

It takes a little more time and energy, but Slide Lake is worth the hike

'The other Strawberry hike'

By Tim Trainor
For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Most people who visit the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness bee-line straight to Strawberry Lake.

It's easy to see why: a relatively relaxing walk to a lake with good camping and fishing, some great

waterfalls along the way, and one of the straightest routes to the peak of Strawberry Mountain itself.

But because the Strawberry Lake trail has all that, it sucks a lot of traffic from nearby hikes that have a lot going for them, too.

One such hike is the four mile jaunt to Slide Lake.

A great way to get to Slide is to head to the busy Strawberry Lake trailhead. The two routes share a trail

for about a mile, before the Slide Lake trek shoots off by itself at a well-marked spur. Once you take the trail less traveled, traffic decreases greatly and the well-worn path becomes suddenly less so. After the fork, there is a good chance you won't see another person, while you most likely won't have Strawberry Lake to yourself all summer long.

The climb continues, snaking always upwards under shady pine forest and open meadows still peppered with wildflowers like balsamroot and paintbrush into July. An open rock outcropping more closely resembles the Serengeti than Eastern Oregon, with gnarled and wind-lashed trees rooted to the rocks. It's also the first open view back down the valley toward Prairie City.

Just after the open outcrop, the route splits. A higher, more exposed route called the Skyline Trail is only for foot traffic. Those on horseback have their own trail that runs lower, wider and more protected.



Staff photo

A strenuous four-mile hike from Strawberry Lake Campground drops hikers at Slide Lake, which receives far fewer visitors than nearby Strawberry Lake.



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

Brook trout are easy catching in Slide Lake.

While cowpokes may be tempted to stay high and enjoy the better views, that could be a fatal mistake. Skyline is very thin in spots, not much wider than a hiking boot, and those with a fear of heights may even have a few scary

steps just walking the ridge.

So don't look down. Look up and out. Intriguing rock cliffs line the trail, and an open Slide Creek Valley stretches before you. Two small, far-off waterfalls can be heard long before



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

A creek runs from Slide Lake and cascades in waterfalls down toward the John Day Valley.

they can be seen. The cow pastures near Prairie City gleam gold in the distance. Chipmunks seem to operate a relay in front of you, sprinting down the trail and leading hikers along.

Eventually, you near the waterfalls that emanate from the creek flowing from Slide Lake. There were two small but beautiful falls during my trip, but that can vary on the season and the year. An excellent though dry camp site sits just 100 yards off the trails — Skyline and Slide Lake — that merge again at this point. What it lacks in nearby water, it makes up for in spectacular views back down the John Day Basin.

Still, it's now just a few more uphill turns to Slide Lake itself and most campers will decide to stay there.

The lake is a beauty. One side is densely forested, but the far side is ringed by cliffs that look to be straight out of a geology textbook. Though the banks are muddy and don't make for good swimming and wading, it makes for ideal fishing.

Summer 2015 offered some thick and toothy brook trout, four or five of which would easily feed a family. The catching was easy on a fly rod rigged with terrestrial patterns or stimulizers. The clear, calm water made for fun sight-casting to cruising fish and there was also the excellent opportunity to work fallen trees just off the bank, where good-sized trout were in easy reach. A roughly mile walk around the lake yielded plenty of angling action, but also a few stands of stinging nettles, so explorers beware.

There are a few nice campsites at Slide Lake but also opportunities for further exploration. Trails head off to nearby Upper Slide Lake, not much more than a pool-sized puddle at the bottom of a talus slope, as well as stunning High Lake. An 8.5-mile lollypop loop route can take you back down through Strawberry Lake and the busy campground where you left your car.

While most of the hikers will be chatting about their visit to Strawberry Lake, you can be quietly content in the knowledge that you hiked farther and saw more.

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