

Take the road less traveled to the Ochocos

Story and photos by **MAKENZIE WHITTLE** • The Bulletin

While the roads through the Cascades fill up for the summer, with tourists and locals alike enjoying some of the splendid beauty of Central Oregon, take the mountain road a little less traveled through the Ochoco National Forest and enjoy verdant woodlands, breathtaking prairies, cool lakes and crystal streams and a bit of rustic history along the way.

Driving east from Prineville along U.S. Highway 26 yields the typical High Desert topography you see to the north and east of Bend. But drive a little further and soon the sagebrush terrain, dotted with farmland, changes to ponderosa pine forest.

The highway continues up through the mountains and onto Mitchell, but if you turn right on to Ochoco Creek Road where the sign points toward Walton Lake and Big Summit Prairie, the windy road takes you on a tour of some of the more interesting places in the forest.

Ochoco Creek meanders through meadows and farmland along the roadway until the Ochoco Ranger House.

Typically available to rent year-round for overnight stays, at the time of writing, the 1940 building was still closed as part of the COVID-19 closures from 2020 and according to recreation.gov reservations become available again in August.

Mercury in them hills

The rental cabin is in the same location as the original ranger station that operated here from 1911 until 2001 when it was moved to Prineville. The station is long gone, but the house and the old Ochoco Highway remain.

The highway, now Forest Road 22, was built in 1933 and was the main route that moved lumber, food and supplies between the railroad and the eastern gold and mercury mines in the mountains.

Gold was discovered here in the 1870s and prospectors quickly struck their claims and established the town of Scissorville. Driving along the road a sign is all that marks where the old town and the Mayflower mine were located along Ochoco Creek.

By the 1930s cinnabar, the ore used to make mercury, was the hot ticket item and mines were built to harvest the mineral from the mountains.

Today you can visit three of these now-abandoned sites, Motherlode, Independent and Blue Ridge mines, all accesses along Canyon Creek Road/Forest Road 42. If you do venture to the mines, don't go inside them as they are derelict and potentially hazardous and remember to take only pictures.

Lakes, rivers and prairies

Up the road from the ranger house along Forest Road 22, 7 miles is one of the most



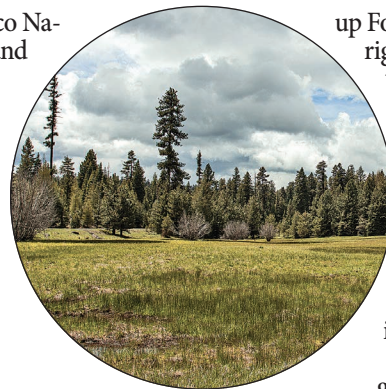
A storm brews over Big Summit Prairie in May.

popular sites in the Ochoco National Forest is the small and relatively shallow Walton Lake. Recently stocked with rainbow trout, on a recent visit to the lake, in the span it took this reporter to eat her picnic lunch by the water, a group of three fishermen hooked about six fish, though not all were keepers.

The lake has nicely laid out, non-electric campsites on either side of the 18-acre lake with the north side more suitable for tents. Sites are both reservable and available on a first-come, first-served basis. Visit recreation.gov for more information.

The lake's shoreline is also home to a short, barrier-free trail to allow for easy bank fishing with a small portion of it paved for accessibility. There is a \$5 day-use fee at the site and Northwest Forest Passes are not accepted.

If you decide to skip the lake and all that's



A forest meadow along Forest Road 22 in the Ochoco National Forest under a stormy sky in May.

up Forest Road 22 and take the right fork at the ranger house, you'll be taken up the winding Canyon Creek Road/Forest Road 42 towards the mines and the Lookout and Round Mountain hiking trails which offer stunning views from their summits as well as wildflowers in the early summer.

As the scenic road begins to descend back down from its summit, it eventually makes its way to the very edge of the Big Summit Prairie.

Stretching for thousands of acres, the prairie is mostly private land but there are some public access points along the edges for exploring (grab a map from the Prineville Ranger Station if you're unfamiliar with the area). Even by just staying in the car the drive is still worth it, so enjoy the view.

Drive straight about 3.5 miles and veer left to stay on Forest Road 42/Arvid Nelson Road for about 6.5 more miles and cross the

North Fork Crooked River for the second time, then turn right to follow the river.

The road and the river deliver quiet scenery to take in with stunning rock formations and the crystal clear waters themselves.

This section of the river is a recreational segment of the federally recognized National Wild & Scenic River and it's easy to see why it bears that distinction. The river babbles along the basalt rocks as it gently makes its way to meet the Crooked River to the south and offers the quiet tranquility that mountain streams often do.

The road eventually leads to Deep Creek Campground that sits nestled among the pine and larch trees by the river. It's first come, first serve that can fill up on holidays and during hunting season so plan accordingly.

From here, it's best to turn back the way you came and return to Prineville or you can extend your trip by turning right just after the river crossing you came from on Peterson Creek Road and follow the signs for an unpaved hour-long adventure to Mitchell.

Whichever way you go, the detour through the Ochoco Mountains is worth every winding mile.

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