

Whychus Creek Offers Great Wilderness Experience

by Scott_Staats

If you love waterfalls and wilderness, then a great fall hiking destination should be Whychus Creek (pronounced "Why-choose") in the Three Sisters Wilderness Area.

From Sisters, turn south on Elm Street (which becomes Forest Road 16) and head toward Three Creek Lake. At 7.2 miles, turn right onto Forest Road 1514, where you'll see a sign for Whychus Creek. After five miles, turn left on Forest Road 600. This is a rough road with sharp rocks. After two miles, you'll reach a "T" where you take a left on Forest Road 680 for 0.4 miles to the trailhead.

Just past the kiosk, the trail enters the wilderness area. Shortly into the hike, the trail crosses a small side stream over a log footbridge. After all the hot weather this summer, it was nice to finally have some cooler hiking conditions.

From several sections of the trail were glimpses of fresh snow covering the high peaks. About halfway into the hike, a Cooper's hawk flew from a large ponderosa pine and glided through the forest. Most of the trail is level and easy hiking. Just before the falls, the trail takes a switchback and climbs a short distance higher.

The only other hikers on the trail that day were Les and Lori Cooper of Black Butte Ranch. "This was our first time to the falls and we thought they were very pretty," said Lori. "It's an easy hike in a relatively isolated area," Les added.

Chush Falls, all photos by Scott Staats The first falls, recently named Chush Falls, is about a mile into the hike and resembles a wide fan-shaped horsetail about 60 feet high. Large logs piled up at the bottom of the falls provided a telltale sign of the streams power at high flow. "Chush" is a Native American word meaning "water" and "Whychus" means "The place we cross the water." The Warm Springs Indian Reservation provided a list of suggested names for the stream and its waterfalls.

Born from glaciers and snowfields on Broken Top and the Three Sisters, Whychus Creek flows clear and cold. It is only one of four glacial fed perennial streams in the Deschutes Basin. From a great overlook above the falls, I sat staring at the roaring cascade as if in a hypnotic trance. The rush of the stream and the rumbling of the falls drowned out any nearby birdsong.

North Sister The high peaks of North Sister and South Sister can be seen over the ridge to the west. For the more adventurous, a rough, steep trail leads down to the right of the overlook to the stream and the falls. Mist rises from the base of the falls and covers everything nearby with water droplets.

Several different species of trees can be found in this section of the Three Sisters Wilderness Area including spruce, fir, lodgepole and ponderosa pine. Stick your nose in the bark of the ponderosa and try to determine if the scent resembles butterscotch or vanilla. Look around first, however, for other hikers. You don't want to be caught with your arms around a tree and your nose stuck in its bark!

The trail becomes less maintained but continues on another quarter of a mile to a second set of falls. In another quarter mile or so is 120-foot high Upper Chush Falls.

Lori and Les Cooper of Black Butte were the only other hikers in the Whychus Creek area. "Whychus Creek is a Wild and Scenic River," said Maret Pajutee, a Deschutes National Forest ecologist on the Sisters Ranger District. Of the 15.4 miles of the creek that was designated by Congress in 1992, the 6.6 miles from the headwaters to the wilderness boundary is considered "Wild" and the 8.8 miles from the wilderness boundary to the gaging station is designated as "Scenic."

"One of the truly remarkable features is the number of waterfalls on the stream," said Pajutee. She noted that there are many more than the three main falls along the trail. More are located farther up the drainage or on smaller tributaries.

Whychus Creek has a genetically isolated strand of Redband trout that has been isolated in the stream for the past 100 years due to downstream dams. The creek once supported large runs of steelhead and Chinook salmon that were believed to have reached Chush Falls. The last steelhead seen in the creek was reported in 1967. The Pelton-Round Butte Dam, built in 1963, stopped fish passage to Whychus Creek. Juvenile steelhead will be reintroduced into the system in the next few years.

According to Pajutee, there is a tremendous variation in water flow due to snowmelt in the higher elevations. In some years, Whychus Creek could be flowing very high while others years it can be low. This year's flow is fairly high.

Pajutee is also the team leader on the Whychus Creek Wild and Scenic River Resource Assessment. Anyone who would like to be involved can contact the Upper Deschutes Watershed Council at 382-6103, or Maret Pajutee at 549-7727.

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