

Life in the Valley

Spring into the season

10 spectacular Oregon adventures perfect for blossoming time of year



Lucy Urness and Matt Achor hike the overlook trail outside the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center. The center is a great place to check out before heading out to see the Painted Hills and John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
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I've always felt that April would make a far better time to mark the new year than January.

Instead of darkness, coldness and the impending teeth of winter, April brings feelings of optimism and rebirth with a tantalizing mixture of sunshine and warm rain.

In that spirit, here are 10 of my favorite outdoor adventures that are at their unique best during the spring.

10: Potato Hill snowshoeing

I've learned over the years that once spring arrives, few people have much interest in playing in the snow.

But this year seems to be the exception to that rule, and spring really is a great time to snowshoe. There's more daylight, more blue sky and typically snow until May.

Potato Hill Sno-Park, about a 90-minute drive from Salem, is a great option on Santiam Pass. Follow the well-marked trail uphill through burned-over forest for stunning views of Washington, Three-Fingered Jack and other Cascade Range peaks.

9: North Oregon Coast hiking

The number of people visiting the Oregon Coast has reached absurd levels.

Oregon's coastal state parks jumped from 21 million visits in 2011 to a record-smashing 29.5 million visits last year. The bulk of those people arrive during the height of summer — late June, July and August.

Thus, I've started getting my coast fix during the spring months, when crowds aren't quite so insane.

This is particularly true for the Cannon Beach to Manzanita area, which is wonderful but becomes unvisitable by summer.

Take advantage of places like Oswald West and Ecola state parks now, rather than in July.

8: McDowell Creek Falls Park

McDowell Creek Falls Park might not be the most well-known destination among winter waterfall hunters, but this quiet and beautiful destination 10 miles north of Sweet Home is a place with three stunning cascades and a quiet atmosphere.

"It's like a miniature Silver Falls without the crowds and tourists," said John Merrell, a photographer from Stayton.

The park is open year-round but shines during spring after a nice rain. An easy, 1.8-mile loop winds through a mossy forest and across wooden bridges that provide endless opportunities for amateur photographers to channel their in-



Deborah Achor, 65, of Minnesota, fat bikes the Nye Beach area on the Oregon Coast.

ner Ansel Adams.

There's no day-use fee, and people are allowed to bring leashed dogs onto the trails, something not allowed at Silver Falls' waterfall trails.

7: Deschutes and Klickitat Rail Trails

These two rail-trails in the Columbia River Gorge feature two of the best mountain biking rides in the Northwest.

The easier of the two is the Lower Deschutes River Trail, which begins at a state park near The Dalles and rolls through stunning canyonlands for 23 miles.

You can turn around whenever you want, but two good goals are an abandoned boxcar (12 miles round-trip) or Harris Ranch (23 miles round-trip).

The Klickitat Trail — located on the Washington side of the Gorge near Lyle, Washington — offers a more adventurous option.

A one-way downhill ride through beautiful Swale Canyon and along the Klickitat River is beautiful in spring but requires a shuttle and comfort in traveling through a remote landscape.

6: Oregon & California redwoods

They twist into the sky like something from another planet, like something passed down from the Jurassic, because the size of an old-growth redwood in person isn't something that correlates with our experience of trees.

A handful of these otherworldly monsters do grow on Oregon soil, and a trip to southwest Oregon makes for a fun family road trip.

The two easy trails that explore Oregon's redwoods are just outside Brookings: Oregon Redwoods Trail and Redwood Nature Loop.

That said, the far more impressive trees of Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park are just a short drive south, so it's easy to see all the big trees of this area with a base camp in Brookings or Cres-

cent City, California.

5: Oregon Coast fat biking

About two years ago, I declared I was finished with hiking Oregon Coast beaches for good.

The reason was that I'd experienced fat biking on the beach. By riding these mountain bikes with balloon-sized tires, you can cover far more ground than on foot and really enjoy the coast.

The easiest place for a family to get started is Newport. Located just a few blocks from the beach, Bike Newport rents out fat bikes. You can ride all afternoon in the shadow of Yaquina Head.

Fat biking trips are best in spring before the coast crowds get heavy.

4: John Day Fossil Beds

The multicolored hills of Eastern Oregon are a bucket-list trip for many Oregonians.

And the best time to visit the Painted Hills and John Day Fossil Beds National Monument is spring, before the crowds and boiling hot temperatures arrive.

It's an ideal trip for children — there are short trails and lots of educational opportunities.

Start at the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center, home to a fantastic museum, before setting out on the trail.

A few hiking favorites include the five short trails at the Painted Hills Unit, along with the Blue Basin trail system. But there are plenty of routes to choose from.

3: Winter Falls tour at Silver Falls

It wouldn't be fair to call them the "forgotten waterfalls of Silver Falls State Park."

After all, these five cascades are smack in the middle of one of the world's most famous waterfall hikes — the Trail of Ten Falls.

But the truth is, this quintet of waterfalls gets far fewer visitors than the most crowded sections of

the park even though they're just as stunning and easy to reach.

Start at Winter Falls Trailhead, at Silver Falls, and follow the trail on an out-and-back adventure to: Winter Falls (134 feet), Middle North Falls (106 feet), Drake Falls (30 feet), Lower North Falls (30 feet) and Double Falls (178 feet).

The hike is just 2.6 miles with 450 feet of climb. The waterfalls are best in spring following rain. They tend to dry up — especially Winter and Double falls — by the time summer rolls around.

2: Kentucky Falls wilderness tour

One of the best hiking trails in Oregon's Coast Range was reconnected by a pair of bridges last November.

Two new bridges were installed on the North Fork Smith River Trail in late November, allowing hikers to connect with the Kentucky Falls Trail system on an 8.5-mile tour.

The combined trails feature five waterfalls, including two over 100 feet tall and old-growth rainforest in the remote area between Eugene and Florence.

That length and collection of highlights is rare in the Coast Range, where the majority of trails are short or splinted in the heavily logged area west of the Willamette Valley.

"We don't have many longer-distance trails in the Coast Range — this is one of our best," said Kraig Lindelin, trails coordinator for Siuslaw National Forest.

The only downside is a very rough and confusing drive from the Willamette Valley.

1: Wilderness river trip — Illinois, Smith or Rogue

Oregon's most beautiful rivers are located in the state's southwest corner — the realm of the Siskiyou Mountains.

That's my opinion, of course, but there's nothing quite like the raw, rainforest beauty of the Illinois, Rogue and Smith (which begins in Oregon but is mostly paddled in extreme northern California).

Spring is the best time to paddle the Illinois and Smith, which are not controlled by dams and only have enough water to run following a decent bit of rain. The Rogue is great in spring but can be paddled all season long.

Commercial outfitters offering trips on the Illinois include Momentum River Expeditions (momentumriverexpeditions.com) in Ashland and ARTA River Trips (arta.org).

Redwood Rides offers trips on the Smith River, including through the redwoods. A high number of outfitters run trips on the Rogue River, which is most popular in summer.