

The water in Waldo Lake is some of the purest in the world.



JAMES JOHNSTON

Waldo Lake Trail

Explore a remarkable and natural Cascade blue.

There are more than 500 named lakes in the Willamette National Forest, but there's only one Waldo Lake. Waldo is one of the world's most outstanding natural features. At more than 10 square miles, it's the largest natural lake in western Oregon, and the second deepest. Because of the large size of the lake relative to the size of the basin it drains, and because it has no permanent inlet, Waldo contains some of the purest H₂O in the world.

Waldo's vast volume of water is what scientists call "ultraoligotrophic" — a fancy word that means that the water is very unproductive, supporting little or no biological activity. The bottled water you buy at the store is probably dirtier.

Fall is the ideal time to enjoy Waldo. Shrubs and hardwood trees are turning crimson and gold, but more importantly, the mosquitoes have mostly died off. Camping during the height of the mosquito season from late June to early August can be thoroughly miserable.

To get to there, drive Highway 58 east from Oakridge. Three miles west of Willamette Pass, take a right on Waldo Lake Road (FS 5897). There are three campgrounds between mileposts 6 and 13 from which you can launch a boat, or start a hiking or biking trip.

One of the best ways to get to know Waldo is a mountain bike trip on the Waldo Lake trail, a 22-mile loop that circles the lake. Start off at the North Waldo Campground and head west. The first part of your trip takes you through the eerie bleached white trunks of the 1996 Charlton Fire. After four miles or so, you'll cross the lake's only outlet, the North Fork of the Middle Fork Willamette River,

which flows through the 37,000-acre Waldo Lake Wilderness to its confluence with the Middle Fork Willamette 40 miles downstream. From here, turn south along the west side of lake, which has several moderately steep grades and few views of the lake itself.

There are better views around Shadow Bay at the south end of the lake. From here you can cut up to the road you drove in on, or continue north on the trail to your vehicle. The total trip ought to take most experienced bikers four to six hours, unless you stop at one of the lake's many sandy beaches for a swim and a long lunch.

If you have access to a sailboat or sea kayak, the trip out to the middle of the lake is unforgettable. All the sun's rays except blue are absorbed by the deep water, leaving the water an intense indigo hue. Bring a large light-colored rock with you and drop it overboard — you'll be able to watch it spiral to the bottom of the crystal clear water to an astounding depth of more than 100 feet.

Waldo is no ordinary lake, but the Forest Service treats it like it is. Current management plans allow gas motors on the lake and heavy recreational use of the lakeshore. Scientists believe that the combination of these activities is slowly eroding the world-class water quality.

To their credit, the Willamette National Forest is planning to change the rules to protect the fragile lakeshore and phase out gas motors. They need to hear from you, so as soon as you get back from your hiking, biking or boating, send an email to comments.pacificnorthwest-willamette@fs.fed.us and let the Forest Service know there's only one Waldo and you want it to stay that way. **CW**

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