

OAKRIDGE EXPLORATIONS

Spring along the Middle Fork Trail

The Willamette River is the lifeblood of the valley that bears its name — though by the time it reaches major population centers it has been dammed and otherwise mutilated by humans. Thankfully not far from Eugene one can hike or bike along the banks of the Middle Fork of this mighty river.

The Middle Fork Trail runs for 27 miles from the headwaters near Timpanogas Lake to Sand Prairie Campground in the Willamette National Forest. Down river from Sand Prairie Campground, the Middle Fork Willamette Trail ends along with the free flow of this beautiful river. Because of the vast elevation difference between the upper sections of trail and the lower, there is a also vast difference in forest cover along the trail.

Spring is starting to feel a lot like summer and has melted substantial amounts of snow already, but the upper sections of the trail will likely be under snow until mid-June. Prior to the melting of snow, the lower sections of the Middle Fork Trail have much to offer in the way of recreation opportunities.

Mountain biking and hiking are among the most popular activities along the Middle Fork Trail. This can lead to some crowding on summer weekends, but during the spring, solitude can be found. Because Forest Road 21 parallels the Middle Fork Trail, there are frequent trailheads; this creates an opportunity for many short day hikes. The area near Indigo Springs Campground is an exceptional place to begin exploring the Middle Fork Trail.



PHOTO BY JOHN WILLIAMS

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE: Take I-5 south to exit 188. Head east on Highway 58 to Oakridge about 40 miles. From Oakridge to Indigo Springs Campground, follow Hwy. 58 east for 2 miles, turn right onto Kitson Springs Road, follow for .5 miles to Forest Road 21, turn right onto Forest Road 21, follow for 27 miles.

Indigo Springs is a breathtaking series of cold water springs that flows into the Middle Fork Willamette. There is a short trail running from the Indigo Springs Campground to the start of this impressive spring; a portion of this trail is the historic Oregon Central Military Wagon Road that once ran through the area. The semi-primitive Indigo Springs Campground is a perfect place to use as a base camp for further exploring the area. Beautiful old-growth Douglas fir and Western redcedar surround this outstanding free campground. Facilities at Indigo Springs include trash service, fire pits and pit toilets. A short walk on Forest Road 21 leads to a connection trail that leads to the Middle Fork Trail.

Hiking up river from this junction leads to Chuckle Springs and Paddy's Valley, 1.5 miles and 6 miles respectively. For a short 3-mile hike, Chuckle Springs makes for an exceptional trip. The trail stays close to the river and passes through moist old-growth forest. Douglas fir dominate the dry sites along the trail while Western redcedar tower over the moist trailside seeps.

Not far from Chuckle Springs the trail passes through a recently burned area. There is a series of bridges that the trail once used, but as a result of fire damage the trail now cuts uphill away from the river. Recently burned areas present a higher degree of danger because of the ever-present threat of falling trees, yet you should take some time to admire the quickly regenerating forest. Immediately around Chuckle Springs the forest was mostly spared from the burn, resulting in a shady place for a mid-hike break.

To complete this short hike simply return the way you came along the Middle Fork Trail. If camping is out of the question the perfect place to finish a hike along the Middle Fork Trail, or anywhere in the Middle Fork Ranger District, is at Brewers Union Local 180. It's home to an outstanding pub menu and cask ale, but if you aren't of age don't despair — they are a family-friendly pub.

Whether you enjoy car camping, backpacking or mountain biking the Middle Fork Trail has something for everyone. ■

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