

Central Oregon’s Horse Butte attracts winter bikers

By MARK MORICAL
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — To the west, the Cascade Range was obscured by a shroud of clouds. To the northeast, the Ochoco Mountains were speckled with snow.

Somewhere in between, I soaked in the afternoon sunshine as I cruised along the singletrack trails near Horse Butte.

Nothing cures the shoulder-season blues of early December like a rejuvenating mountain bike ride.

I was still waiting for more snow to accumulate before snowboarding at Mt. Bachelor or Hoodoo ski areas. And heavy November snowfall had made mountain biking difficult in recent weeks.

So it had been a while since I had engaged in one of my favorite outdoor pursuits. And when I saw my window of opportunity, I took advantage.

Thanks to drier areas east and north of Bend, mountain biking is a year-round pursuit in Central Oregon.

Recently at Horse Butte, just southeast of Bend, the trails were in perfect shape. The snow had melted away to leave firm, tacky soil that is pure pleasure to ride on a mountain bike.

However, riders should avoid the trails when warmer winter days can thaw the ground to create a muddy mess. And when the mud dries, ruts from bike tires can be left behind in the singletrack, making for rough riding.

I rode a relatively short loop and encountered three or four other mountain bikers enjoying the trails.

The Coyote Loop Trail and Arnold Ice Cave Trail (Trail 63) form a loop of about 10 to 12 miles that can be ridden in either direction. I started out on the Arnold Ice Cave



In this Dec. 13 photo, Kent Benesch, of Bend, rides the Swamp Wells trail near Horse Butte east of Bend.

Trail to ride the loop clockwise.

The trails traverse the burn where the 1996 Skeleton Fire scorched 17,000 acres, opening up sprawling views in every direction and leaving behind sagebrush and bare juniper trees. The area is pretty exposed, so when heavy wind, rain and/or snow move in, bikers might be wise to find a more protected area to ride, if possible.

The wind was fairly intense during my outing, but it was manageable over the 12-mile ride.

The trails near Horse Butte include a relative dearth of climbing or elevation change, and they are not especially technical, making them rideable for all skill levels. But

riders should be wary of rocks and thick brush along the trail, which can smack their pedals and surprise them.

Bikers should also always yield to horseback riders — and let them know they are there so as not to spook the horses. Cyclists should always yield to runners and hikers as well.

As the late-afternoon rays cast long shadows on the sagebrush, I continued riding along the single-track, grateful for a December day on my bike.

But many more winter rides are possible, as Central Oregon has numerous locations for mountain bikers to enjoy throughout the winter,

conditions permitting.

Here are a few more:

Swamp Wells

This trail, accessible off Chiona Hat Road near Bessie Butte, is located near Horse Butte but cuts through a ponderosa pine forest, offering more protection from winter weather.

The ride from Bessie Butte to Kelsey Butte and back is about a two-hour commitment, offering rolling singletrack and sprawling views, as the trail leads riders about halfway up Kelsey Butte.

Swamp Wells leads all the way south to Newberry National Volcanic Monument, but riders are likely to eventually encounter snow as the

elevation rises toward the monument.

Horse Ridge

Not to be confused with Horse Butte, Horse Ridge is a little farther drive southeast of Bend off U.S. Highway 20. An official trailhead is now in place across the highway from the Badlands.

Horse Ridge offers fun hillside climbs and descents with views of the Badlands and beyond. The singletrack trails include several areas of extremely technical lava rock, so Horse Ridge is not a place for novice mountain bikers.

Maston

Located off Cline Falls Highway between Tumalo and Eagle Crest Resort, Maston offers some of the best wintertime mountain biking in Central Oregon.

The area is mostly flat, making the singletrack trails ideal for all skill levels. One trail skirts the edge of the Deschutes River canyon, offering nice views of the river far below.

Two trailheads for Maston are accessible from Cline Falls Highway, including the south trailhead off Newcomb Road, and the north trailhead, called Juniper.

Smith Rock/Gray Butte

This rock climbing destination is also a good spot to ride a bike in the winter. Bikers can climb the challenging Burma Road to reach the Gray Butte singletrack, which includes some thrilling side-hill trails high above Smith Rock State Park.

The climbers’ trail, which follows the Crooked River around the park, is also open to bikes.

The Radlands

This relatively new area in Redmond features mostly flat, technical rock riding, with several loop options. The trailhead is located in northeast Redmond at the High Desert Sports Complex.

Plenty to love about a winter kayaking hobby

By ZACH URNESS
Statesman Journal

SCIO (AP) — It was a particularly cold day last December when I arrived at the upper North Santiam River with a small group of kayakers.

Snow coated the ground and large icicles hung from the canyon walls as we put on gear and carried our boats to the shoreline in temperatures (optimistically) at about 39 degrees.

“We must be crazy to be getting on the river today,” I said.

There was a pause.

“Nah,” my buddy Jim Heck said. “This is how you keep from going crazy.”

It’s difficult to say why, but the answer was a perfect summation of why I love kayaking in the winter.

