



TAKE THE WAGON ROAD!

Historic trail offers river views and old-growth forest WORDS AND PHOTO BY JOHN WILLIAMS

Originally the Santiam Wagon Road was built to move wild horses from near Sisters to Halsey for auction. It was also part of the first transcontinental car race in 1907; the Sevenmile Section near Tombstone Pass was the steepest of the entire race.

Today the greater part of the Santiam Wagon Road within the Willamette National Forest has reverted to a single-track trail, though it's obvious there is a roadbed under the impressive layer of forest duff. Thankfully many sections of the Santiam Wagon Road were spared from the free-for-all clear-cutting that destroyed much of the ancient forest that once covered a good chunk of the Old Cascades.

Relatively low elevation trails of substantial distance are difficult to find in Western Oregon. Thankfully, in under an hour and a half from Eugene, you can find yourself on either the Santiam Wagon Road or the McKenzie River Trail.

Chances are you have heard of the McKenzie River Trail, so to find the Wagon Road go just past the upriver terminus of the McKenzie River Trail, where you will find the Fish Lake Guard Station. From the Fish Lake Remount Station continue 19.5 miles on the Santiam Wagon Road, down primarily single-track trails, to the Mountain House Trailhead.

If you're looking to set out and hike or bike both trails, I suggest starting at the Mountain House Trailhead on the Santiam Wagon Road. There is ample parking for five or more vehicles, and it's farther off the road than the lower McKenzie River Trail Trailhead. Potential water sources are frequently available along both trails, and camping is also easily found. As always, surface water should be treated in a manner that makes you feel safe.

Hiking the entire trail might sound great, but some of us

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE TO MOUNTAIN

HOUSE TRAILHEAD: Follow I-5 north for 22.5 miles, exit onto Hwy. 228, follow east for 18.9 miles, turn right onto Hwy. 20 and follow for 23.4 miles. Parking is on the south side of Hwy. 20.

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE TO FISH LAKE

TRAILHEAD: Follow I-5 north for 22.5 miles, exit onto Hwy. 228, follow east for 18.9 miles, turn right onto Hwy. 20 and follow for 39.8 miles. Turn right onto Forest Road 2672, follow for .1 mile; parking is well-signed on the left.

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE TO CLEAR LAKE

RESORT: Follow Hwy. 126 east for 73.3 miles to Clear Lake Resort. Park in the day-use area.

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE TO SAHALIE

FALLS/KOOSAH FALLS LOOP: Follow Hwy. 126 east for 72 miles to the Ice Cap Campground/Koosah Falls sign. Parking is on the left.

DIRECTIONS FROM EUGENE TO TAMOLITCH

FALLS: Follow Hwy. 126 east for 64.5 miles, turn left onto Forest Road 730, follow for .5 miles. Parking will be on the right.

cannot escape "civilization" for three or four days. There are some incredible points on both trails that are accessible within a day's hike, and not to be missed. The first is from Mountain House to House Rock Falls. You will pass

through breathtaking old-growth forest and go past a large rock used by the Kalapuya and settlers for shelter, ending at a small but beautiful cascade.

This round-trip trek is approximately 5 miles. Shortly after Lost Prairie Campground lies the Fish Lake section of the Santiam Wagon Road. Beautiful old-growth western hemlock and Douglas fir surround the trail to the historic Fish Lake Remount Station.

On the McKenzie River Trail are a few more trail options allowing for some spectacular loops for those more inclined to drive to an easier hike. Clear Lake is the headwaters of the McKenzie River and breathtaking enough to spend a day simply walking around. There is a 5-mile loop that surrounds the lake, the eastern half of which is the McKenzie River Trail.

Just downriver lie the impressive Sahalie and Koosah Falls. Sahalie Falls is the more famous of the two and, at 74 feet, is slightly taller. Koosah Falls is much wider and slightly shorter at 64 feet. It is a short 3-mile loop to reach both falls from Highway 126.

Another famous spot only a few miles down river is Blue Pool or Tamolitch Falls. Depending on the amount of snowmelt and rainfall, you might find an incredible shimmering dark blue pool or a waterfall.

Porous lava fields drive the McKenzie River underground until it reemerges at Tamolitch Falls. Whether you have the time to hike or bike all 45 miles of the McKenzie River Trail and Santiam Wagon Road or you can only make it out for a few sections, it's worth the short drive (or LTD bus ride) from the Willamette Valley.

Spring is here and the rivers are raging, so go explore the land of falling waters. ■