



McKenzie River Trail Story and photo by James Johnston

Walk, bike or float a nearby national treasure.

The federally designated Wild and Scenic stretch of the McKenzie River, like the Wild and Scenic Rogue River in southern Oregon, is world renowned for its whitewater. And like the Rogue, if you don't want to do the river in a raft or kayak, you can walk or bike along a National Recreation Trail, one of over 800 trails throughout the country recognized by Congress for their outstanding scenic and recreational features.

If there were just one place I could recommend to out-of-towners as a quintessential Lane County experience, it'd be the McKenzie River Trail. The entire trail is about 26 miles in length. I'll cover the lower half — from Paradise Campground to Trail Bridge Reservoir — in this column. The upper half will have to wait for another time.

Directions: Drive Highway 126 east from Springfield for about 50 miles. The

lower (downriver) trailhead begins a little more than a mile east of McKenzie Bridge. But the parking lot for this trailhead is under construction, and the trail just parallels the highway anyway. So drive about three miles east of McKenzie Bridge and take a left into Paradise Campground and follow the signs for the trailhead.

The best thing about this hike is you don't even have to drive. LTD buses will take you and your bike all the way to McKenzie Bridge. The bus leaves Eugene Station at 8:30 am on weekends and 8:20 am on weekdays.

From the Paradise trailhead it's about 10 miles to Trail Bridge Reservoir, a hike that gains 600 feet in elevation. But don't worry if you don't make it the whole way, some of the best scenery is just upriver from Paradise. The first couple miles of trail wind through an absolutely spectacu-

lar old-growth forest of 600-year-old Douglas firs, with a few short uphill climbs that offer dramatic views of the McKenzie's vivid blue and green waters. A little more than two miles from the trailhead, the trail briefly follows a gravel road, part of the Belknap Springs facilities.

After Belknap, the trail follows the side of the highway briefly before ducking back into the forest. In about a mile and a half you wind back up to the highway, and cross the McKenzie on a paved bridge. The rest of the trail follows the west bank of the river — the side opposite the highway — through more beautiful forest. In just about three miles, you'll cross another paved road. If you look behind you, a short riverside path to the left leads to Deer Creek Springs, a small rock-lined hot springs right next to the bank. It's a great way to ease tired muscles, except when the

river's up and the springs are flooded.

From Deer Creek Springs, it's another three miles to the reservoir. If you make it that far, it'll be almost a 20-mile round trip hike, so consider a shuttle. Or better yet, bring a mountain bike. The McKenzie River Trail is a classic western Oregon bike track, suitable for beginning or intermediate riders.

Not to give anything away about the upper section of the trail, but a lot of bikers will leave a shuttle car at Paradise, drive to the upper trailhead at Clear Lake and bike the entire 26 miles downhill. The trail between Clear Lake and Trail Bridge will take you past a crystal clear lake, jagged lava fields, a series of stunning waterfalls, and a narrow canyon where the McKenzie River disappears into a subterranean passage to emerge in a turquoise cataract ...

But that's another column. 