



The hike up Saddle Mountain in the Coast Range offers old-growth forest, wildflower meadows and sweeping views from the Pacific Ocean to the Oregon Cascade volcanoes. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Saddle Mountain is a pretty interesting spot geologically. It was created when Columbia River basalt flows erupted in Idaho around 15 million years ago, poured down the Columbia River's channel and then fanned out, to the ocean and down the Cascade Foothills, helping form some of Oregon's most dramatic landmarks from the Gorge to Silver Falls to Cape Lookout.

Hike

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"What we're seeing is a good indication that the released butterflies are successfully reproducing," he said.

Taylor noted that hikers should stay on trail, particularly in the upper meadows, to protect the mountain's biodiversity and the silverspot caterpillars.

"That rocky outcrop habitat is quite fragile with very thin soils, and the diverse plant community is easily damaged by trampling," he said. "Second, stepping on violets could definitely harm caterpillars."

Hikers are encouraged to look out for the rare butterflies and take pictures if possible — but don't touch or catch them, which is illegal.

"If visitors are able to see one fairly close without moving off trail, we love seeing pictures posted to iNaturalist with the location data so we can use citizen science to track where they've been seen," said Samantha Derrenbacher, a biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Its wings are bright orange with black spots and about 2 inches across when they are open. The unique bright silvery dots on the underwing are what gives the species its name."

Trail climbs uphill at steady pace

I left Portland as early as possible last Saturday morning, following Sunset Highway 26 toward Cannon Beach until I reached a sign for Saddle Mountain State Natural Area, turned right and followed a winding but paved road to a large trailhead with outhouses and plenty of parking. I arrived at 7 a.m. and was the first person to arrive.



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The trail is uphill from pretty much the beginning, winding through rocky outcrops and old-growth forest. After just 0.2 miles, there's a side trail on your right that leads to a good view of your goal — Saddle Mountain rising in all its glory. It's probably best left for the hike down, so you can celebrate climbing it rather than contemplate how far you have to go. Either way, it's the best wide-angle view of the mountain itself.

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In Saddle Mountain's case, the basalt cooled when it hit the cold water of an ancient bay and broke into a giant pile of basalt fragments. Over the millennia, erosion stripped away the surrounding soil but the basalt held firm, resulting in a peak that kept rising above everything around it.

The mountain is believed to have preserved a number of plant species during the Ice Age, which is why it's such a biodiverse peak now, according to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

Old-growth, wildflower meadows and steep cliffs

After a stretch in old-growth forest, you begin to rise above the surrounding mountains pretty quickly. In my case, that led to lots of views of the fog that was spread into the coastal mountains below.

The wildflowers were sporadic at first, popping out of the thick emerald forest in a few places that typify the first half of the journey. But as you climb higher, the flowers become more colorful and common, forming clusters along the edges of the trail, then becoming thicker and more colorful in the higher meadows.

You cross a few bridges before climbing up a rise, where the summit and layers of basalt come into view and steep cliffs drop away. This part of the trail can be slick in wet weather, with metal fencing holding the trail in place in a lot of areas and that can be slick. Even so, the trail stays away from cliff edges and there aren't any particularly sketchy areas.

The wildflower meadows become more numerous the higher you get, and I tried to remember to keep an eye out for any silverspots dancing on the wind but ultimately didn't see any. Eventually, the trail leads to a summit area with guardrails and those sweeping views.

From the top, the view from Saddle Mountain is grand and in a lot of ways encapsulates Western Oregon. The ocean spreads across the horizon on one side while Mount Hood rises on the other. There's also human evidence, from the clearcuts that mark the forest below to the giant tankers floating down the Columbia.

But again, it's the small things — the wildflowers and silverspot butterflies trying to establish a new home — that make Saddle Mountain as unique a hike as there is in Oregon.

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