

# Snorkeling

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## Snorkeling in 'Emerald Pool'

At mile 3.3, we reached our destination: Emerald Pool. It's long and narrow, between canyon walls just below the trail.

I put my hand in the water to check the temperature.

"Yup," I said. "I'm wearing the dry-suit."

A big question for me is always whether to pack in my drysuit, a full-body layer that's the gold standard for keeping warm. It's harder to dive because it traps air, but I'd rather error on

the side of warmth, so I put it on and slid into the water.

It was cold.

Really, really cold.

Jeff dove in wearing a wetsuit, made a noise, and resurfaced.

"Yeah that's cold," he said laughing.

The upside, of course, was amazingly clear views of the deep hole, along with a handful of curious cutthroat trout that inhabit Emerald Pool.

The most striking thing was the depth. We'd kick down, and the bottom was like an optical illusion that seemed close but got further and further away as you reached out to touch it.

We explored Emerald Pool for an hour or so before packing up and hiking back the way we came.

## Waterfall canyon pool

The second place we snorkeled was below the big waterfall and canyons we'd seen within the first half mile of the trailhead.

It was a tricky place to access that required hopping off a ledge and into the pool. I've always loved snorkeling below waterfalls, because the churning water looks really interesting underwater — waves of energy rippling through the blue.

The most interesting place was downstream, where the creek drops into steep canyons and the pools are deep, with fascinating caverns visible below the surface.

There appear to be even better places to explore downstream by "creek-

whacking" — swimming and hiking — but it would also have been a challenge to get back to the trail.

So, we played it safe with the afternoon getting late and decided to pack up and return to the car.

Overall, I'd still say the Little North Santiam is my favorite spot for backcountry snorkeling, but Elk Lake Creek was a beautiful — although frigid — place to explore an underwater world.

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# Mill City

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tee and spark of the economic windfall. "It's a wonderful little community in terms of people diving in, building on successes and seeing the community grow."

## Property values leap exponentially

Mill City has gone through several growths and declines since being incorporated in 1887, including during construction of Detroit Dam when the population boomed to 1,792 in 1950.

But the population went flat along when the logging industry struggled.

"We went for close to 20 years with maybe a couple of houses being built," Kirsch said.

In the past five years, there have been two subdivisions with six to 10 houses each.

The city council is deliberating on a proposed 15-unit subdivision and another developer has started talks about building an 80-unit subdivision within the city's urban growth boundary.

According to a study by RefiGuide.org released in June, Mill City is in the top 10 cities in the United States where property prices rose the most in the prior year by growing 33.9%.

According to Zillow.com, the average value of each home in Mill City is \$208,800.

"Mill City is still a very affordable place to live," Kirsch said.

In the past few years, restaurants and other businesses have sprouted to life along Highway 22.

There are still two major lumber companies in the area, Freres Lumber and Frank Lumber along with a number of smaller logging outfits.

But the city no longer relies solely on the industry.

Until the latest push, the last time there was a significant infrastructure investment in Mill City was in 2004 when it switched to well water from surface water as its filtration system was out of compliance.



A small housing development under construction in Mill City on Aug. 15, 2019.

ANNA REED / STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Saving a pedestrian bridge leads to millions

Harrington's children were growing and close to leaving home.

All she knew about Mill City was Giovanni Mountain Pizza, which for her was a stop between her home in Keizer and a vacation home in Black Butte.

She started looking around for new places to live, but Mill City wasn't on her list until going to a daughter's track meet at Santiam High School.

"I remember looking around and saying, 'This is a pretty place,'" Harrington said.

She bought a property along the North Santiam River in 2003, finished building a new house a year later and never left.

Kirsch said a growing portion of the community are people like Harrington, who end up retiring in the town.

Harrington goes on daily walks across the old railroad bridge, which for decades has been a pedestrian bridge. After a 2014 study showed the 1888 bridge needed to be repaired or torn down, she became part of a committee whose goal was to raise \$400,000 to restore the bridge.

Through grassroots small-town fundraisers, the group raised \$300,000

before Marion County Rural Economic Development Analyst Danielle Gonzalez stepped in and told the group to think bigger.

They expanded their scope to include rehabilitating the weight-restricted traffic bridge over the North Santiam River, applied for and received an \$8 million grant from the federal government.

The grant will be matched by about \$400,000 from Mill City and \$900,000 from Linn County.

It turns out that money attracts money.

## Infrastructure with a school bond

At one point in the 1970s, Santiam High School was one of the most modern and amenity-filled schools in the state.

"We have a very nice auditorium which has classrooms and the cafeteria that was built in that '69-70 school year, and that was all built with timber money," Santiam Canyon School Board President Rich Moore said. "And when they built the elementary we have, that was built with timber money."

Oregon changed how it distributes tax dollars for schools from staying exclusively within their communities to

being spread on a per-student basis in 1993.

In the May election, voters of Mill City and surrounding communities authorized \$17.9 million for school bonds to pay for new buildings for the high and middle schools and other improvements on the campus in Mill City, and the school district was subsequently awarded a \$1 million grant from Oregon Department of Education.

The city recognized the school bond's passage meant the new school building's entrance would have no sidewalks and a woefully inadequate street leading to it.

The city applied for a Safe Routes to School grant, but the city's lack of a stormwater system made it prohibitively expensive, and it didn't get the grant.

"Storm drains are hard to fund," Kirsch said. "It's not something everybody looks at as an important aspect."

Kirsch stays in contact with the state senator and representative for the area (Fred Girod and Sherrie Sprenger) and approached Girod about Mill City's dilemma. Girod offered to add money for Mill City's stormwater system in a funding bill.

House Bill 5030, which was signed Aug. 8 by Gov. Kate Brown, gave the city \$1,880,000 for a stormwater drainage through lottery bonds.

Kirsch said Mill City will again apply for a Safe Routes to School grant, and it isn't finished with infrastructure improvements.

Mill City is one of four cities — Detroit, Gates and Idanha are the others — partnering with Marion County to form a joint wastewater sewer district. Mill City has its own wastewater treatment facility, but its nearly at the end of its lifespan.

"Small communities live and die on grants," Kirsch said. "We can save up enough money to replace a water line here, resurface a street here through our own taxes and our fees, but to really do a complete project, it's tough to do that kind of money."

"Everybody benefits from infrastructure."

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