

Life in the Valley

Oregon's 10 best hikes for the family

Abby Luschei and Zach Urness
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Doing things with children can be unpredictable. Going to the grocery store may seem like a feat in and of itself.

If you've ever wanted to hike with your family but have been worried about going into the unknown, you are in luck: Zach Urness and Bonnie Henderson have done just that.

And they published a book about it. "Best Hikes with Kids: Oregon" features 121 hikes in the state, primarily close to the Willamette Valley and Bend, that can accommodate a range of ages, difficulties and abilities.

"The hikes themselves (were) all carefully selected and have all been hiked recently by Zach or me," said Henderson, a freelance writer, editor and author of several outdoor-related books.

It isn't a one-size-fits-all book; it's a detailed reference for eager-to-be-outdoors parents giving them a place to start.

Together, the co-authors have more than 30 years of experience exploring and writing about Oregon outdoors. In the decade he has written about the subject, Urness said he often gets asked, "I have a family, I want to take them somewhere amazing. But where should I go?"

According to the authors, a "good hike" with kids consists of not having to hike too far to get a good payoff like a view, waterfall or footbridge.

"I brought my daughters (1 and 3 years old) and my nephews (7 and 10 years old) on a lot of the hikes," Urness said. "So, in addition to hiking them myself, I got the experience from being out there with kids."

With more than 100 hikes to choose from, "Best Hikes with Kids: Oregon" is formatted to inform with ease – pick it up, flip to the desired geographical location and head out.

To give an idea, here are the co-author's 10 favorite hikes with kids, written by Urness and Henderson, from every region of the state. They've even added a few bonus hikes just across the Washington and California border.

1: Portland area: Wapato Access Greenway

Any excuse to go to Sauvie Island is a good one, especially during the harvest season, when family-friendly farms offer u-pick berries, corn mazes, and more. While you're there, take an easy, level walk around Virginia Lake, a wetland that's dry most of the year but wet in winter. You might spy migrating waterfowl from a trailside viewing platform and bird blind.

The whole loop hike is 2.5 miles, including a short detour to Hadley's Landing on Multnomah Slough, where you could stop to picnic and watch boats go by.

The bridge to Sauvie Island is just 10 miles from downtown Portland; the drive to Wapato Greenway takes another five minutes, and there's no trailhead parking fee.

2: Mount Hood: Lower Twin Lake

We love the hike to Mirror Lake — and do a lot of other people. So drive a lit-

tle farther from Portland, past Government Camp, and take the 2.1-mile hike to Lower Twin Lake. It gains just 660 feet of elevation, making it doable for most kids. All this lake mirrors is the forest surrounding it (and your own smiles of satisfaction upon reaching it).

Make it a day hike and picnic at the lakeshore. A trail encircles the lake; the best wading is on a small bit of sandy shoreline on the far side. Or make it a backpacking trip and pick a campsite among several scattered all around the lakeshore, but avoid busy summer weekends if you can; lots of families choose this for a first, or annual, kids' backpack destination.

If your group has more time and energy, Upper Twin Lake is less than a mile by trail to the north.

3: Gorge: Columbia Hills State Park

Because many of Oregon's iconic waterfall trails remain closed due to Eagle Creek Fire damage, we're going a little outside the box with our Columbia Gorge selection.

Columbia Hills State Park, located on the Washington side of the Gorge near The Dalles, features one of the best spring wildflower displays in the Northwest, along with petroglyphs and an ancient ring of lava.

The great thing about hiking here with kids is different levels of difficulty, plus the educational possibilities. There are also options for camping, fishing and boating.

The most notable hike is Dalles Mountain Ranch, with wildflowers and Mount Hood views, on a moderately difficult 4.1-mile loop. Two other excellent options are Horsethief Butte (1.2 miles) and a short stroll along Petroglyphs Trail, which features images showcasing the area's Native American history.

4: Coast Range: Sweet Creek Trail

Here's a fun activity with kids while exploring this charmed trail in Oregon's Coast Range: at the beginning of the hike, ask them to count the number of waterfalls they see.

Officially, there are 11 waterfalls along Sweet Creek Trail, a 2.2-mile trek south of Mapleton and near Florence. But there's so much cascading water in this steep rainforest canyon that my nephew Rylan decided there were really 26 waterfalls.

No matter how you do it, though, Sweet Creek is a sweet treat, with catwalks that go out over the water and numerous places to stop and explore the creek. Sweet Creek Falls, the 50-foot main attraction, is powerful in winter and becomes a popular swimming spot in summer.

