

# Oregon mountaintop lookout is a journey back in time

By ZACH URNESS

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ATOP HAGER MOUNTAIN, Ore. — There is something about splitting wood on the top of a mountain during winter and carrying the logs into a lookout cabin for the evening's fire that feels perfectly removed from the modern era.

No electricity, running water or flushing toilet are here. No cell phone service or Internet connection or passable road can be found.

There is only a glowing sunset across a horizon dotted with the Cascade Range volcanoes to the west and the sweep of high desert to the east, viewed from a 14-by-14-foot glass house where I'm sipping tea and preparing a dinner of pesto, pasta and chicken.

For the past three years, I've been on a quest to spend a night at each of Oregon's mountaintop lookouts, and this night it's Hager Mountain Lookout.

One of four lookouts open for rental during winter, Hager Mountain is remote, difficult to reach and a journey back in time.

For water, you melt snow. For warmth, you make a fire. For epic views, just look up from your bed.

In late February, I headed southeast to this little-known mountain on the edge of Oregon's desert, near the unincorporated town of Silver Lake and northeast of Klamath Falls.

The trip is not easy. You must climb 4 miles and 2,200 feet — while carrying a pack with all your food and gear — to the top of the 7,188-foot mountain.

Yet the challenge is part of the appeal.

"It was a hard haul up the trail, but the boys endured it with positive attitudes," wrote Phil Avery and Dan Frye, a pair of fathers who stayed at the lookout with their 8- and 10-year-old sons in February and wrote down their experiences in a journal at the cabin.

"We made snow forts and sledged down the ranger road while at the lookout. Overall, it was a great father and son bonding experience. I hope we have more weekends like this that the boys will cherish and pass to their kids."

## PLANNING, JOURNEY, CLIMB

The biggest hurdle to spending a night at Hager Mountain Lookout isn't actu-

ally the steep climb — but rather just reserving a night.

Despite its remote location, the lookout is popular, and getting a night requires logging onto Recreation.gov six months in advance to claim the dates you want.

I reserved a night in late February and hit the road early, beginning a drive that takes about four and a half hours.

The drive takes you over Santiam Pass, through Central Oregon and southeast of La Pine on what's known as the "Oregon Outback Scenic Byway."

The byway showcases a sagebrush landscape home to ancient volcanoes, alkaline lakes and rocks inscribed with petroglyphs from Native Americans thousands of years old.

In Silver Lake, I turned south and headed into Fremont-Winema National Forest.

From the road, Hager Mountain is impossible to miss. A silicic lava dome that rises high above everything else in sight — it looks similar to Black Butte near Sisters — Hager Mountain was formed some 5.9 million years ago from basalt lava flows.

I parked at Hager Mountain Trailhead and stepped into the cool, sunny morning. There wasn't much snow at the trailhead (about 5,100 feet), so I strapped my snowshoes onto a pack filled with water, food and extra clothing and began the climb.

The first part features old-growth ponderosa pine forest. These bright-orange trees, cracked with black veins, are a sure way of knowing you're on the east side of the Cascades.

The first view of the lookout came after a mile, and it was a bit disheartening. It was way off in the distance, at a summit that seemed far away.

After about 1.5 miles, I reached deep snow and put on my snowshoes. From here, blue diamonds marked the route through the forest.

In the final 2 miles, the route broke out of the forest into open, grassy plains around the mountain's summit.

Views to the west took in numerous Cascade Range peaks. Mount McLoughlin, Bailey, Thielsen, Crater Lake, Diamond Peak and the Three Sisters were all visible at different points.

The final push is the most



This Feb. 26 photo shows Hager Mountain Lookout at sunset in south-central Oregon near Silver Lake. Spending the night here requires making reservations well in advance and snowshoeing up a steep mountain to 7,166 feet.



This Feb. 26 photo shows Hager Mountain Lookout during daytime in south-central Oregon near Silver Lake.

difficult, straight up the mountain in places and along steep ridgelines at other moments.

