



Winter Wandering

Circling Crater Lake by snowshoe

Oregon's only National Park is a summertime favorite for locals and tourists alike. Whether it's a boat ride to majestic Wizard Island or a scenic tour around the caldera on Rim Drive, Crater Lake has plenty to offer in the warm season. But America's deepest lake is by no means off-limits when the snow falls in winter. The southern entrance to the park remains open, and the road to Rim Village is plowed for vehicle access. And from there visitors can embark on one of the greatest adventures the park has to offer: a wintertime circumnavigation of our state's most impressive body of water.

Such was my intent on Dec. 21, 2011 when I showed up at the Crater Lake Visitor Center parking lot with two friends and a pile of gear. Although many winter trekkers prefer cross-country skis, we chose snowshoes as our method of travel, opting for secure footing and fewer embarrassing face-plants. After registering for a three-day backcountry permit and ditching our cars in the free parking area, we set out from Rim Village at 11 am.

We did our best to follow the hikers' route of the Pacific Crest Trail (equestrians on the PCT use another route at the base of Mount Mazama, the ancient volcano that now contains Crater Lake). I recognized the terrain from previous hikes on this National Scenic Trail, but the snow here was new to me. Although I have always thought Crater Lake to be gorgeous in the summer, I found the wintertime version to be even more picturesque.

As we followed the trail, we saw Wizard Island to our right. This volcanic cinder cone rises out of the lake near the western side of the caldera. At its top is a crater of its own, a reminder that Wizard Island is a small volcano within another volcano. Although most of our attention was drawn to the contents of the gigantic caldera, the scene outside the rim was also spectacular. To the southwest stands Union Peak, with Mount McLoughlin farther south and mighty Mount Shasta towering in the haze beyond in California. As we continued around the rim, we were given increasingly wonderful views of Mount Thielsen and Diamond Peak to the north, and eventually we spotted the South Sister in the distance.

A quick lunch in the early afternoon helped fuel our efforts around the lake. When we reached the junction of Rim Drive and North Entrance Road, the Pacific Crest Trail left the rim. Now our most practical route was along the remainder of Rim Drive. Following this snow-covered road took us around the back side of gigantic Llao Rock, a prominent feature named after a god in Klamath Native American legend. We stopped to make camp just before dark, having accomplished about 10 miles.

One of my goals for the trip was to test my sleeping gear in cold temperatures. My down sleeping bag, ultralight pad, and solo tent were intended for "three-season" use, but I figured with enough clothes on I could probably make them work. As the temperature dropped, it was soon obvious that

winter was not one of those three seasons. I wore all of my clothing and slipped three pairs of socks over my numb feet. When I failed to regain feeling in my toes, I crammed my feet into my thermal gloves and tried to sleep through my shivering. The temperature reached 7 degrees F that night — well below the rating of my sleeping bag. I was miserable.

Due to a minor injury we spent the next day backtracking to Rim Village, leaving the remainder of our intended route for a future expedition. Just past our turn-around point a clockwise trekker will reach Cleetwood Trail, the only safe and legal access to the lake itself. This steep, switchback-riddled path is open to both snowshoers and skiers in winter (though I think a little insanity is required to attempt the descent on skis). Continuing to the east side of the lake, adventurers will encounter Mount Scott, an old volcano with a summit elevation of nearly 9,000 feet — the highest point in the park. A trail from its base climbs about 1,500 feet to the top, providing access to backcountry travelers year-round. The view from the peak is spectacular.

Back at Rim Village, we made sure to hang our backcountry permit on the door of the Visitor Center to assure the staff of our safe return. No doubt they were amazed that we had circled Crater Lake in just two days instead of our intended three. I hope we set a record.

Aaron J. Nicholson of Eugene is working on promoting his recently published backpacking book, The State of Determination, which includes the self-contained, solo 460-mile Pacific Crest Trail trek he wrote about last fall for EW. His book website is aaronjnicholson.com

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