

Happy Trails: A walk through the hidden gems of the peninsula

Ilwaco Parks and Rec adds to in-town adventure options

By DAVID PLECHL
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ILWACO, Wash. — Hike along the new and improved Black Lake trail system and you'll meander fern-lined lanes past several massive old growth stumps. You might see frolicking deer, jumping fish, blue herons, hawks, berries, and (hopefully not) any curious black bears.

"I think it's one of the hidden gems of the peninsula," said Ilwaco Parks and Recreation Chairman Nick Haldeman as he bounded down a freshly etched trail with his black lab, Magpie, in tow.

Ilwaco's Parks and Recreation was created just six years ago, but since then, the all-volunteer commission has steadily been working on city cleanup and park improvement projects. Haldeman, who joined in 2010 and rose to the chairman position in 2013, has made adding easily accessible, in-town recreation options a top priority.

Black Lake and City Park are the main beneficiaries of the efforts, he said, mainly because they are the only parks within city limits. That allows Parks and Rec to concentrate on a few major projects for the biggest impact.

Haldeman, who also serves as a firefighter-EMT with Pacific County Fire District 1, and is a captain with the Ilwaco Volunteer Fire Department, estimates he regularly puts in 10 and 15 hours a week on the Black Lake trails project.

Sustainable trails

The aim, Haldeman said, is to build "sustainable trails" that won't need a lot of long-term upkeep. To do that, he's following U.S. Forest Service and International Mountain Biking guidelines. The trails were drafted out before any boots hit the ground. Haldeman and volunteers then flagged out a rough corridor and settled on final re-routes.

Trailblazing means first removing large shrubs, roots



Ilwaco Parks and Recreation Chairman Nick Haldeman checks out a newly maintained trail with his black lab, Magpie.

and rocks that pose a hazard, said Haldeman. Then vegetation on the trail is scraped down to the bare mineral soil. A slurry of pine needles and loose dirt is added to give a proper walking surface.

Haldeman even built a little foot bridge out of rough-cut, rot-resistant Western red cedar, with the help of Ilwaco Middle School shop teacher Steven Blake. It's all part of that long-term mind set.

"This bridge will be here in 50 years," he said.

A good portion of the trails that criss-cross the hills above Black Lake were laid out in the '90s, but unfortunately, not very well.

The problem with some sections, Haldeman explained, is that the trail just followed the descent of the slope. Not sustainable. Water will run down the trail, erode the surface and create muddy, slippery conditions. Trails should ideally run perpendicular to the grade of the slope. To do that, a "bench-cut" is made on the uphill side of the trail and then material is pulled down. Done right, water runs over the top of the trail and over the embankment, not down the trail like a stream.

Haldeman showed one steep and notoriously muddy 150-foot section of Josh's Trail that has now been completely circumvented and replaced with a switch-back route that means less muck, a better hike, and

some newly accessible views of Black Lake.

Other additions and re-routes mean one can loop out from the parking lot on the east side of the lake and hike Josh's Trail without ever having to set foot on a gravel logging road. Improved signage and trail maps that give visitors a better sense of how to get around and navigate the interlocking trail system are also in the works, said Haldeman.

Eager riders equal busy builders

Marc Simmons, the former principal of Ilwaco Middle School, was looking for someone to teach mountain biking during the popular Pathways program.

The outdoor curriculum gave students a chance to learn things like mountain biking, archery, or horticulture; sometimes setting up shop along a ridge on Josh's Trail where an "outdoor classroom" of wooden benches awaits.

Haldeman threw in his hat for the job of mountain biking instructor and was quickly leading groups of more than 20 middle-school students along the trails weekly, for over two years.

Safe bike handling skills, bike maintenance and trail etiquette, were all covered. Rides clocked in at anywhere from 3 to 10 miles and Haldeman said over 100 kids passed through

the program, which he added is, unfortunately, "up in the air."

"I would like to see it come back," said Haldeman. Because of Black Lake's close proximity to Ilwaco's schools, he sees the park as an ideal and rare resource for hands-on, outdoor education.

Volunteers from CLEAN, students from Naselle Youth Camp, community members and loads of Ilwaco students have all helped build and maintain the Black Lake trail system.

"The cool part is, once they come out here to build a trail and see what it's all about, they take ownership of it, and they become stewards of the park, and stewards of the trails," Haldeman said.

More options, more use

Haldeman often comes to the trails to walk Magpie, do routine maintenance, and occasionally rip around on his mountain bike; a passion he discovered while at university in Bellingham. Between classes, close proximity to Galbraith Mountain presented the perfect opportunity for some fat tire fun.

