

Hit the high country on the O'Brien Creek Trail

BY EVELYN ROETHER

Greetings fellow hikers! It's time to hit the high country, following spring as it moves up in elevation. Right out our backyard lies the Kangaroo Roadless Area, a 20,370-acre chunk of de facto wilderness. You have to climb to get there, but there are several trails that take you up to its ridgeline, and the O'Brien Creek Trail is one of them. It's also a good place to look at the resilience of landscapes subjected to fire, in this case the Miller Complex fire that blew through in 2017.

The following is a brief description of the trail. For the full version and a description of 19 other trails in our neighborhood, pick up a copy of *Hiking Trails of the Lower Applegate*, now available at many local retail outlets and the Williams Farmers' Market.

O'Brien Creek Trail #900

- Accessible June - November
- Difficulty: Upper O'Brien Creek Trail—difficult; Lower O'Brien Creek Trail—moderate.
- Distance: Lower O'Brien Creek Trail to Upper O'Brien Creek Trail—2 miles round trip; Upper O'Brien Creek Trail to Boundary Trail—4.6 miles round trip; Upper O'Brien Creek Trail to Big Sugarloaf Peak—6.8 miles round trip.

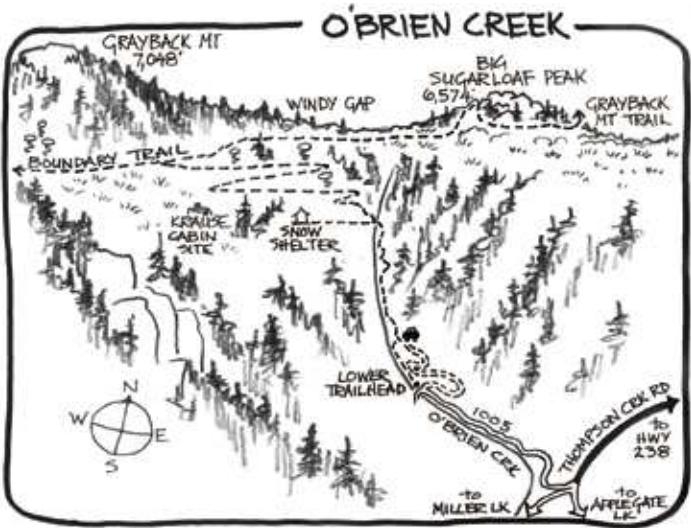
- Elevation gain: Upper O'Brien Creek Trail to Boundary Trail—1,560 feet; Upper O'Brien Creek Trail to Big Sugarloaf Peak—2,079 feet.

Directions

Take Highway 238 to the town of Applegate. Go south on Thompson Creek Road for 11.9 miles until the pavement ends at a four-way intersection. Take a hard right turn onto Road 1005. After 2.3 miles you will see the Lower O'Brien Creek trailhead on the left. To reach the Upper O'Brien Creek Trail, keep driving for another 1.7 miles until the increasingly rough road ends at the trailhead. *Note:* The last 0.7 mile requires a high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle.

This trail has an upper and a lower trailhead; both begin on Road 1005. If you do not have a high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle, you might want to park at the lower trailhead and follow it up along O'Brien Creek. The Lower O'Brien Creek Trail climbs along the north side of O'Brien Creek for one mile up a moderately steep slope before joining up with the Upper O'Brien Creek Trail at its trailhead parking area.

The Upper O'Brien Creek Trail provides great access to the Siskiyou high



country. Whether or not you make it to the ridgeline, this is a beautiful route that takes you through magnificent old-growth forests as well as wildflower-rich high-mountain meadows.

The Upper O'Brien Creek Trail begins at the end of the drivable part of the road. From the parking area, follow the old roadbed for 0.3 mile, at which point it turns into a steep single-track trail. A steep ascent takes you through an old-growth forest, crossing tributaries of O'Brien Creek in a couple of places. After 1.3 miles, shortly after the second creek crossing, the trail forks at an old sign.

To continue up to the Boundary Trail (1.2 miles farther), stay right. Here, in midsummer, you will find yourself standing in a classic high-country meadow with more varieties of wildflowers than you've

probably ever seen in one place. There are spectacular views of the conical-shaped Mt. McLaughlin to the east.

At the second junction, the Boundary Trail heads south (left) through the meadow, around the flanks of Grayback Mountain. To reach Windy Gap, Grayback Mountain, or Big Sugarloaf Peak, turn right, following the

trail through 0.7 mile of forest that was somewhat charred by the Miller Complex fire in 2017. Notice that many of the big trees were burned at the base but are still alive and thriving.

After about a mile, once you get out of the trees to the open ridgeline saddle, you can (1) turn left (south) and scramble your way up the rocky slopes another steep half mile or so to the summit of Grayback Mountain, the highest peak in Josephine County (7,048 feet), or (2) keep following the Boundary Trail up along the ridge to the north (right) for another 0.2 mile towards Windy Gap and Big Sugarloaf Peak (6,679 feet).

Take it all in and return the way you came. Happy hiking!

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■ CHRIS BRATT TRIBUTES

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Can't add my name into the fight when I'm gone, so I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here. When it came to the environment, Chris was like a bulldog on a pants leg. He believed that our national forests are a treasure belonging to all Americans and need to be protected at all cost. Our forests should not be allowed to be ravaged by a few for temporary financial gains. He also fought for clean air and water, hoping to save the planet from irreversible damage.

Another fight that he was passionate about was workers' rights. During the times of farmworker rights struggles, he again left paying work to help build a community center for the farmworkers of the Central Valley in California.

