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# WEEKEND BREAK



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## The spirits of Bear Mountain

### Writer treks for answers to mountain's history

By RON BALDWIN

The silent sentinel looms over the river's widening. It is balanced and graceful in an irregular landscape.

From the Oregon side of the river, Bear Mountain appears to be a perfect cone. For years, I speculated that this may be a volcanic vent, but I never took the time to find out. I theorized that if Bear Mountain is a volcanic vent then it would likely have a caldera or depression at the top like that of the dormant Cascade volcanoes. This spring, my curiosity got the best of me and I went to investigate.

Bear Mountain is part of a mountain range that includes Bear River Ridge, Naselle Ridge and Scarborough Hill. The southern face of the range is in full view from Astoria but most people, like me, never give it much of a thought.

This grouping of peaks and deep valleys was 30 million years old when the Cascades were the size of mole hills. The underlying rock of the formations is largely basalt with deposits of andesite, a lighter igneous rock and tuff, a light fluffy rock formed from compressed volcanic ash. In most spots this is overlaid with clay and forest soil. Many creeks have cut deep canyons in these hills.

The southernmost point in the range, Scarborough Hill, was chosen by James Scarborough as a home for himself and his Chinook wife who had

inherited the property, then called Chinook Point. Life at Scarborough Hill was regaled in Washington Irving's books "Astoria" and "The Adventures of Captain Bonneville." The property was eventually acquired by the U.S. Army and became the site for Fort Columbia around the beginning of the 20th century.

Most native old-growth forest was logged early. Being before the advent of silviculture, the forest was not planted but grew back naturally. Later, stands were replanted.

Large stands of Western Hemlock still cover most of the hills with patches of Douglas fir, Western red cedar and larger stands of red alder and big leaf maple. The only other land use here is the microwave and radio repeaters on great towers above the range's other southern peaks. These towers are the mainstay of our connection to the rest of the world.

During World War II, the Army Air Corps built Radar Station Bear Mountain, ironically at the other end of Bear River Ridge, high above Greenhead Slough. The installation included recently-developed radar equipment which was highly secret at the time. The installation also included barracks and a mess hall for operators.

Public access here is complicated since there are many owners.

The U.S. government is one player, owning the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge. Washington state is another through ownership of Fort Columbia State Park. Most of the forest is owned by timber companies.

This arrangement creates a patchwork quilt of lands that become quickly confusing to the casual runner or walker. Most of these companies do not allow motorized vehicles on the roads in the area except during designated hunting seasons.

Massive locked metal gates ensure that no unauthorized vehicles can enter. No camping and fires are allowed. Companies otherwise allow daytime walking or non-motorized cycling. Most require permits for this access. Currently, most of this access is offered on a no-fee basis. Federal and state lands are open to public access and have designated trails and roads. User fees apply for some spots. The reason for all this security and permitting boils down to liability. If you wish to walk in the area, you have to plan ahead and ask for permission and/or get a permit/pass. There are signs at the heads of most roads indicating how to apply for a permit. Some roads cross several property lines so multiple permits may be needed.

The protocol for hiking and camping is quite different from that of the Cascades where national forest land is predominant. One good

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Photos by Ron Baldwin

**TOP:** Washington state's Bear Mountain can be viewed from the Port of Astoria and Columbia River. **ABOVE:** Bear Mountain peeks over the Lower Naselle Valley at Johnson's Landing. **BELOW:** The Crimson Ark, a container ship, near Bear Mountain.

