

Fort Rock hike offers a glimpse into Oregon history

By MARK MORICAL
The Bulletin

FORT ROCK — This was the sort of rock climbing that I could get used to.

OK, so it was more like rock “scrambling” than actual climbing, but I preferred it to clinging to a vertical rock face while attached to a rope.

A quick little climb over rocks here and there, and I was always able to find flat ground again, even at the highest point of this remarkable geologic formation rising steeply out of the flat sagebrush country in remote south-central Oregon.

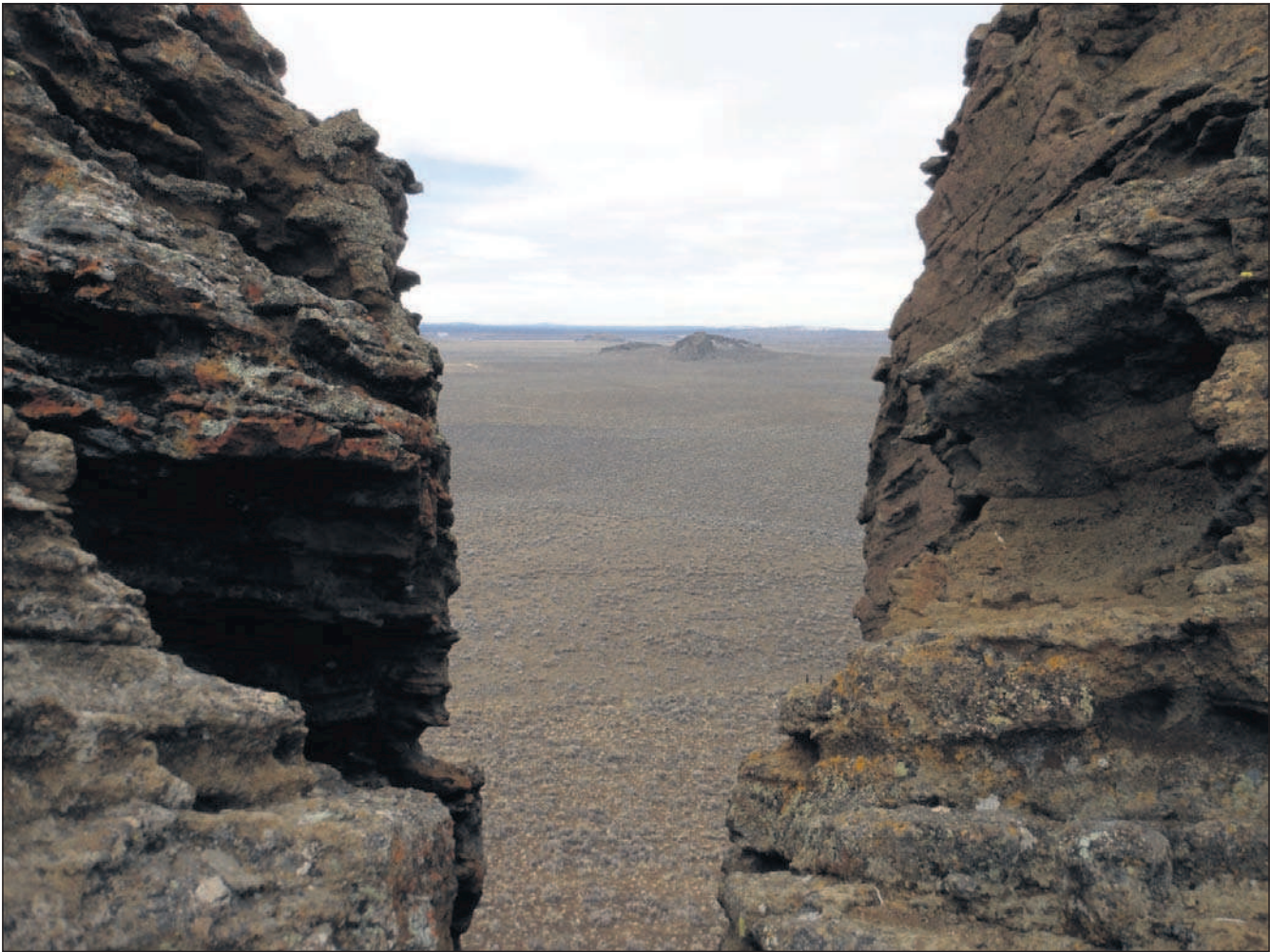
The Fort Rock State Natural Area, about 70 miles southeast of Bend along the Oregon Outback Scenic Byway, offers a chance to learn about the geology and the anthropology of that desolate part of Oregon. But it also gives hikers an opportunity to take a unique trek back in time. When they get off the flat trails and venture onto the rock, they can gain a keen perspective of this formation that was once an island in a large lake.