All the pleasures of love will not be mine when I'm gone...so I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here. And love he did. He loved his family, his friends, his country, this planet we all call home, and his beautiful home on Thompson Creek.

Chris Bratt will be missed by many. The most important lesson he taught me is that to pay it forward is the finest way to pay it back. I will miss singing, working, traveling, playing, drinking wine, and arguing with him. I know that he worked hard to "do it while he was here."



Tonya Graham

Executive Director, Geos Institute

Chris was one of the first people I met when I arrived at Headwaters' office in the basement of the Ashland Armory in the summer of 1991. I had volunteered to hang posters for events, and Chris was serving on the board. In spite of the difficult and often combative nature of the work, Chris was consistently positive and kind. His warm welcome made me feel immediately at home and necessary to the movement, even though my contribution was minor in comparison to the work others were doing.

I recall meeting him at daybreak for many years in the parking lot of Lithia Park in Ashland as we set up the Fourth of July burrito booth and he took his position next to Jim Ince and Chris Fowler stirring

the beans. I've also watched him fully in his element holding elected officials' and agencies' feet to the fire over destructive forest policies. And I've seen him warmly greet a wide range of fellow activists at the forest conference. It seemed that Chris knew everyone and everyone loved him.

Chris served on the board of Headwaters and then Geos Institute for three decades, during which time he could always be counted on to bring a refreshing perspective to challenging deliberations. As Headwaters morphed into the Geos Institute and we shifted our focus, Chris showed a flexibility and willingness to take risks that were critical to our being able to step with confidence into that new territory as an organization. He also led the effort that resulted in Geos Institute buying its building in 2012, which set us on a path to greater financial sustainability. He was unfailingly generous on all fronts.

Chris inspired courage and called forward the best selves of those around him. I am a better person for having known him all these years.

Many in the movement are speaking about Chris as a fierce warrior for the forests. That's true. Chris had a way of parking himself in front of someone until they found their moral compass, and he could be more than assertive when the moment called for it. In addition, Chris showed me and many others how to be both the fierce warrior and the caring fellow human being—the person deeply connected to the land and to their community.

When I walk into my office each day, I have the privilege of walking past the cabinets and shelves Chris built for us. He built those cabinets with love like he did everything else in his life. And those hands are not only on all of our past accomplishments but also on our future ones because of the seeds he sowed in so many of us during his time walking this beautiful earth.



Chuck Levin, Headwaters attorney

By 1986 when I joined Headwaters, Chris was already instrumental in the

rise of the grassroots environmental movement in Oregon, lending countless hours as a volunteer board member and early president. He set the tone and provided leadership and credibility, speaking truth to power, challenging BLM forest management decisions, and developing a grassroots infrastructure network. A vigorous debater, Chris also listened to others' viewpoints intently and thoughtfully, earning respect by all for his deliberate and considered, rather than dogmatic, responses and positions.

As Headwaters' attorney during those early years, I spent a great deal of time with Chris strategizing and conferencing, networking, driving to federal court in Eugene and Portland, and exploring BLM timber sale sites on the ground. He engaged people with his warmth, laughter, positivity, humility, and sheer humanity, both in and out of the office. He seemed to take active interest in all things artistic and political and had a vast knowledge and curiosity about many subjects. Southern Oregon was lucky to have him.



J.D. Rogers

I knew Chris Bratt for over two and a half decades. He was a man of strong opinions and actions. While we were involved in many organizations, the *Applegater* was where I had my most interactions with him.

From the start of the *Applegater* 25 years ago, Chris stood as one of its strongest defenders and supporters. For the 19 years that I was the editor of the paper, he was the person I could turn to if there was an issue that I needed to bounce ideas off of or if I just needed a helping hand. He was always there when needed.

Chris had a great sense of humor and a wonderful smile; he loved to sing and play his guitar at get-togethers. I will truly miss him as a friend, neighbor, and community activist.



Jack Shipley

Chris Bratt and I came together some 30-plus years ago in the mid-1980s when we were both on the board of directors of Headwaters, an Ashland-based

environmental organization. Headwaters was at the apex of the "jobs versus owls" conflict that had raged among environmentalists, the timber industry, and the federal land-management agencies over the previous decade.

Chris was the chair of the Headwaters board and represented TREE (Thompson Creek Residents for Ecological Education). I was vice chair and represented NAWPA (the North Applegate Watershed Protection Association). Chris was an outspoken and successful advocate to stop aerial application of chemicals on forestlands managed by BLM and USFS in southwest Oregon.

Chris and I joined logger Jim Neal to create the Applegate Partnership, a collaborative, grassroots response to the constant conflict and litigation that swirled around our communities between the tree huggers and the tree cutters.

In 1992 the board of the Applegate Partnership included community environmental organizations, loggers, scientists, the Sierra Club, and the BLM. John Lloyd, an attorney from the Department of Justice (DOJ) informed Chris and me that the partnership was in violation of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The DOJ said we were unduly influencing the federal government. When our agency representatives transitioned from board to advisory positions, the FACA issue went away.

Chris and I spent many hours together seeking solutions to the "sticky wicket" environmental issues in our valley. Chris's strong-willed and outspoken approach challenged us all. At one of our early board meetings, when Dwayne Cross was absent, Chris exhibited his integrity by resisting board action on an issue without having the timber representative at the table. Chris and I didn't agree on every issue. In fact, on one occasion we had to seek assistance from an outside facilitator to settle our differences. Even though we didn't always agree, we remained the best of friends. I will miss Chris's strong environmental

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