

Outdoors

Three lakes, one day



Fir Lake on the edge of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. ZACH URNESS /STATESMAN JOURNAL; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RACHEL VAN BLANKENSHIP/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY

Visit Frey, Pika and Fir lakes in one solitude-filled afternoon near Detroit

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One of the best things about Oregon's vast system of public lands is the number of places where you can still disappear.

Even though a growing population and social media make it feel as though hordes from Portland and Bend have swarmed every trail, lake and swimming hole in our fine state, that's not really true.

Yes, they have trampled across South Sister and Jefferson Park, Blue Pool and Opal Creek, but those were well-known places to begin with. The popular places have just become more popular.

Meanwhile, there are countless wonderful but less dramatic spots — ones you won't find on Instagram — that have

remained the same quiet places they ever were.

Such is the case with three nice lakes nestled in the forest southeast of Detroit on the edge of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. Fey, Pika and Fir lakes are all located within 2 or 3 miles of each other but are each distinct, pretty and surrounded by wildlife.

Visiting all three makes for a fun afternoon, especially with kids.

To reach all three, you'll need to drive some rough roads and do some hiking. But it's a pleasant and easy experience set amid sweet-smelling fir forest.

The lakes don't offer dramatic vistas, but that's sort of the point. My kids had a blast discovering wildlife and tight-rope walking on the thousands of downed trees.

If you head out here, make sure to have a Detroit District Forest Service

map or Adventure Map for the Detroit/Opal Creek/Mount Jefferson areas.

First stop: Fey Lake

After turning off Highway 22, about 25 miles east of Detroit, you'll follow a combination of paved and dirt roads to Fey Lake, a 6-acre pool surrounded by forest along remote Forest Service Road 2257.

This is the most visited of the lakes, and gets a decent bit of use from anglers in the spring and horseback riders just up the road at Big Meadows Horse Camp.

The upside is that you can drive to a few day-use or dispersed campsites around the lake and let the kids run around and explore while you make lunch or dinner or just sip a beer in the sunlit forest.

The lake isn't great for swimming — all three of the lakes are fairly muddy. But we brought our trusty inflatable kayak and had a lot of fun paddling around the grassy inlets. There's a ton of

small creatures to find, including a few million frogs and tadpoles.

Fey Lake makes a nice first or last stop of the day. Because the next two lakes require hiking.

Small but pretty: Pika Lake

Just up rough and rutted Forest Service Road 2257, you'll reach the Pika-Fir Trailhead. The pathway is pretty easy, running 2 miles out-and-back with some moderately steep climbs.

The trail is encased by fir trees of all types. Bring a tree identification book and see how many types of fir trees you can find, from grand to noble to Pacific silver.

My kids had a blast on the seemingly endless number of "balancers" — downed trees you can tightrope walk on — along and just off the trail. It's one of the many tricks I employ to keep a 2 and 4-year-old entertained.

The pathway rolls through shaded

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'Almost fall' is the best time to get outdoors



Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist



Critters are regular visitors when the roar of campers dies down after the Labor Day holiday. HENRY MILLER / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Ah, it's magic time.

The time between when the dust settles from the stampede of last-minute summer holiday-makers during the Labor Day weekend and the onset of the winter doldrums is a very sweet spot indeed in outdoor recreation.

Kids are back in school, midweek camping spots are open, trails are two-lane back roads, not rush-hour freeways, and mosquitoes are ebbing because of cooling nights.

For almost a decade, my brother-in-law, Bob, and I had had standing week-long road-warrior camping trips the first full week after the Labor Day weekend.

When we both worked, it was relatively easy to get that week off. Most people had put away the tents and camping stoves.

We had no agenda or destinations, really.

I think the first year the only mandatory stop we made was at Crater Lake to get a picture of his then-new Toyota Tacoma on the rim with his Crater Lake license plate in the foreground.

How's that for a mission?

My only constant, more a desire than a demand, was to set up camp where there was fishing.

During the course of our outings, I caught everything from cutthroat trout at the base of Steens Mountain, rainbow trout at Wallowa Lake and catfish at Prineville Reservoir.

Along the way, Bob and I traversed most of the state from the Steens in the southwest corner to Wallowa Lake in the northeast three-state triangle of Oregon/Washington/Idaho.

We ventured over the Astoria-Megler Bridge at Astoria to spend a night at Cape Disappointment State Park in Washington — and speaking about disappointments, got washed out by one of the most intense storms I've ever seen at Humbug Mountain State Park near Port Orford on the southern Oregon coast.

That turned out OK, though, because we got into a yurt at South Beach State Park near Newport, where a seagull that had stolen a Dungeness crab from somebody's bucket dropped it and almost brained me while I was walking on the beach near the south jetty.

Air seafood delivery, you might say.

Weather can be, ahem, unsettled after Labor Day, as witnessed by a motor-

cycle club spending the night camped out in the bathrooms during the deluge at Humbug and the steady drumming on the tents during a hailstorm at Wallowa Lake.

We woke up to a quarter-inch of snow and a half-frozen water bottle the morning after a hot, sunny day at Three Creeks Lake near Sisters and suffered sunburns at Prineville Reservoir.

Way we saw both natural wonders such as the Painted Hills at John Day Fossil Beds and man-made monuments such as the massive dredge at Sumpter.

We were stuck in avian traffic when a flock of wild turkeys moseyed across the highway en route to John Day, heard a pack of coyotes yowl all night at Phillips Reservoir, had packages of instant oatmeal pilfered at Three Creeks Lake, had a massive buck deer rummage for corn cobs in a garbage sack at Wallowa Lake, where we also watched what looked like a koi pond as a phalanx of scarlet-and-green kokanee (a landlocked variety of sockeye salmon) swim up the Wallowa River on a spawning run 50 feet from our campsite.

As I said, the space between the end of summer and the start of fall is an exceptional time for an Oregon outback road trip.

Here's hoping that you get a chance to savor the magic.

Post Labor Day bonus: You might call it "limitless" fishing.

And on a personal note, totally upending my fishing calendar ... in a good way.

If, like me, you've circled Oct. 1 on the calendar, the traditional opening day for deep-water bottom-fishing, boy is this a

sweet surprise.

On Tuesday, Sept. 3, on the recommendation of biologists, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife lifted the 40-fathom (240 feet) depth restriction for pursuing bottom fish.

Think those deep-water lunker lingcod and other tasty whoppers.

As an added incentive, weather and ocean conditions generally are better in the early fall.

Not to get too deep into the (sea) weeds about the reason for the switch, but catch counts showed that there are enough yelloweye rockfish left in the 2019 quota to provide for the early opener.

You say that you want more?

Because of high winds and lumpy, bumpy ocean conditions, summer all-depth halibut fishing was the pits off the Oregon coast, so there were a lot of pounds of fish left over in the total allowed catch.

So the department approved a two-halibut daily limit beginning on Aug. 23, between Cape Falcon near Manzanita and Humbug Mountain near Port Orford with fishing allowed on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays until the total allowed catch of 54,409 pounds (as of Aug. 26) is landed, or Oct. 27, whichever comes first.

Captain's platter, anyone?

Also, near-shore halibut is open daily off the central coast with a two-fish daily limit until the rest of that catch quota is landed.

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