OUTDOORS

Surveyor's Ridge

Surveyor's Ridge. PHOTOS BY BOBBIE SNEAD/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Explore the confluence of two biological communities

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Special to Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Editor's note: Although large parts of forests in Oregon were closed during recent wildfires, this trail is now open and suffered no wildfire damage.

Surveyor's Ridge stretches like a wooded wall along the east side of the upper Hood River Valley. Mount Hood rises at the valley's head, its glaciers and snowfields releasing streams that flow north to water the famous Hood River apple orchards. The parched east slope of the ridge becomes progressively drier as it descends toward the Wasco County wheat fields. Two biological communities meet at the ridgetop as moisture-loving plants and animals from the west side of the Cascades commingle with those of the arid east side.

An easy loop hike from Gibson Prairie Campground provides a great way to explore the unique fusion of east and west on the crest of Surveyor's Ridge.

The forest holds the cool stillness of a mountain morning as I start up the unnamed trail directly across the gravel road from the campground's entrance. Conifer cones and needles crunch underfoot with each bootstep; the forest floor is tinder dry. As the trail swings north, I see Douglas-fir and grand fir trees, residents of the west, standing alongside eastside ponderosa pines and western larch. I notice a venerable ponderosa nearing the end of its life and find bundles of its dead needles scattered on the ground. Egg-shaped cones with three pointed bracts from a neighboring Douglas-fir litter the spaces between the dried sheaves. It looks as though woodland elves charged with tidying up the forest floor suddenly quit, abandoning their piney brooms as they walked off the job.

Next, I find deep gashes in a rotting Douglas-fir snag. These rectangular holes with rounded corners are the work of a hungry pileated woodpecker. It uses its large pointed beak like a chisel to excavate deep cavities as it searches for carpenter ants to eat. A long finely-barbed tongue enables it to snatch insects from deep inside the decaying wood. Stiff feathers covering the top of its beak prevent woodchips and splinters from entering its nostrils as it forages. I hike on, grateful that I don't get my food this way.

Rounding a curve, my eyes catch a glimmer of pink above the needle-covered duff. It's a blossoming pink pyrola, usually found in the damp westside rainforest. Pale pink petals edged in white comprise the waxy saucer-shaped flowers hanging five inches above the ground. As I admire its delicate beauty, I notice it has no green leaves. I gently push the soil aside, thinking they might be partially buried, but find nothing. I've stumbled upon a rare leafless phase of this plant species. Normally the pyrola bears rounded leaves at its base. Sometimes, when light conditions are less than ideal for photosynthesis, it will resort to free-loading in order to survive. Under the surface it's parasitizing a fungus, sucking vital nutrients via a connection between its roots and subterranean fungal filaments. Most people know that some fungi make their living off of trees and herbaceous plants. Here is a case where a plant is mooching off a fungus.

Pondering this reversal of parasitic roles, I arrive at an old roadbed where I turn west. Soon the road crosses the signed Surveyor's Ridge Trail and I turn south. Now following the ridge's crest, the trail takes me along an undulating course where I get occasional glimpses between the trees of the valley below. I pass an unmarked junction with a trail heading east and make a mental note of it. I will complete the loop by descending this trail at the end of my hike. Continuing south, I climb a hill using exposed roots as stair steps. At the top, I emerge from the forest at an open dry slope. Mount Hood rises to 11,000 feet across the valley. The Eliot Glacier, the mountain's largest, spills down the northeast face for over a mile. Its crevasses and ragged jumbles stand out clearly even though the mountain is eight miles away. The glacier's lower portion is covered with rocks and boulders that have fractured off a weak headwall near the mountain's summit. The thick debris layer insulates the ice so this glacier melts at a slower rate than cleaner glaciers on Hood.

A wide swath of burned trees spreads like a charred apron for miles around the northern base of the mountain. Destroyed in the 2008 Gnarl Ridge Fire and the 2011 Dollar Lake Fire, this part of the

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If you go

Directions: From Government Camp, take Highway 26 east for 2 miles and then head north on Highway 35 for 13.5 miles. Turn right (east) on Road 44 and follow it for 5.7 miles. Turn left (north) on Road 17 for 5.6 miles to Gibson Prairie Campground.

Best Month: August or September

Length: 4.5 miles round trip

Duration: 4 hours

Elevation gain: 240 feet

Age range: suitable for kids 8 years old and up.

Woodpecker holes seen in a tree.

Be very quiet, it's mushroom and deer hunting season

Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

It's probably too late for me to take up ninja training.

When it comes to agility, I remind friends of the old Woody Allen joke: "I've got bad reflexes. I was once run over by a car with a flat tire being pushed by two guys."

But the stealth and skills of the Asian martial art form come in handy every year about this time in the Oregon woods.

Two things are happening right now.

The western Oregon and coast buck general deer-hunting seasons opened Oct. 3.

And with moist, cool weather and the first freeze a ways off, hunting for wild edible mushrooms such as chanterelles and lobsters is just coming on.

Which means that it's time for me and my favorite foray buddy, Phil McCorkle, to hit the road.

He scores! My 'shrooming buddy, Phil McCorkle, with a lobster mushroom that he scored on one of our outings.
HENRY MILLER/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Given the pandemic, we'll probably do a mini-caravan. The specific logistics remain to be worked out.

In 2019 we timed our outings perfectly, arriving at a couple of our secret spots to find a forest of chanterelle stumps poking out of the forest duff the day after, we assume, commercial pickers clear-cut the mushrooms.

Occasionally, though, we get lucky and come home with a sack apiece of the fungal treasures.

And that's where the ninja skills can come in handy.

Since several of our spots are near roads, there can be some intermittent traffic cruising past.

Because its deer season, you want to be visible, so orange, red, or any bright color not associated with critters is de rigueur 'shrooming apparel.

This year there's another option: Coronavirus masks in bright orange for Halloween.

If you don't mind the witches and bats printed on them.

Moving on to the second problem: Fellow pickers scouting for others such as Phil and me to give away their secret spots.

He's got the duck-and-cover move to drop into the brush like, well, a brightly clad ninja.

Me, not so much.

My disappearing act tends more toward a slow-motion squat, usually ending up on a protruding branch or snag that ends up, to put it delicately, where the sun don't shine.

And if the descent into the cover is somewhat, ahem, lethargic, getting up is like trying to get a fully loaded cement truck out of a peat bog.

So I've tended to opt for cunning ruses that probably fool no one, such as whipping out the camera with the long lens and pretending to capture images of imaginary flora and fauna.

Nothing to see here, folks; just taking nature pictures.

Although, come to think about it, nothing says "look at me" more than a guy in a Halloween protective mask waving a camera around with a lens the size of a bazooka.

I'll get back to you when I come up with some more ideas.

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