

Outdoors

Explore these emerald pools via 'wilderness snorkeling'



Zach Urness explores below the surface of Elk Lake Creek in the Bull of the Woods Wilderness. PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF GREEN / DYNAMIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Zach Urness
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The only problem with snorkeling Oregon's clearest rivers and creeks is that the water is often bone-chillingly cold.

Even with a wetsuit — or even a dry-suit — the streams of most crystalline purity feel as warm as a bathtub of ice cubes when you dive underwater.

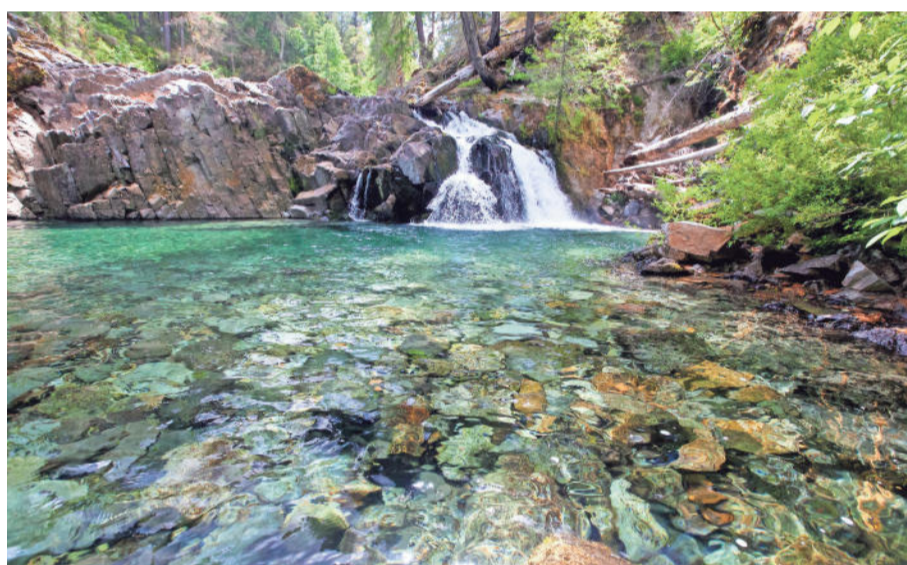
But that's the price you pay for the chance to explore worlds of emerald glass in streams such as the Little North Santiam, Collawash and, earlier this month, a place called Elk Lake Creek.

Over the past two summers, I caught the river snorkeling bug — exploring streams with a face mask, breathing tube and fins. Below the surface, you discover deep canyons, come nose-to-nose with curious fish and appreciate the complexity of rivers in a way you can't from above.

My favorite part is what I'll call "backcountry snorkeling," which includes packing your gear and hiking a few miles into the wild to find the most interesting spots.

Last month, I headed to Elk Lake Creek, a remote stream that flows as clear and cold as liquid glass through the Bull of the Woods Wilderness.

It was everything I could have hoped for, minus turning into a human popsicle.



A waterfall on Elk Lake Creek in Bull of the Woods Wilderness. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Snorkel setup and getting started

If you want to get started in river snorkeling, it's easier than you might think. Last summer I headed to Salem Scuba for advice and all the gear needed to get started.

After a quick test-run with the equipment, I was ready to roll.

The purchase has been worthwhile. I've brought snorkel to countless swimming holes around Oregon, even to places like Detroit Lake. It's just an easy

thing to include on any adventure.

Backcountry snorkeling is more involved. I packed all the snorkel equipment into a pack that also included a waterproof case for cameras, maps, cell phones and lunch. (Nobody wants a soggy sandwich).

A good backcountry snorkel trip means in addition to hiking, you'll also be traveling and exploring in the water — maybe even jumping off waterfalls — and want to be as waterproof as possible.

Elk Lake Creek

I met adventure pal Jeff Green, a Salem photographer and homebuilder, at the Elk Lake Creek Trailhead around 8 a.m. We quickly went over the plan.

First, we'd hike three miles to a place called Emerald Pool, scouting out good spots to access the creek on the way. We didn't want more than six miles of hiking overall, because snorkeling and exploring takes plenty of energy itself.

"Good?" I said.

"Good," said Jeff.

The trail starts in second-growth forest but nice views begin quickly, with a booming waterfall in the first half-mile and a promising-looking canyon for snorkeling.

"Let's make sure to leave enough time for this place," I said.

We crossed into Bull of the Woods Wilderness and at mile 2, reached Welcome Creek. It's a beautiful spot, with multiple tiers of waterfalls.