I made the drive to Fort Rock from Bend during a winter warm spell that had me in a hiking mindset. Most areas east of Bend typically stay dry enough throughout the winter — even a winter of heavy snowfall — to make for snow-free adventures.

As I drove southeast on state Highway 31, the trees of the snow-covered Deschutes National Forest thinned out until all that was left was sagebrush land and little if any snow.

The giant tuff ring (tuff is a porous rock formed by consolidation of volcanic ash) that is Fort Rock towers over the tiny community of Fort Rock in the middle of the endless sagebrush. Visitors drive past the Fort Rock Homestead Village Museum, where cabins, schoolhouses and homes have been gathered to preserve some of the pioneer history there.

A short drive from the museum is the parking lot and trailhead for the Fort Rock State Natural Area, which includes several trails that cut through the flat area in the middle of the formation, and some that lead hikers up onto the rocky cliffs of the ring.



This Feb. 10 photo shows Fort Rock in Lake County. The Fort Rock State Natural Area is about 70 miles southeast of Bend, along the Oregon Outback Scenic Byway.



This Feb. 10 photo shows Fort Rock from the west side of the turf ring in Lake County.

According to Oregon State Parks signage at the trailhead, the tuff ring originated from a volcanic eruption more than 100,000 years ago. Debris from explosions of steam, lake bed

mud and glass shards formed an enormous ring around a broad crater. The glassy mud of the 6,000-foot-wide tuff ring solidified into rock.

Today the rock walls are as high as 200 feet, and the

formation is one-third of a mile in diameter.

Wind-driven waves in the lake eroded the walls of Fort Rock, cutting numerous notches and terraces, according to Oregon State

Parks. The different notches represent prehistoric shorelines thousands of years apart.

Hiking beside, onto and through some of these formations, I imagined how the rock was formed by the lake waves. I also imagined how Native Americans made Fort Rock their home some 10,000 years ago, possibly canoeing along the lake to and from their island caves.

At the end of the last ice age, Native Americans migrated to the Fort Rock Valley, according to signs at the trailhead of the state natural area. A warming trend shrank the lake, and people found caves shaped by waves when the lake was higher. Humans occupied the caves for more than 11,000 years, and more than 70 sandals — woven from sagebrush bark — have been found in caves in the Fort Rock basin. Those sandals are believed to be some of the oldest evidence of human habitation in Oregon. Arrowheads, spear points and fish net weights have also been discovered in caves at Fort

Rock.

With all this geology and history in mind, I set out to hike the trails through Fort Rock on a mild winter day when temperatures reached the mid-50s.

I started my trek on the east side of the ring, glancing up at unusual holes in the rock walls, no doubt formed by that ancient lake that stretched eastward 40 miles to Christmas Valley, and southward 30 miles to Silver Lake, according to Oregon State Parks. Camels, mammoths, bison and flamingos lived along the lake’s edge.

Today, Fort Rock is home to deer, coyotes, reptiles — and many species of birds that are rarely seen in other parts of Oregon.