Finally, as my legs began contemplating rebellion, I reached Hager Mountain Lookout, stepped inside and flopped on the bed.

## NIGHT IN THE SKY

My favorite part of staying at a mountaintop lookout is the small chores.

That might sound odd, but there's a simple pleasure in splitting wood, washing dishes and melting snow for water while a panoramic view spreads out below your feet.

I would have loved to work a season at a lookout, and doing the chores gives you the illusion of making that dream come true, if only

for a moment.

The lookout, which is staffed during the summer by the Forest Service, is well-stocked. There are three bunks, a stove, fireplace, propane-power lights and a random assortment of foods. There was a refrigerator as well, but it didn't appear to be working.

The most striking thing about the view from Hager Mountain Lookout is the contrast between Cascadian and high desert geography.

A forest of green trees rolls eastward from the Cascades before stopping dead at the beginning of the high desert, where a rolling brown landscape of buttes, mesas and canyons extends to the horizon.

The evening sunset was

## If you go:

**What:** A rentable mountaintop lookout in south-central Oregon's Fremont-Winema National Forest near the town of Silver Lake

**How to do it:** Visit [Reservations.Gov](http://Reservations.Gov) and type in "Hager Mountain Lookout."

**What to bring:** Water, food, flashlight, extra clothes, snowshoes or skis

**Hike in:** 4 miles one-way or 8 miles round-trip

**Climb:** 2,200 feet

**Difficulty:** Strenuous

**Remember:** Pack out all your garbage

**Driving:** About four and a half hours from Salem. From the town of Silver Lake, head south on East Bay Road south, which becomes Forest Service Road 28, for 9 miles. Parking lot and trailhead is on the left.

**Cabin coordinates:** 43.02333, -121.04389

beautiful — bright yellows, pinks and finally red lighting up the stringy clouds on the western horizon.

After the sunset, there's not much to do except read and enjoy the rich canopy of stars overhead, including the streak of the Milky Way.

After stargazing, I spent some time reading notes left by past visitors.

It gives you a sense of the people who've come before, the kindred spirits who seek out remote cabins on mountaintops.

The people before me were a group of four with pretty interesting nicknames — Mama Buttons, A-Rod, Big-E and Dillweed. A-Rod was just about to have his first child.

Their favorite activity

was sledding down the steep mountainsides and hurting themselves.

"Sledding optimal — but ramp at road base gave the ribs a rough time," they wrote.

Some entries spoke of the weather.

"Endured three straight days of wind warnings! Great times!" wrote S & M.

The magic of being disconnected from the modern world works differently for each person who visits Hager Mountain Lookout.

For some, it's a way to disconnect from the modern world.

For others, it's a way to connect with their children and inspire the next generation of outdoors lovers.



Rick Hargrave with his niece, Kinley, catch rainbow trout at Pine Hollow Reservoir, south of The Dalles.

## Free family fishing events scheduled in northeast Oregon

East Oregonian

The Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife plans to hold 36 free family fishing events across the state later this year, including five in northeast Oregon.

Shahab Farzanegan, ODFW angler education coordinator, said the goal is for families to discover the fun and enjoyment of fishing. Events are held in lakes and ponds where the departments stocks fish in advance, and loaner gear is provided for beginners.

"Our goal is to make it as easy as possible for a family to experience a successful fishing trip," Farzanegan said. "We hope everyone has a good time at the event and discovers that fishing is an activity they can enjoy for a lifetime."

Events for northeast Oregon include:

- April 2, Hermiston, McNary Channel Ponds, 10 a.m. to noon

- May 14, Hermiston, McNary Channel Ponds, 10 a.m. to noon

- June 4, Heppner, Cutsforth Pond, 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

- June 4, Ukiah, Twin Pond, 7 a.m. to noon

- July 9, Pendleton, Jubilee Lake, 9 a.m. to noon

Kids under 11 can fish for free, while those ages 12-17 and adults will need to buy an Oregon fishing license. A youth fishing license is \$10, and \$33 for adults. Licenses can be purchased at any ODFW field office or retail outlet, or online at [www.dfw.state.or.us](http://www.dfw.state.or.us).