Beyond, we reached the first crossing of Elk Lake Creek. The stream's clarity made it hard to judge just how deep the water is.

"While the creek may appear to be only inches deep, you'll be surprised to discover that it's knee to waist deep," wrote Matt Reeder in his guidebook "101 Hikes in the Majestic Mount Jefferson Region."

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A visit to Willamette Mission State Park includes ferries and fishing



Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

You might say this trio was on a Mission for fishin'.

Brothers Easton, Hudson and Madden Hughes were trying their luck recently off the boarding float at the boat ramp on Mission Lake at Willamette Mission State Park just a shade more than 5 miles from their Keizer home.

"Last time we came here there was way less (weeds)," said Easton, 15, who was on his second visit to the lake, an oxbow slough, really, on the Willamette River. "Last time when me and my friend came here, I think we caught five fish, some bluegills and what they call, I'm not sure, but it was a pumpkin something."

That would be a pumpkinseed, a smallish but colorful sunfish.

Mission Lake also sports some substantial bass.

A while back I saw one being flown off in the talons of an osprey that scared the bejeezus out of me, hitting the water like a bowling ball out of nowhere to get

the fish about 10 feet away while fishing from a raft.

Despite the brothers' limited success in the mid-day heat and sprawling weed beds, Hudson, 12, said he is hooked on the sport.

"It's really fun," he said. "I've wanted to go fishing almost every single week."

Although because of his luck catching a trout at Detroit Lake on his first-ever fishing trip, Madden Hughes, 9, had the bragging rights among the siblings.

"Yeah," he said with a grin when asked if he was the master fisherman.

Fishing is best at Mission Lake in the spring after the high winter flows blow most of the weeds out into the Willamette.

But there're still good opportunities during mornings after the lake has cooled overnight in the summer.

It's best if you have a raft, canoe or kayak (the lake is electric motors only) and work the edges and the open areas of the weed beds.

Baits such as worms or night crawlers work best, but it's hard to keep the little guys off. Rubber jigs or lures such as spinners, when the weeds are down, also are effective.

Or you could hire an osprey.

If you've never been to Willamette Mission State Park, it's well worth a visit. It gets its name from a religious mission erected by the Rev. Jason Lee in 1834.

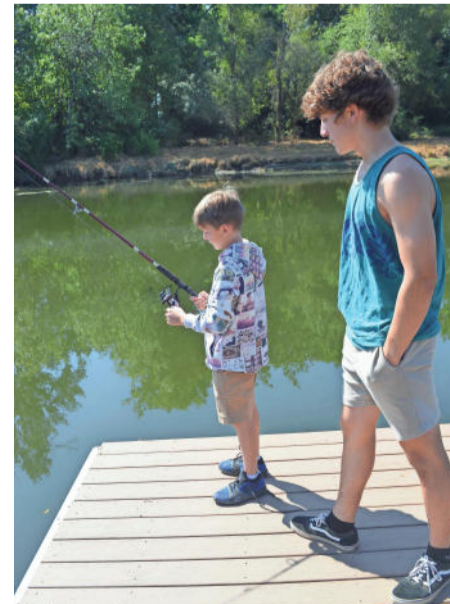
The 1,329-acre park features an active osprey nest on a platform on the entrance road, the world's largest black cottonwood tree, five miles of bike paths, 7 miles of horse trails (with accompanying horse camp), group camping and picnic sites, a one-mile jogging loop, dog exercise area and an 18-hole disk golf course.

A day-use permit (\$5) is required and available at the kiosk on the entrance road.

For more information online, including reservation information for the group camping and picnic sites, go to https://oregonstateparks.org/index.cfm?do=parkPage.dsp_park-Page&parkId=99

Oh, and don't forget to take a side trip if you have time, a ride on the Wheatland Ferry (<http://wheatlandferry.cccvc.com/>). It's about a half-mile up the road from the park entrance road.

The one-way toll is \$2 for cars and trucks, \$1 for bicycles/motorcycles. Walk-ons are free. It connects with Wal-



Easton Hughes, 15, offers tips to brother Madden, 9, while fishing with a third brother, Hudson, 12, at Mission Lake in Willamette Mission State Park. HENRY MILLER/STATESMAN JOURNAL

lace Road on the west side (go left to get to West Salem).

To get to the park, take Wheatland Road (the light at the B&S Market turn) off River Road N heading north out of Keizer. The well-marked park entrance is about 5 miles down the road through

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