



FUNGI AND SUGAR PINES

Larison Creek's low elevation hike

PHOTO BY JOHN WILLIAMS

Recently I've had the craving to hike around Oakridge. I'm not sure if it is the incredible forest or the food and beer at Brewers Union Local 180 after the hike. Regardless of the reasoning, I've been twice in the last week. The first hike was a lower portion of the Middle Fork Willamette Trail and the second was the Larison Creek Trail. For those who don't know, Oakridge is a mecca for both hiking and mountain bike riding. I like to do both, but prefer hiking. This time of the year you will likely find yourself alone on the trail, whatever your mode of transportation.

The Larison Creek Trail starts off on a portion of Larison Creek connecting with Hills Creek Reservoir,

though this changes quickly to a much more diverse native setting. While walking along the section that is part of the reservoir, if the water level is low enough, you can see quite a few massive tree stumps. These giants were likely Douglas fir and western redcedar, lost to the dam and now covered in water most of the year. Thankfully the remainder of the Larison Creek drainage didn't meet this fate.

If one is lucky enough to be hiking after the first frost, there is an impressive display of fungi along the trail, ranging from the odd (golden jelly fungus) to the delicious (Pacific chanterelle mushroom). Though if you plan on picking and eating any fungi, you will need a permit from the Willamette National Forest, which is free for personal

use and can be picked up on your way to the trailhead at the Westfir Ranger Station. And of course don't eat anything you're not absolutely positive is edible.

The trail closely follows the north bank of Larison Creek for most of the walk except for when it climbs to the edge of a clear-cut that is rapidly regenerating. This valley is home to many impressive trees. Mostly Douglas fir, western hemlock and western redcedar, but there are also quite a few sugar pines, which in this type of forest are fairly rare. You can spot them by their massive cones.

The Larison Creek Trail can be explored on horseback, bike or by your two feet. If you wanted an easy nearly all-downhill hike you could start at the upper trailhead along Forest Road (FR) 101. But this involves driving on a few miles of gravel roads. The trailhead off of FR 21 is paved up to the parking area. If you're mountain biking, don't worry about any steep uphill sections; it's a slow, steady climb. There are some great campsites that I'm sure are fairly busy on summer weekends, but this time of the year one could stay for days and likely not camp near anyone.

As more snow falls in the high Cascades, low elevation trails become more attractive for those who love to hike year-round. The lower 3 miles or so of the Larison Creek Trail should remain snow free for most of the year. But, as always, check the weather before you head out, and be prepared for inclement weather regardless of the forecast. The Larison Creek Trail is 6.3 miles one way. There is no fee or permit needed for this hike. ■

DIRECTIONS FROM OAKRIDGE:

Follow Highway 58 east for 2 miles, turn right onto Kitson Springs Road, follow for .5 mile, turn right onto FR 21, follow FR 21 for approximately 3 miles, turn right at the well-marked entrance.

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