

Wildest and Most Scenic of Them All

The Rogue River Trail

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is much less well known than the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act or the other landmark environmental laws passed by Congress in the '60s and '70s. Very quietly, the Act has protected 11,358 miles of river from dam building and pollution, with more added every year.

Forty-seven Oregon waterways are designated as wild and scenic, more than any other

state. Many of those rivers, including the McKenzie, Umpqua, Deschutes and Snake, are world-famous fishing and white water rafting destinations.

No river segment is more famous — or wilder and more scenic — than the 43-mile long section of the mighty Rogue River that flows through a wilderness canyon in the heart of the Siskiyou Mountains. Most folks float this section; the rest embark on a three to four day backpacking adventure on a trail along the north bank. This south-facing slope can be blisteringly hot in the summer. Besides better weather, hiking the trail in April or May will allow you to enjoy wildflowers, brilliant green foliage and the vanguard of the big spring Chinook run. And surprisingly few people hike the trail in the spring.

The eastern trailhead is at the Grave Creek boat launch, 15 miles west of Grants Pass. The western trailhead is near Illahe on the Rogue River Road, 31 miles up the river from Gold Beach. Shuttling yourself can be time consuming and exposes your vehicle to a high crime rural area. The best option is to pay one of several professional rafting companies to shuttle your vehicle for you. Many locals will also offer their shuttling services for cheap. Ten years ago, this would have been a safe approach. Unfortunately, today I have to recommend against trusting anyone but professional outfitters with your vehicle.

Once you're on the trail, you'll encounter no trouble from people, but strong sun, extensive poison oak thickets, rattlesnakes and ticks are all real dangers (the Rogue Valley is one of the few areas in Oregon where Lyme disease has been reported). Fires are prohibited within 400 feet of the river (unless in a fire pan), and marauding black bears frequently steal food that's not properly secured. In the spring, the river is deceptively fast and powerful and quite dangerous to swimmers.

This 40-mile trek is the best way to experience the colorful history of the area. The first point of interest is Whiskey Creek in 3.5 miles. There's a side-trail to the north after a bridge crossing that takes you to an interesting collection of 100-year-old mining equipment. Gold was discovered on the banks of the Rogue in 1851, bringing a flood of prospectors, whose wretched treatment of native peoples and Chinese laborers is one of the saddest chapters in Oregon history.

There are several mild climbs and switchbacks in the first ten miles of hiking. The big blue-green river, carving its way through russet-colored boulders, dominates the scenery along the entire length of the trail. This first half of the trail travels through a relatively dense mixed conifer forest interspersed with a few grassy meadows and extensive madrone, white oak, canyon live oak, tan oak and manzanita groves.

Did I mention the trail is popular? In fact, it is possible to spend each night at one of three different wilderness lodges regularly spaced along the route. The first you'll encounter is Black Bar Lodge, 10 miles from Grave Creek. There are good camps another 2.5 miles down the trail at Horseshoe Bend.

Nine miles down the trail from Black Bar brings you to Battle Bar, scene of a fierce fight between the U.S. Calvary and Takelma Indians in 1855. Less than a mile further is Winkle Bar, site of famous western writer Zane Grey's summer cabin. This is where he penned one of his lesser-known books, *Rogue River Feud*, the tale of turn of the century eco-raiders who sabotage illegal fishing operations and gripe about old growth logging. The cabin lies on private land and is not accessible to the public.

Another five miles brings you to Mule Creek (good camps), where the trail ends and you have to follow a road for a little under two miles before the trail begins again at Blossom Bar.

The last 15 miles are the most scenic part of the trip. The canyon narrows dramatically in places, and there are lots of slot canyons, waterfalls, grassy meadows and patches of old growth timber. Obnoxious jet boats occasionally prowl the river between Illahe and Blossom Bar after May 1.

Despite the occasional noisy intruder, hikers on this trail will experience one of the premier wild and scenic river segments in the country and some of the best the Oregon outdoors has to offer. **EW**

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