

# LOG ON TO THE WOOD WIDE WEB

Story & photos by  
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For the *TODAY*

Seven miles northeast of Waldport, tucked into the steep hills above the tea-colored Alsea River stands one of the last remaining old growth forests on the Oregon Coast.

The seldom-visited, 5,798-acre Drift Creek Wilderness is home to 500-year-old Douglas fir, endangered northern spotted owls and during the rainy days of autumn, spawning Coho salmon. In this forest of giant conifers, a careful observer hears a wren flitting about in the salal and then glimpses a Douglas squirrel scrambling up the trunk of a hemlock blanketed in atomic green moss. Carved into a ghost gray snag are the rectangular excavations of a pileated woodpecker. Within earshot of the creek, a water-saturated cedar log provides spruce seedlings with an elevated foothold above the densely vegetated forest floor. From the stone slab of Drift Creek's bank, visitors spy a red-tailed hawk orbiting above the gnarled crowns of the ancients. Drift Creek Wilderness is a small fragment of what was once common in the Pacific Northwest, yet

despite its diminished size, this wilderness and places like it will play an outsized role in revitalizing our planet.

A decommissioned logging road paralleled by second-growth forest leads hikers to a narrow dirt path that descends into the wilderness.

According to the National Forest Service, some of the 50-foot-high, 30-ton firs near the creek bottom were seedlings when Christopher Columbus negotiated with Queen Isabella about the specifics of his journey to India. Growing at a glacial pace in the miserly light provided by those ancient giants, a hemlock waits for the summer night when a lightning bolt will split the crown of a nearby fir and send the tree crashing to the forest floor. The fir's demise will open a gap in the canopy that will be filled by sunlight for the hungry hemlock's droopy needles to photosynthesize and transform into wood. That same fallen fir



## Directions

I was able to find the trail by using the GPS on my phone but for safety's sake I would bring a map as backup just in case your cell signal cuts out. I also use the website AllTrails.com to find out about new hikes and how to get to them.

Drive east from Waldport on Highway 34. Turn left on Risley Creek road Forest Road 3446. After 4.2 miles, fork left onto Forest Road 346 continuing for a third of a mile to the dirt parking lot. If you have a high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicle, this would be the place to bring it. Drive slowly and avoid the more flooded and craterous looking of potholes and you should be fine.

will provide food and shelter for numerous insects, mammals and amphibians, which will in turn provide nourishment for bears, owls and woodpeckers. Below ground, the forest's fungal networks will creep into the giant's heartwood and begin a centuries-long process of decomposition.

Every step that you take on this trail will compact thousands of invertebrates and miles of fungi that envelope the roots of the trees. Fungi enhance the trees' ability to extract vital nutrients from the soil. The interlinkage of roots and fungi creates a complex mycorrhizal network. Through this network that some forest scientists call the "wood wide web" healthy trees provide nutrients to sick trees and a tree under attack from insects will send out subterranean distress signals to its neighbors, warning them to boost their defenses against the invaders. In our high school biology classes, we all learned about the concept of survival of the fittest and of the continuous competition between organisms for survival. But here in the old forest, it is not only competition but also cooperation that plays a significant role in ensuring that the self-generating forest ecosystem endures.

About two miles into your walk a remarkable example of this mutual dependence is represented by two giants, a western red cedar and a Douglas fir, wrapped at their bases in a lifelong embrace. Through drought, hundred-mile-an-hour gales and insect infestations, the fate of the

cedar is tied to that of the fir and vice versa. Forest scientists are not only increasing their knowledge of the bonds that link forest ecosystems together, they are also learning how the forest's influence travels far beyond the boundaries of Oregon's misty coastal hills.

A recent study published by Oregon State University's College of Forestry explains how the forests of the Pacific Northwest, specifically the wet forests that thrive west of the Cascade crest, are some of the planet's most effective carbon storing forests. According to these scientists, preserving ancient forests like the one protected in the Drift Creek Wilderness could provide one third of the carbon sequestration capacity needed to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. These scientific findings broaden the oft-repeated lumberman's phrase "this is a working forest."

