Deschutes River Trail Provides Lots of Recreational Opportunities

by Scott_Staats

The molten, steaming lava flowed from the cinder cone and headed for the pristine, slow-moving river -- covering, burning, and destroying everything in its path. Finally it reached the river, in places filling its channel and pushing the entire river westward. In other places great lava dams formed across the river, backing up water and creating lakes. Through erosion, these dams eventually breached, leaving behind a series of rapids and falls where the once placid river flowed.

Although these events occurred about 6,200 years ago, the results can still be clearly seen today just south of Bend. An eight and a half-mile long trail now follows the Deschutes River providing a variety of recreational activities.

When French fur traders passed through central Oregon in the early 1800's, they named one of the rivers the â€œRiviere des Chutesâ€• - the â€œriver of falls.â€• Today, the Deschutes River continues to live up to this name, especially the section along the Deschutes River Trail.

The trail parallels the meandering river through lava boulders and ponderosa pines, giving the hiker, mountain biker, runner, or horseback rider close encounters with its calm, quiet waters as well as its wild, raging rapids and falls.

To reach the lower trailhead, travel six miles out of Bend on the Cascades Lakes Highway and take a left just before the Widgi Creek Resort to reach the lower end of the trail at Meadow Picnic Area on FS Road 100. Continue on the highway about a mile past the Widgi Creek Resort and take a left on Route 41. A sign indicates the Deschutes River Recreation Sites. Go to the end of the pavement and follow the signs to Benham Falls, the upper end of the trail.

From Meadow Picnic Area it is one mile to Lava Island Rockshelter, 1.2 miles to Lava Island Falls, 4.5 miles to Dillon Falls and 8.5 miles to Benham Falls. However, there are several access points between the two trailheads to allow for shorter hikes. Parking a vehicle at each end and hiking the entire section would be another option. The trail is on Deschutes National Forest land and a Trailhead Pass is required.

Highlights along this section of river are Lava Island Falls, Big Eddy, Dillon Falls, and Benham Falls, all of which can be easily accessed from spur roads off of Route 41.

Lava Island Falls is a half-mile of Class IV to Class VI rapids. (Class I being easy moving water with few obstacles and small waves and Class VI being on the extremes of navigability). Dillon Falls is rated as a Class VI and has a 15-foot drop. Benham Falls has a series of Class V rapids and Class VI falls. All of these rapids have been run by kayaks or rafts in the past, but some people have lost their lives trying.

Dillon Falls, photos by Scott Staats Just above Dillon Falls, I met John Nelmes II and Skip Hinton, who where riding their mountain bikes on a nice fall day. Both remarked about the great scenery along the trail. â€œEveryone we meet is real friendly and laid back,â€• Hinton said.

The Deschutes River Trail is popular for avid birders. There are various species of finches, warblers, sparrows, wrens, as well as ospreys, kingfishers, dippers, great blue herons, Canada geese, mallards, mergansers, buffleheads, goldeneyes and teals. Keep your eyes open for a fleeting glimpse of beaver, otter, mink, mule deer, elk and bear that frequent the area.

Every section of the Deschutes River Trail is unique and the river changes at each bend. From the trail there are views of the falls and rapids, the calm, slow sections of the river, wetlands and ponds, meadows and hills, and lava cliffs and lava fields. Pumice can be found in several areas. The light and airy volcanic rock actually floats.

From most parts of the trail, the huge lava flow from Lava Butte can be seen on the east side of the river, which is part of Newberry National Volcanic Monument. The lava field covers nine square miles of land to a depth of 30 to 100 feet. A tour guide at the monument once explained that if all this lava was ground down, it could build a road 24 feet wide and six inches deep for 160,000 miles, or six and a half times around the earth.

Aspens near Dillon Falls on the Deschutes River Trail. In places, the trail follows the old railroad grade used by the Shevlin-Hixon Lumber Company (one of the largest lumber companies in the world in the early 1900â€™s) to bring logs to the mills in Bend. The logs were floated down the Deschutes River to a take-out point just above Benham Falls where they were then loaded onto rail cars.

The Deschutes River Trail is one of the best year-round trails in Central Oregon. Itâ€™s a wild, rugged, natural and peaceful place where rock, water, plants and wildlife come together. The trail is different in every season and I'm sure it will be different on my next visit.

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