

Black Butte Provides Great Views of Central Oregon

by Scott_Staats

After rounding the final bend of the trail near the summit, I find myself in the midst of the skeletal remains of charred trees, remnants of a 200-acre forest fire sparked by lightning in September of 1981. In the distance, Mount Jefferson stands like a beacon, overlooking the surrounding wilderness. Farther to the north, Mount Hood, Oregon's highest peak, reaches into the clear mountain air.

The lookout tower comes into view and a few minutes later I find myself staring in awe at the scene before me. Black Butte may well be the best perch that offers a bird's eye view of the state's five highest peaks as well as Oregon's high desert.

Black Butte provides great views of Central Oregon. Anyone living in or visiting Central Oregon can easily recognize the dark, symmetrical outline of Black Butte looming west of Redmond and just north of Sisters. The volcanic peak rises 3,200 vertical feet from the surrounding ponderosa pine forest.

Although the 6,436-foot high butte has been an important fire lookout for the last 90 years, those in the tower aren't the only ones who can experience the spectacular 360-degree views from the summit.

A two-mile trail leads to the top of the mountain, giving visitors the opportunity to not only view the Oregon Cascades up close and personal, but also see firsthand some of Black Butte's fire lookout history.

The trailhead begins about halfway up the butte. Although it's only two miles one way, the steady ascent may not be a hike for younger kids.

The first mile of trail starts out on the western flank of Black Butte and climbs steadily uphill through large ponderosa pine. Along the way, hikers will encounter manzanita, snowbrush, grand fir, whitebark pine, aspen and bitter cherry. Interpretive posts name the various trees and shrubs.

The second mile of trail has more subalpine vegetation and openings that provide excellent views to the west. As the trail traverses the southern side of the mountain, a glance to the summit reveals the fire lookout (the old fire tower collapsed a few winters ago). Below lays Black Butte Ranch and its golf courses.

The view from the summit is nothing short of outstanding. The Cascades from Mount Adams in Washington to the Three Sisters all line up from north to south. Below to the northeast stretches Green Ridge. Far to the south, the massive Newberry volcano dominates the horizon. Suttle Lake can be seen as a long, narrow strip of green giving an optical illusion of running uphill. To the south, Highway 20 stretches in a long straight line to the town of Sisters.

Black Butte, cabin, and Three Fingered Jack. Photos by Scott Staats. There's a great lunch spot near the old cupola (one of the original fire lookouts) to sit and take in the view. The cabin, a short distance to the west, is for the fire lookouts and hikers are asked to respect their privacy and not walk past the cupola. Golden-mantled ground squirrels look for handouts and any dropped crumbs. No matter how cute they look and how tempting it is, do not feed them. They can survive on their own and our food can actually hurt them. Most of the food we eat isn't even good for us! Plus we can even get diseases from them.

On the descent, I look down on a turkey vulture as it flies by, the wind ruffling its dark feathers. I look to the west at all the square-looking clearcuts and try to imagine what the surrounding forests looked like 150 to 200 years ago before they experienced the first saw.

According to the Forest Service, about 7,000 people a year hike the popular trail. If your goal is to have quiet and solitude, avoid busy weekends.

Late summer days can be very hot even at the summit, so be sure to carry plenty of water, along with a lunch. There is no water available at the summit and the only restroom is at the trailhead. The trail is for hiking only; there are no mountain bikes or motorized vehicles allowed. No smoking is allowed on the trail. Hikers are required to stay on the trail on the way up and at the summit. A Northwest Forest Pass is also required. Rules, rules, rules!

GEOLOGY

Although Black Butte appears geologically young with its smooth sides, the stratovolcano is about four to five times older than the rest of the Oregon Cascades.

Black Butte formed about 1.4 million years ago from hundreds of eruptions of lava flows, cinders, and ash. A few hundred years were probably required to bring the volcano to its present height.

Because of its location east of the Cascades, Black Butte managed to escape the action of glaciers and retained its symmetrical shape. It also escaped being cut in half by the Green Ridge fault since it erupted just after the fault block dropped downward.

“One of my first days atop Black Butte as a fire lookout was extraordinary,” said Glen Corbett, who works for the Sisters Ranger District on the Deschutes National Forest. “I opened the shutters of the cupola and saw a bald eagle hanging in the wind.”

Corbett recalled living on Black Butte. “The cozy little cabin has views out the south window at the Three Sisters, the west window at Three Fingerted Jack, and the north window at Jefferson and Hood.”

On clear nights she would sometimes sleep out on the deck of the new tower and watch all the stars and meteor showers. She recalls many spectacular sunsets and sunrises.

“Black Butte is so unique due to its high, centralized location and you can see so much from it,” Corbett said. “It was a sacred place to Native Americans and is a special place for all of us.” Corbett and her husband Kirk Metzger were married at the summit of Black Butte.

Whether providing fire protection for the area, or a scenic destination for hikers, Black Butte will continue serving the area for many years to come.

GETTING THERE:

Proceed west from Sisters on Highway 20 for 6 miles. Turn right onto Forest Road 11 (the Green Ridge Road) at Indian Ford Campground. Follow Road 11 for 4 miles then turn left onto FS Road 1110 at the Black Butte Trailhead sign. Take this road 4 miles to the trailhead.