



THE REGION'S HUB FOR OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Each week in this section, you will find the area's most complete guide of what's open and closed; outdoor activities and events; top picks of places to explore; conditions of hiking and biking trails, fishing holes, water flows, camping spots, parks and more — as well as features from outdoor writers and field experts.

High Desert delight



Mark Morical/Bulletin photo

The Opal Canyon Trail cuts along the Crook River Gorge.

Otter Bench Trailhead offers hikers breathtaking desert scenery along the Crooked River Gorge

BY MARK MORICAL
The Bulletin

CROOKED RIVER RANCH — Birds of prey flew in circles far below as I walked along the edge of Central Oregon's mini Grand Canyon.

At the bottom of the sheer cliff walls, hundreds of feet down, the Crooked River flowed serenely.

The Central Oregon High Desert offers some memorable locales to hike during springtime, and the Crooked River Gorge is certainly one of them.

Located just a few miles west of the Crooked River Ranch Golf Course, the Otter Bench Trailhead gives hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians access to about 8 miles of trail that highlight the 300-foot-deep, 4-mile-long gorge.

The trails, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, include newer sections and some reconstructed paths that anglers have hiked for decades to travel down the canyon walls and reach the river below. The area is best visited in the spring before daytime temperatures become uncomfortably hot in the summer and the trails become dusty.

I arrived at the trailhead Tuesday morning after about an hour's drive from Bend. The crisp, cold morning would soon give way to desert heat.

I started the hike on the 1.7-mile Otter Bench Trail, which climbed gradually along the hillside. After rambling through rolling terrain of juniper trees and sagebrush, I eventually came to a cliffside, where surging river rapids flowed far below the towering, rugged canyon.

It seemed impossible to make my way down to the river, but the switch-backing Pink Trail, three-quarters of a mile long, makes the journey manageable for able-bodied hikers who don't mind precipitous, rocky terrain.

When I finally made it down to the water, I soaked in the solitude and stark beauty of the canyon.

See **Otter Bench** / B10



CENTRAL OREGON TRAIL ALLIANCE

What does a volunteer trail work event look like?

BY EMMY ANDREWS
For The Bulletin

I'm riding my bike on a local trail, and I pass a guy in a hard hat digging away, surrounded by a cloud of dust. What is this guy doing? Looks cool! Where do I sign up?

I joined Central Oregon Trail Alliance's meet-up group online. The alliance is the local nonprofit that builds and maintains many of Cen-



tral Oregon's mountain biking trails. There I see multiple trail work events posted, and they say "no experience required," so I click "Attend Event," and I am in!

The meet-up event directs me to meet at a local trailhead and bring my bike. It also tells me to bring certain safety gear: long pants, closed toed shoes, eye wear and

gloves. When I pull up, our crew leader, Tom, has already set tools out next to his truck.

Our crew leader's commitment to safety is apparent. Although each person should assess their own comfort level with attending this or any event, to me, the event feels low risk from a COVID-19 standpoint. The work is outside, the group is small and we wear masks and stay 6 feet or more apart throughout.

To comply with U.S. Forest Service safety requirements, we wear hard hats, as well as the other safety gear we brought. We sign a waiver, and Tom gives our crew a safety briefing describing the COVID-19 protocols we are following, how to work safely with tools and other safety tips.

Tom explains the work we are going to do. He has already placed flags beside the trail at locations

where drainage could be improved. We are going to build drains at these locations. The drains will be channels that branch off the trail that will intercept water and snow melt running down the trail and divert it off the trail. The drains will help the trail shed water faster and better, protecting the trail tread and minimizing mud and erosion.

See **Volunteer** / B10