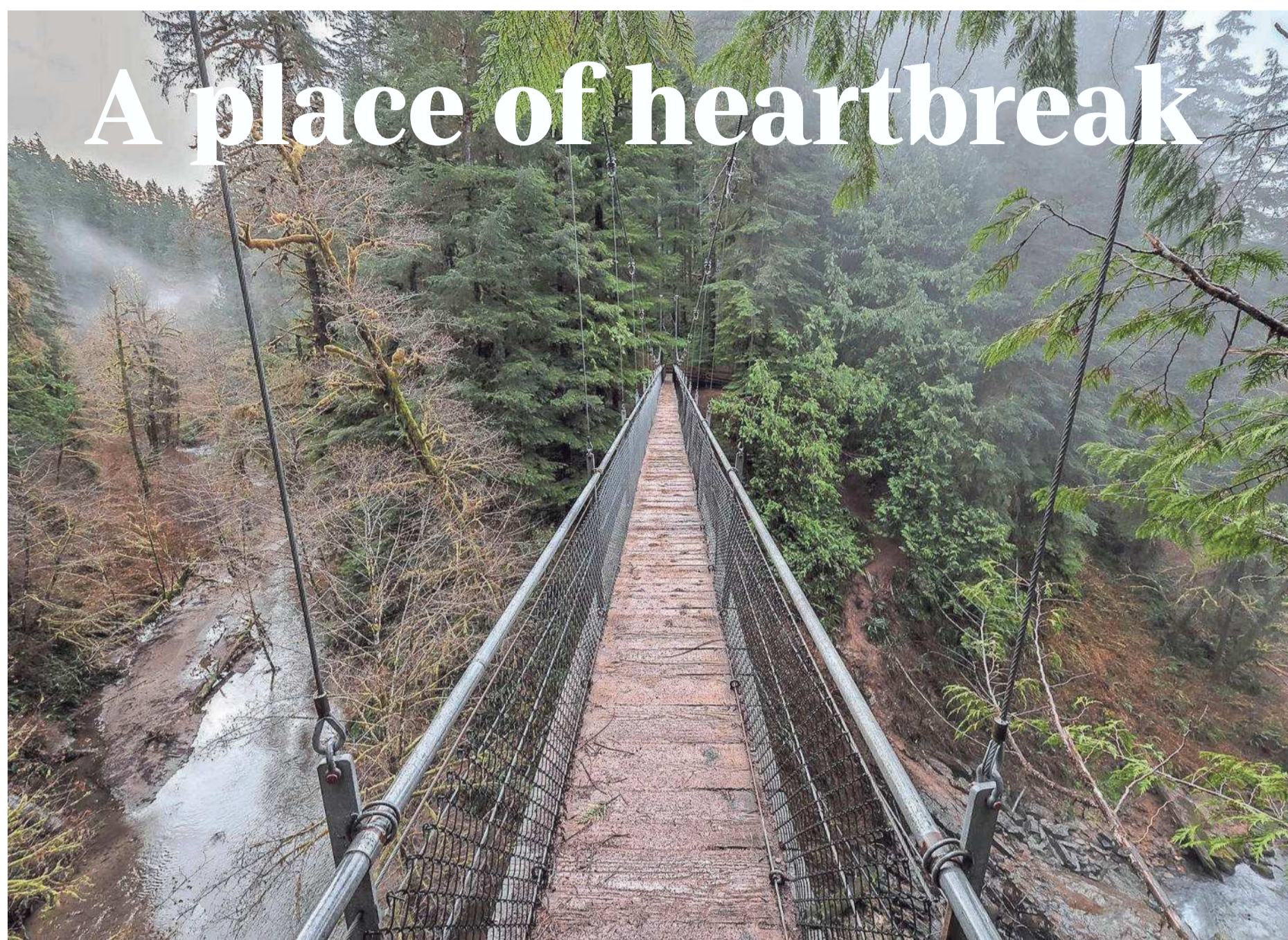


Life in the Valley



A place of heartbreak

The bridge across Drift Creek hovers 100 feet in the air. JEFF GREEN/DYNAMIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Drift Creek Falls bridge provides fantastic views, but carries a tragic tale

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The most spectacular back-country bridge in Oregon turned 20 last year, and it's just as amazing now as it was back in 1997.

