



Shifting Sands

Strange things are always afoot at the Oregon Dunes.

Oregon is full of surprises, and one of the most surprising and interesting spots is the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area, a 40-mile long strip of shifting sands between Florence and Coos Bay that contains the largest expanse of coastal dunes in North America.

The juxtaposition of natural features at the Oregon Dunes is bizarre. Looking north or south, the barren, glimmering dunes will make you feel like you're in the Sahara Desert or the Arabian Peninsula. But glance to the west and you'll see the blue-green breakers of the Pacific Ocean colliding with the shore. And to the east is a wall of lush temperate rainforest.

To get to the dunes, simply drive west on Highway 126 from Eugene for approximately 60 miles to Florence. Turn south on Highway 101 — the National Recreation Area is found between the highway and the shoreline and begins just south of town. There are two day-hiking opportunities near Florence that are very representative of the larger area.

The Taylor Dunes trailhead is found at the Carter Creek Campground 8 miles south of Florence on Highway 101. A gate closes the campground during the winter. The trailhead begins in a small parking lot right off the road. The path skirts a shallow lake for a half-mile before reaching a viewing platform.

From here the trail is poorly maintained. You will follow wooden posts through the sands for a half-mile to a junction with the Carter Dunes Trail. (You can skip straight to the Carter Creek trail by walking past the gate from the parking lot for a quarter of a mile and finding the trailhead by the first campground.)

At the trail junction, head west to reach the beach or continue south through a crazy moon-scape of dunes. The sand dunes here are "oblique" dunes found nowhere else on earth. Called oblique because they form at an angle to southern winter winds and northern summer winds, these are the tallest dunes in the area, growing as high as 500 feet. Oblique dunes are constantly moving, traveling from three to five feet a year, burying everything in their path, including forests, streams and lakes.

Probably the most diverse and scenic part of the Oregon Dunes is found around Takhenitch Creek. To get there, drive 10 miles south of Florence on Highway 101 to the Oregon Dunes Overlook. The lookout itself isn't nearly as interesting as the hike that continues into the dunes, where you can head south towards Takhenitch Creek past strange islands of trees that survived the bulldozing action of sand dunes marching inland.

To begin exploring Takhenitch immediately, drive 12 miles south of Florence to the Takhenitch Creek trailhead, which follows crystal clear waters as they wind their way west to the ocean past enormous sand dunes. This trail intersects a variety of interesting loop trails that take you south.

In a weird twist, the sand dunes are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, which has dedicated half of the 31,500-acre recreation area to the sole use of off-road vehicle aficionados. Every summer weekend this obnoxious subspecies of *boobus americanus* holds a full-scale reenactment of the Normandy invasion on these beautiful sands.

The dunes are literally being wiped off the face of the Earth by a quieter but even more insidious force than the invading army of dune buggies. Civilization detests dynamic natural features, and European beach grass was introduced to the dunes in the 1920s to stabilize the shifting sands. The beach grass has done its job too well. A foredune has established itself close to the shoreline and parallel to the beach. Vegetation growing on the foredune is preventing sand from the beach from moving inland and replenishing the big dunes.

Unless something is done soon, the dunes could be rendered completely inert and beyond recovery within 50 years. Using high explosives or heavy equipment to blow holes in the foredune to allow sand to move freely inland would be an extreme, but completely warranted, restoration measure.

Yep, drop a bunker-busting bomb on an Oregon beach. This place just keeps getting stranger and stranger, huh? **EW**

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