

Life in the Valley



Wildfire views

Recently reopened Triangulation Peak Trail reveals extent of damage

A fire line is seen carved out on Triangulation Peak Trail. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
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On the cliffs of Triangulation Peak, the Whitewater Fire made its final stand.

The wildfire that ruined eclipse plans, rained ash on Detroit and torched 11,500 acres below Mount Jefferson was almost finished by last September.

But in one final flourish, as though giving people something to remember, the fire boomed back to life Sept. 13, throwing up a smoke column and roaring toward one of the most beloved viewpoints in Oregon.

Today, with a hike on recently reopened Triangulation Peak Trail, you can see where the fire finally broke. A black line of burned trees and charred forest cuts like a ribbon just below the 5,400-foot peak and entrance of Boca Cave.

The 5.2-mile hike up Triangulation Peak has always been one of the most interesting near Salem. My favorite view of Mount Jefferson and the chance to climb inside a rock cavern is about as good as it gets.

The good news is the fire’s impact didn’t change any of that — although the route to Boca Cave was torched and could see problems in the future.

Overall, though, the hike remains excellent. The views of the fire scar add an interesting element, providing a reminder of the force that’s shaped this landscape for millennia.

New fire line

The trip begins at Triangulation Trailhead, about 30 minutes from

Detroit, and travels through mixed forest.

Most of the hike up Triangulation Peak is unchanged — with one major exception.

The new feature is a large fire break, or buffer, a half-mile into the trip. The break is about 50 yards wide where all the trees have been cut, above and below the trail.

“That was the western control line meant to stop the spread of the fire last summer,” Willamette National Forest Detroit district ranger Grady McMahan said. “The goal was to stop it from reaching private timberland and structures like McCoy Snowmobile Shelter area.”

The fire lines cut around the Whitewater Fire have remained controversial. Critics say the fire lines were cut unnecessarily — the fire never reached many of them — and shouldn’t have been cut in the name of protecting private timberland and shelters.

McMahan has defended cutting the lines a number of times.

“The fire was coming closer every day, and with the right wind event, the fire could have been right there in a day or two,” McMahan said in a story from September of 2017. “We didn’t feel like that was a risk worth taking.”

New views at the top

It’s not until you reach the ridge-line of Triangulation Peak that there’s an evidence of the fire.

A few blackened trees show up along the edge of the trail, and as the views expand, a mosaic of black, brown and green forest spreads out.

The most interesting places are where you can see, exactly, where

the fire broke. It’s a run of blackened trees colliding with green forest.

You can almost imagine the fire roaring up and petering out, stopped in its tracks by cool weather and rain that eventually doused the blaze.

Lots of burn at Boca Cave

The area most impacted by the wildfire is around Boca Cave.

The pathway to the iconic cavern with a view of Mount Jefferson was torched to its bones. What was once a forested scramble to the cave’s mouth now feels like walking through a desert of matchstick trees.

That could become problematic as more people visit, and wear down the soil that’s already sloughing.

From inside the cave, the view is pretty much the same, except the iconic tree near the mouth is burned and may eventually fall down.

The view also has more blacks and browns below the massive bulk of Mount Jefferson.

Hiking home

During the hike to the top, I found myself hoping Triangulation Peak wouldn’t be badly burned. It’s one of my favorite hikes, after all.

I was glad to see it wasn’t much different.

But on the hike down, I started having different thoughts.

One striking thing about walking around the burn was noticing how the forest floor had been cleaned of dense brush. It was as though someone had taken a

broom and swept up the downed limbs, leaves and most of the vegetation.

That’s what fire has been doing in the Cascade Range for millennia.

By contrast, on the hike down, through the area that hadn’t burned, it was impossible not to notice how choked the forest floor was with brush drying in the hot sunshine.

The unburned side of Triangulation Peak might have escaped the flames last summer, but it’s warming into a tinderbox that with the right spark could ignite a fire just as large as Whitewater.

Hike to Triangulation Peak & Boca Cave

In a nutshell: A forested hike to one of the best viewpoint and caves in Oregon.

Location: northeast of Detroit Lake

Distance: 5.2 miles round-trip

Climb: 700 feet to Triangulation Peak; 1,000 feet (down and up) to Boca Cave

Difficulty: Moderate to difficult

Directions to trailhead: From Detroit, travel east on Highway 22 for approximately 8 miles to Forest Service Road 2233 (McCoy Creek Road). Turn left onto FS Road 2233, travel 7 miles to Triangulation Trail #3373.

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