As I continued to hike the ring, I came to the north side of the formation and started to look for a trail leading to the top of the rock wall. Four or five other hikers ambled along the trails below; while Fort Rock is in the middle of nowhere, it is hardly a secret.

After reaching the top of the wall on the north end, the shortest part of the wall, I hiked back down then back up toward the west side of the ring. A crack in the rock offered a view of the vast sagebrush land to the north, stretching toward the Newberry National Volcanic Monument.

Above that crack I pulled myself up onto a rock terrace and walked toward the south end of the east rim. For such a rocky formation, several flat trails cut along the cliff. I imagined that was where some Native Americans made their home on the island.

I continued up more of the natural terraces until I could go no higher. The sprawling view of the High Desert stretched for what seemed like forever.

It was the pinnacle of a Fort Rock hike that provided a fascinating mix of rock scrambling, geology and human history in the middle of the desolate, yet beautiful, Oregon outback.

New, improved hiker-biker camp coming to Wallowa Lake

By GEORGE PLAVERN
East Oregonian

Cycle Oregon has awarded a \$10,000 grant to build a new and improved hiker-biker camp at Wallowa Lake State Park.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department will match the grant up to another \$10,000, in hopes the camp will draw more visitors and less traffic congestion to Wallowa Lake.

“We’d really like to encourage people to consider different ways of visiting Eastern Oregon,” said Chris Havel, spokesman for Oregon State Parks.

The current camp for people who hike or ride their bicycle into the park is located along the main camp entrance. The new camp will be built in a more secluded spot at the park’s former amphitheater, and include eight camping sites, lockers, tables and charging stations.

Over the years, Havel said the park has invested in camping upgrades for yurts, cabins and RV sites, but not for hikers and bikers. Wallowa Lake was one of the first state parks to introduce camping for visitors in 1951, along with Silver Falls.

Between 2009 and 2014, visits to Wallowa Lake State Park increased by 10 percent, from 348,000 to 381,000. However, just a tiny fraction of those — between 50 and 60 — are hiker-biker campers, Havel said. The goal is to boost that figure to 200-400 after the next two years.

Havel also said the park is interested in encouraging less polluting and congestive forms of transportation.

“We’re just sort of looking ahead,” he said. “I don’t think Oregon is going to fall out of love with the northeast (part of the state) anytime soon.”

Park Manager Nancy McLeod said the grant is a generous gift from Cycle Oregon.

“They’ve always supported the region, but this goes beyond goodwill,” McLeod said. “They’re investing in the community, and we’re grateful for it.”

Work on the new camp should start this spring and be ready in time for the 2017 season.



Wallowa Lake State Park was one of the first state parks to introduce camping for visitors in 1951.



A new hiker-biker camp is paid in part by a \$10,000 matching grant from the Cycle Oregon Fund.

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
New snow: Trace
Base depth: Unrecorded
Conditions/events: The last night ski of the year is 5-9 p.m. Saturday

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
New snow: 2”
Base depth: 67”
Conditions/events: EO Backcountry Festival Saturday, music 3-6 p.m. from Wasteland Kings.

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
New snow: None
Base depth: 72”
Conditions/events: Machine groomed runs, heavy powder off-piste. Spring conditions.

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 26”
Conditions: Sunny, spring skiing

Mt. Hood Meadows
Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: 0”
Base depth: 100”
Conditions: Soft and slushy on the groom. Off the groom there’s softening hardpack, and moguls.

Timberline Lodge
Timberline Lodge, Ore.
New snow: 0”
Base depth: 114”
Conditions: Clear skies, sunshine plentiful. Good spring skiing

SKI AREA

Friday: 5 pm to 9 pm
Saturday: 9 am to 9 pm
Sunday: 9 am to 4 pm
All Holidays: 9 am to 4 pm

Night skiing starts January 1st and is Friday 5 pm - 9 pm & Saturday 5 pm - 9 pm