"When I moved to the peninsula, I wanted to keep riding my bike," Haldeman said. "I didn't see the opportunity, so I had to build the opportunity."

Visitors will be pleased with better hiking surfaces, less mud, and for the two-wheeled thrill seekers, some pretty sweet

jumps and bumps created with the input of local bikers. But novice riders need not worry, as each "technical trail feature" also has a "ride-around" option that allows cyclists to just keep cruising.

"Since we've installed the new trails, we've seen a definite increase in their usage," Haldeman said.

Through informal conversations with visitors, he said he thinks more people are coming from Clatsop County, just to seek out previously untapped options in the region.

All together, Black Lake Trail, Salamander Trail and Josh's Trail all present visitors with just over 3 miles of hiking and biking options. Motorized vehicles and horses are not allowed in the park. Dogs can be off-leash, Haldeman said, but owners need to be vigilant about picking up what the dogs may leave behind.

He said he's not too concerned about conflicts between bikers, hikers, dogs and joggers, especially considering the current levels of relatively modest use. He said there are plenty of mixed-use trail systems around the state that see a lot more activity, and still avoid regular conflicts.

Nevertheless, its important for anyone using the trails to exercise a certain level of awareness. Bikers should know they are on a trail shared with walkers, and hikers should

be alert enough to yield to the quicker moving bikes.

Haldeman said Upper Josh's Trail "is probably the one that has people most excited."

And no one ever seems to tire of the fishing options on the lake. The 35-acre expanse is dotted with three docks and a fishing platform; each often filled with anglers looking to hook trout, perch, blue gill and large-mouth bass.

A 'community' park

Ilwaco's City Park celebrates its 100th birthday this year, and the old boy is showing his age.

When surveyed, Ilwaco residents repeatedly said they wanted to see major improvements to the long-neglected green-space. Haldeman said the goal is to make the park, "a place where people want to spend time."

While the survey showed that local desire for something better was abundant, Haldeman wasn't quite sure stakeholders would be prepared to back up their building dreams with Benjamins.

Astonishingly, locals quickly raised \$150,000 in fewer than three months.

Ilwaco Merchant's Association, the Temple Foundation, Port of Ilwaco and Ilwaco Saturday Market provided the heavy hitting. Tons of individual donors also stepped up to the plate, and a matching grant batted in the total \$300,000 needed for phase one of the project.

Haldeman was humbled. "It was pretty impressive."

Right now, he said the central issue is that the elements of the park that get used the most, like the playground, are farthest from the parking lot, and wedged into a poorly lit corner.

In the new layout, the playground equipment will be replaced with a modern set-up and moved closer to parking. Lighting will be improved. The little-used tennis court will be removed. The grass softball fields will be leveled and replanted. A new walking trail will skirt the perimeter of the park, and irrigation, landscaping and parking will be totally revamped.

Haldeman said city officials are weighing a slight name change for City Park's grand re-opening, slated for late this fall.

"We'd like to call it Ilwaco Community Park," Haldeman said. "That's really what it is."

Museum: Collection has been growing for more than 50 years

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Others are one-of-a-kind pieces, including the bell from the USS Astoria and an alcohol bar from the USS Oregon, which have both been on display.

Row upon row of boxes contain objects yet to be sorted and shelved, such as flags, chart maps, port lights, gillnet fishing equipment and untold reams of historical documents.

"It can take years to get caught up on a collection of this size," Pearson said.

In a nearby boat haul, the museum keeps dozens of antique watercraft built and used throughout the region; the oldest is an authentic Native American dugout made circa 1895.

The museum has been collecting for more than 50 years, so many of the objects that were newish when acquired have become antiques.

This is especially true of marine electronics, which become outdated fairly quickly. The museum has several specimens of LORAN (long-range navigation) equipment, a form of pre-GPS navigation.

Touching history

Part of the challenge of curating a museum is to make the most of the objects available.

This involves using "targeted" pieces, the ones that tell the fullest story of the Columbia River and its place in Pacific Northwest maritime history.

A fresnel lens from a North Coast lighthouse, for example, is a great find. But a lens that actually saved sailors on the Columbia River over many decades, and that figures into many maritime stories, is ideal.

Matthew Palmgren, the museum collections manager, said that being able to personally interact with history every day is probably the best part of his job.

"To see and feel and — of course, through a linen glove — to touch history, in a safe way," he said, "that's a big perk."

Pearson added, "You can study history and learn it, but then to actually see the objects — connecting with (those) really brings it to life."



In the Columbia River Maritime Museum's boat haul, Matthew Palmgren, the collections manager, shows off the top section of a retired buoy from the Buoy 10 salmon fishery in Astoria.

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