

A DAY WITH THE FISHES

Discover Willamette Hatchery in Oakridge BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

You can almost listen to the entirety of Taylor Swift's album *1989* on the way to Oakridge. If you're the parent of a 7- or 8-year-old — and particularly a girl — you know what this means. For the rest of you, in case you weren't aware, Oakridge is about 45 minutes southeast of Eugene, past Pleasant Hill and Dexter Reservoir on the way to the mountains.

And located near Oakridge — a Lane County town with so much untapped tourist potential — is a little gem of a getaway spot for families called Willamette Hatchery. "Seen one fish hatchery, seen 'em all," you might say. But odds are you haven't been to a hatchery like this — called Oregon's best by roadtripsforfamilies.com, and for good reason.

So why is this such a great and easy way to pass a summer afternoon with the kids? First of all, Willamette Hatchery is a whole lot more than the fishes. Yes, you can toss food to writhing masses of beautiful Chinook salmon or steelhead as well as some whoppin' white sturgeon. You might even see a great blue heron swoop low over the water looking for a snack.

Next, check out the museum and interpretive center. See stuffed representations of animals native to Oregon: cougars, coyotes, foxes and wolverines. Use the guide to help identify species with your little one. Do you know what a ringed-tailed cat is? Neither did I before I went to Willamette Hatchery.

And bring a picnic because Willamette Hatchery has lots of great places to sit and eat; one picnic area is demarcated by a carved statue (one of many statues dotting the hatchery grounds) depicting a bear with a picnic basket. Get it? So classic. There's also an interpretive trail, easy for all ages, with signs identifying different native plant species along the way. And don't miss the viewing area full of beautiful upland game birds.


But the real crown jewel is the 9-hole mini golf course. Play golf while learning about the salmon lifecycle, complete with Oregon landmarks: Journey with the salmon downriver to the ocean, dodging predators and fisherman and then travel back upstream to spawn. I managed to get a hole-in-one.

Not that you should keep score, turning a nice family outing into a competition. I totally kept score and was robbed on several holes.

After your time at the hatchery, stop by Brewer's Union Local 180 on your way back through Oakridge for a refreshing adult beverage. Just one; you're driving. And minors are welcome. Think to yourself about all the fun you had at the hatchery and, other than the gas it took to get there, it was all totally free.

Willamette Fish Hatchery is open all year, but summer is the best time to visit. To get to the hatchery: From Oakridge Take Highway 58 to Salmon Creek Road. Travel one mile on Salmon Creek Road to the hatchery. Salmon Creek Road is 1.7 miles east of the spotlight in Oakridge.





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