5: Crater Lake: The Watchman and Cleetwood Cove

Oregon's only national park showcases the United States' deepest lake glowing bright blue inside the belly of an exploded volcano.

While there are a number of fun activities here, two stick out. The first is a short hike to a lookout with a bird's eye view of the lake, while the second takes you down to the lakeshore, where chilly swimming and a boat tour is possible.

The hike to The Watchman is 1.6

miles round-trip to the lookout, with a steep little climb. Cleetwood Cove drops 700 feet to the lakeshore and is 2 challenging miles round-trip. Boat tours are expensive — \$42 per adult and \$28 per kid — but certainly worthwhile.

6: Central Cascades: Sahalie Falls

Multnomah Falls is tall, but Sahalie Falls is huge: the entire McKenzie River pouring over a cliff and into a bowl. You can see it in a short walk from the parking area off Highway 126, but the best way to see it is in a 2.4-mile loop hike that provides views of Sahalie from both sides of the river plus a second waterfall, Koosah.

Oh, and there's an awesome skinny footbridge to cross over the river near the start of the loop. And if there's any sunshine, you may see a rainbow in the falls' copious mist.

You might encounter mountain bikers on the trail — the McKenzie River Trail is a popular single-track route — but they tend to be polite and accommodating to hikers on this trail. There is no parking fee (but be warned; the restrooms at the parking area are notoriously dirty and to be avoided).

7: Coast: Short Sand Beach

Looking for a short coastal walk with wee ones? You can't beat the 0.5-mile hike to Short Sand Beach. It's easy and it goes through what may be the Oregon Coast's biggest clutch of old-growth cedars — among the few that have avoided being cut over the past century-plus. You'll likely be accompanied by surfers heading to the water with their boards.

Short Sand Trail is kind of a gateway: with older kids, consider peeling off north to Cape Falcon, or south to the meadows and views at Devil's Cauldron. It's all within dramatic Oswald West State Park, a gorgeous park south of Arch Cape and north of Manzanita.

Short Sand Beach used to have a hike-in campground; camping is no longer allowed, but campground amenities (ocean view picnic tables, flush toilets at the trailhead and at the beach) remain. There's no parking fee for this trail.

8: Central Oregon: Sparks Lake

It's fitting that a trail named for one of Oregon's preeminent photographers would be as scenic as they come. Ray Atkeson Memorial Trail starts along the edge of Sparks Lake, with mirror views of the nearby Cascades peaks, before venturing into the adjacent lava-rock landscape.

Take the main 1.4-mile loop, including a short detour through a slot canyon of tall rock walls. Or expand your hike into Davis Canyon for a 2.5-mile loop.

Sparks Lake is near the start (if you're coming from Bend) of Cascade Lakes Scenic Byway, with unlimited recreation opportunities for outdoorsy families. This is one of the easier trails that peel off this classic Central Oregon route.

9: E. Oregon canyonlands: John Day Fossil Beds

Few places do indoor and outdoor learning better than this national monument in Eastern Oregon's canyonlands.



Lucy Urness and Matt Achor hike the overlook trail outside the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center.
ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

The monument's main attraction is a trove of easy and spectacular hikes, showcasing the iconic Painted Hills and a geologic wonderland packed with fossils.

But it's also home to an outstanding museum and working paleontology science center.

I like to start a trip here by taking my kids to the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center, home to skeletons of saber-tooth tigers and a prehistoric animal known as the terminator pig. Then, we head out to hike the canyonlands where these fossils were discovered, in uber-scenic spots such as Blue Basin and Island in Time trails.

It's a long drive from most Oregon cities, so take advantage by staying overnight at a bed and breakfast or hot springs resort.

10: Northeast Oregon: Anthony Lake

One of the least-known mountain ranges in Oregon is the mighty Elkhorns. Located just outside Baker City, on the far side of the state, these rugged peaks actually host some great options for hiking and traveling with kids.

It might sound like heresy, but I actually prefer the Elkhorns to the better-known Wallows when adventuring with kids.

The basecamp for adventure in the Elkhorns has to be Anthony Lake, a stunning alpine pool above 7,000 feet with a number of short and beautiful hikes, including access to the iconic Elkhorn Crest Trail.

There's a number of different options from the easy (2.4 miles to Hoffer Lakes) to the very challenging (26 miles one-way on Elkhorn Crest) and everything in between.

Bonus: Oregon and California redwoods

Did you know that there are old-growth redwoods on Oregon soil? There are indeed, and we feature the Redwood Nature Loop and Oregon Redwood Trail in the book. We also feature the best of the best redwoods trail just across the border at Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park.

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