Licenses will not be sold at any of the events.

## Wyden, Blumenauer sponsor outdoor recreation bill

Concept forged by 'Seven Wonders' tour

By GEORGE PLAVERN  
East Oregonian

Oregon's "Seven Wonders" span the entire state and encompass a variety of unique perspectives, from the sandy coast to the rugged Willowa Mountains.

Last summer, Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Earl Blumenauer made a point to visit each place to learn what challenges people face in enjoying the outdoors, and how Congress can help. The result is a bill introduced on Thursday that aims to improve access and opportunities for recreation.

Wyden and Blumenauer, both Democrats, are sponsoring the Recreation Not Red-Tape Act, which proposes a number of measures including simplifying permits for outdoor guides, requiring agencies to promote recreation and provide free recreation passes for low-income students and their families.

"Oregonians love the outdoors — it's who we are; it's in our DNA," said Blumenauer, the representative from Portland, in a statement. "Unfortunately, they're not always easily accessible. Our legislation changes that, removing burdensome barriers and helping support recreation programs so that people in

Oregon and across America can more easily get out to enjoy the great outdoors."

In addition, Wyden and Blumenauer say the bill will bolster the economies of rural America that depend on outdoor sports for tourism dollars. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that visits to national parks, forests, wilderness areas, wildlife refuges and national heritage support more than 6 million jobs every year.

Hunting and fishing are especially important to communities in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon. The Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife reports hunters and anglers spent \$2.5 billion statewide in 2008, including the cost of stopping for food, gas and gear.

More than 50 outdoor industry groups have thrown their support behind the bill. If passed, the legislation would make all federal park passes and permits available to buy online, or bundled with state park passes. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management would also be required to adopt consistent rules for permitting outfitters and guides, with standard forms and deadlines.

The bill also encourages more families to get outdoors by providing free "America the Beautiful" passes to low-income students, and prompts the military to adopt outdoor recreation as part of its Transition Assistance Program, providing tools and training

"Oregonians love the outdoors. It's who we are."

— Earl Blumenauer,  
U.S. Representative,  
D-Ore.

to service members heading back to civilian life.

All land management agencies would be required to work together on creative ways to expand their recreation programs, and launch new volunteer opportunities to keep up on land management. Agencies would select up to 15 "priority landscapes" for trail maintenance and improved access, and recruit volunteers to help with the work.

Results of these programs would be tracked by the agencies in reports that monitor the number and types of jobs tied to outdoor recreation.

Wyden said the bill's policies would cut through bureaucratic red tape and clear the way for more park visitors — thereby creating jobs and spurring economic development.

"The (bill) puts to work the creative ideas I heard from Oregonians about how to streamline the process when it comes to opening up access to our great outdoor places," Wyden said.

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## SKI REPORT

**Spout Springs**

Tollgate, Ore.

CLOSED

**Anthony Lakes**

North Powder, Ore.

New snow: 18" since Sunday

Base: 85"

Conditions: Powder fields, sunshine, light breeze.

**Ski Bluewood**

Dayton, Wash.

New snow: 20" since Sunday

Base depth: 79"

Conditions: Soft snow, terrain parks open on weekend

**Ski Fergi**

Joseph, Ore.

Weekend open/closed status unknown as of press time

**Mt. Hood Meadows**

Government Camp, Ore.

New snow: 24" since Sunday

Base depth: 129"

Conditions: Refrozen granular on the groom.

Off the groom is skier tracked snow down low, with some untracked snow at higher elevations. Last weekend ski of season.

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 1<sup>st</sup> and is Friday 5 pm - 9 pm & Saturday 5 pm - 9 pm