Located deep in the Coast Range, east of Lincoln City, the 240-foot suspension bridge soars across treetops and above Drift Creek Falls at the end of a popular 1.5 mile hike.

The bridge is supported by two giant towers and anchored by bolts planted in the rock, but it still feels a bit like walking across a wobbly tightrope 100 feet above a rocky gorge.

It's a thrill for kids — my 3-year-old almost lost her mind with joy upon reaching this wooden skyway, even while some adults nervously scurry across its planks.

But Drift Creek Bridge, the longest trail bridge on national forest lands in the Northwest, also is marked by tragedy.

Upon reaching the bridge, visitors are greeted with a small plaque that reads: "Dedicated to the memory of Scott Paul: his vision for this bridge will live forever."

Paul was the engineering brains behind the ambitious Drift Creek bridge. It was a project that "many thought could not be built," his friend Carroll Vogel wrote.

"Scott Paul was consumed with passion for this project," he wrote. "It burned like a fire inside him."

Sadly, Paul would not see his masterwork's completion.

While trying to move an excavator across the canyon, Paul became tangled in a rigging line and was pulled down into the 100-foot chasm his bridge was meant to connect, according to a 1997 story from the Eugene Register-Guard.

His death would stall the project for years, until Vogel, a Seattle-based contractor, picked up the pieces.

The project was no small feat. A helicopter flew in the largest pieces and buckets of concrete. Vogel and his team "spent their days working in midair above the canyon, putting together the walkway — a 30-inch wide structure with chest-high safety railings," according to the Register-Guard story, even in the driving rain.

All the effort, though, has left something special at this beloved trail in Siuslaw National Forest, which is best to visit during the spring.

After almost a mile and a half in the forest, the trail reaches the bridge and leaves hikers in awe-struck wonder as they clamber across. It's hard to know whether



Lucy and Rollie enjoy a trailside snack on Drift Creek Falls Trail. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL



The suspension bridge on Drift Creek Falls Trail has a dedication to Scott Paul. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

to hold onto the railings for safety, or stare down at the 80-foot waterfall booming directly below your feet.

The trail continues on the opposite side of the canyon, heading down to a picnic table and viewpoint of the waterfall and bridge high overhead.

It's a moment to stand in awe, both of the natural beauty, but also at the audacity of the engineer who gave his life for this remarkable bridge.

"When you make that journey do not doubt that Scott is there, awaiting your visit," Vogel wrote.

"He is present in the laughter of children as they scamper forth above the canyon. And in the gasp of awe when adults step away from the cliff and observe the world beneath their feet tumbling away to airiness and mist; only the bridge between them and the great unknown."

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The suspension bridge on Drift Creek Falls Trail offers view of the waterfall and deep gorge. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Drift Creek Falls Trail

In a nutshell: Kid-friendly hike in the Coast Range east of Lincoln City, highlighted by a suspension bridge and 80-foot waterfall.

Difficulty: Easy to moderate

Length: 3 miles

Elevation drop & climb: 350 feet

Open: Year-round, but best in spring after some rain.

Crowds: Can be heavy on nice weekends, so arrive early to get a parking spot. Mid-week is much quieter.

Directions (from Salem): From Salem, travel west on Highway 22 and merge onto Highway 18 toward Lincoln City. After passing Grande Ronde / Spirit Mountain Casino, continue another 18 miles. Near Rose Lodge, turn left on Bear Creek County Road for 3.5 miles. Continue straight seven miles on Forest Service Road 17 to trailhead.

Directions (From Lincoln City area): From Highway 101 on the south end of Lincoln City, turn east on Drift Creek Road, turn right on South Drift Creek Road about a quarter of a mile. Turn left onto Forest Service Road 17, approximately 10 miles to trailhead.