Despite conditions that can seem harsh — and despite the feeling you’re tempting hypothermia — exploring the rivers and creeks that rise during winter remains my go-to source of therapy.

And so, with the idea of saving a few people from insanity, I present the top 5 reasons to kayak rivers in freezing temperatures.

5) PROPER EQUIPMENT (equals) WARM AND TOASTY

People have a hard time believing this, but with the right equipment, you’re actually warm and cozy even when you’re splashing through a rapid at below freezing temperatures.

The key piece of equipment is a drysuit, which encases your body in a cocoon of waterproof warmth. It does cost \$500 to \$1,000, but they typically last a long time (mine has been good almost five years) and have good warranties.

Beyond the drysuit are items such as gloves or “pogies” (\$20 to \$40), a skull cap (\$20 to \$40) and booties (\$60 to \$150). By the time you’re ready to roll, almost every body part is covered.

4) EMBRACE THE RAIN!

Part of living in northern Oregon is finding a way to deal with the rain (although it has been remarkably easy this year).

Winter kayaking is perfect because you actually look forward to downpours. The more rain, the more the river and creek levels rise,

and the more places where you can paddle.

When you love winter kayaking, seasonal affective disorder is something that occurs when the forecast is full of sunshine.

3) THRILL RIDE

The thrill of gambling, I’ve always believed, isn’t the amount of money on the line.

The addictive quality of gambling — what drives people to the tables and holds them hostage — is the few moments before the card is flipped or the dice stop rolling. In that moment, the mind is so hypnotized with anticipation that nothing else matters.

It’s a powerful sensation, and the only other place I’ve felt that intensity of focus is above Class IV or V rapids. All of your adrenaline is distilled into the strokes you’ll need to make in the next few moments.

The fear of entering a tough rapid and the release afterward is a feeling as powerful as any drug. And trying to make it through the rainy season without a whitewater fix is not possible.

2) MEETING NEW PEOPLE

Whitewater kayaking is a team sport.

Among the five stupidest things you can do in life is try and run a frozen Oregon river solo. By necessity, kayaking brings people together. And oftentimes, it brings you together with people you wouldn’t otherwise have any contact with.

Truth is, it takes a certain sort of person to want to kayak in winter. And those people are excellent folks 99.9 percent of the time.

I’ve paddled with people from 16 to 74 years old — no kidding — some of whom became longtime friends.

A few great groups to meet people? The Willamette Kayak and Canoe Club is a good place to start, or simply joining a email list where you can organize trips. Businesses such as Next Adventure and Alder Creek in Portland also offer programs where you can meet up with people and get started.

1) DISCOVERY

No question I’m biased, but I’ve always believed the world’s most beautiful sights are found along the river.

The intersection of forest, water and wildlife — of canyons, mountains and valleys — all occur on the river.

Winter kayaking is about discovery. When

the waters rise, you can find places unreachable by any other method of travel.

On the North Fork of the Smith River, in extreme southwest Oregon, you can kayak down an aqua blue stream into a burnt orange canyon reminiscent of Mars, and carnivorous cobra lilies stand on the shoreline and waterfalls tumble down from every direction.

Closer to home, a trip into Sandy Gorge can make you feel as though you’ve entered

Middle Earth (where are the Hobbits?) while a trek down the upper North Santiam provides views of Mount Jefferson you can’t get anywhere else.

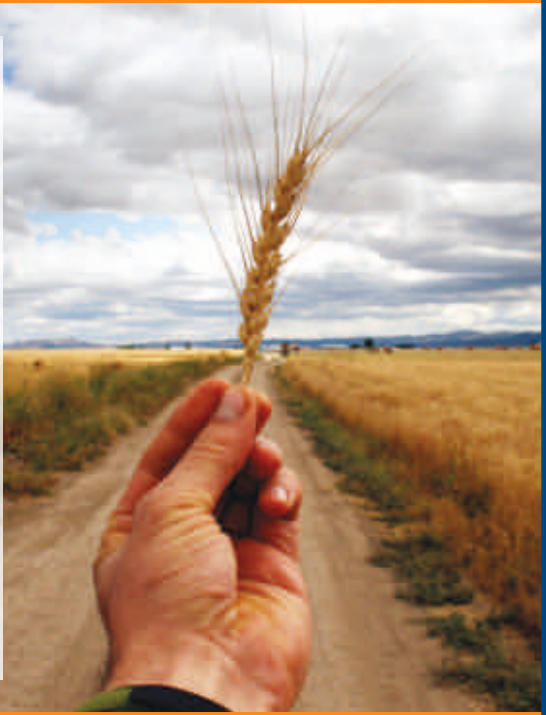
And those are just the well-known places. Kayakers more intrepid than myself are forever exploring tiny, never-before-run streams, dropping down unnamed waterfalls and discovering new wonders only accessible from the seat of a kayak in winter.



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Submitted photo
Jim Smootz of Pendleton poses with a steelhead he caught recently in the Columbia River. Have a trophy photo of your fishing, hunting or outdoor adventure that you would like to share? Email it to ttrainor@eastoregonian.com.