



JAMES JOHNSTON

Clay Creek Trail

Head west for wintertime walks in the woods.

One suggested translation for the word "Siuslaw" is "far away river," which couldn't be further from the truth for Eugeneans. There's so much great hiking to be had by following the Willamette River east, that a lot of people forget about the spectacular scenery along the banks of the Siuslaw River, which begins in the hills just west of Eugene and pours slowly through a gap in the Coast Range to the Pacific. With the short days of winter upon us, not only does the Siuslaw have the advantage of being close to Eugene, but it's also almost always free of snow. The Clay Creek trail is one of several short walks through a classic example of coastal old-growth.

Directions: Drive Highway 126 west from Eugene for approximately 30 miles. Take a left onto Siuslaw River Road at a sign for "Whiteaker Creek Recreation Area." Stay to the left at the intersection in just 20 yards, following signs for Whiteaker Creek and Clay Creek.

The scenery along the river road is worth the trip. You'll be following the slow black waters of the Siuslaw as it meanders through a forest of fir, maple, and red alder. 9.9 miles from the highway stay to the left at a fork in the road, following the sign for Clay Creek.

This part of the Coast Range is a "working forest," and the clearcuts get

larger and uglier the farther from the main road you get. There's a particularly nasty recent cut 2.8 miles from the fork in the road that's caved in a good portion of the riverbank. This sort of forestry is the main reason that the Siuslaw supports less than 5 percent of its historic run of coho salmon.

After 6.2 miles from the fork in the road, take a right at the sign for the Clay Creek Campground. Cross a bridge over the Siuslaw and park on the left, just on the other side of the bridge. The trailhead is just another 10 yards farther up the road on your right.

The first half of the Clay Creek trail is a moderately steep climb, passing dozens of gigantic old-growth Douglas fir trees. This time of year, the path is covered in a thick mat of colorful fallen leaves. There's plenty of color still on the branch, too, mostly from the vine maple thickets whose leaves are the same color as ripe lemons.

After a little more than a half mile of switchbacks, the trail splits and levels out in a loop that follows the ridgeline and offers an occasional glimpse through the forest to the river below.

If you leave Eugene by noon, you can be on the top of the ridge by 2 pm. Lane County's "other river" is a great alternative when the Cascades seem far away this winter.

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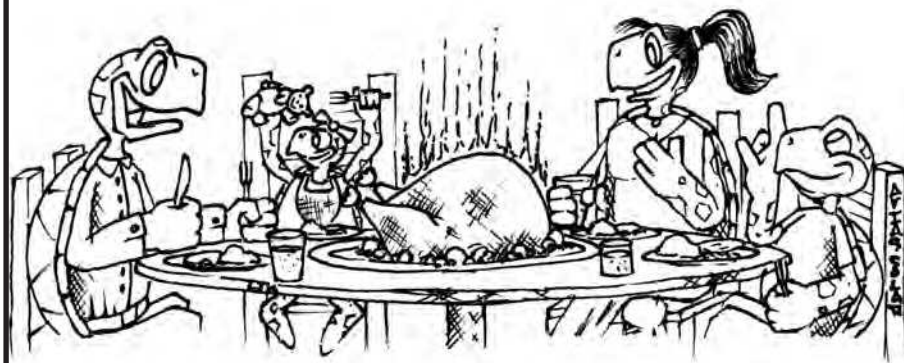
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