

Linton Lake And Proxy Falls - Two Short Hikes Provide a Colorful View into the Cascadesâ€™ Geologic P

by Scott_Staats

Linton Lake:

A large earthquake shook the Central Oregon Cascades. Lava began oozing from the base of North Sister and flowed down the drainage of White Branch Creek to the west. The flow continued for about 12 miles, jumping into the next drainage of Linton Creek and creating a dam.

A thousand years later, I stand on the shores of Linton Lake and try to imagine the scene -- the smoky, fiery lava bulldozing its way down the valley until it finally cools to a stop. Today, the lava dam clearly blocks the lake at the lakeâ€™s lower end. With no visible outlet, the water percolates through the lava and emerges farther down the valley.

Glaciers during the last Ice Age about 10,000 years ago carved out the steep U-shaped valley. Across the lake, Linton Falls can be heard tumbling off the high valley wall. Glimpses of its white veil can be seen through the lush forest. Fish jump in the clear, cool water (fishing season on the lake ends October 31) and the fall colors reflect off the surface.

Linton Lake -- all photos by Scott Staats The trail to the lake is just as impressive as the endpoint. From the trailhead on the Old McKenzie Highway, Linton Lake is an easy 1.4-mile stroll through ancient old-growth Douglas fir and western hemlock. Vine maples and alders provide a brilliant contrast of yellow and red to the deep green forest.

The tall straight trees near the trailhead are about three to four feet in diameter. The understory consists of ferns, Oregon grape and rhododendron. Moss-covered rocks line the trail. Red-breasted nuthatches and chestnut-backed chickadees make a light racket in the lower trees. The smell of autumn permeates the air.

After crossing the ancient lava flow, which is now a boulder field, the trail switchbacks down into old growth forest once again. Shortly afterward, the glistening lake comes into view through the towering trees. I stop to examine the rings on one of the fallen logs cut from the trail. The tree is only about three feet in diameter and I count between 200 and 250 rings.

Springs seep out of the steep side hill and trickle down toward the lake. The trail remains above Linton Lake until reaching Obsidian Creek coming in from the east. Large cedar trees appear along the shore. Some hemlocks and firs reach six feet in diameter. After crossing a large fallen log over the creek, I walk down to a sandy beach. A flock of mergansers fly up and head for the opposite side of the lake. A great blue heron takes

to the air like a fully-loaded cargo plane, slowly circling and climbing until it can clear the basin. The prints of fresh deer tracks are outlined in the wet sand.

The maintained trail ends at Obsidian Creek. Depending on the lake level, hikers can walk along the shoreline to where Linton Creek empties into the lake. To avoid the sometimes soggy and slippery bank, continue on a less maintained trail in the forest.

To keep the area beautiful, hikers need to have some better ethics. Some litter could be seen along the way. Remember to bury human waste and toilet paper and carry out your trash. When nature calls, head away from lakes and streams. The entire hike is located within the Three Sisters Wilderness Area in the Willamette National Forest.

Getting there:

From Sisters take Highway 242 (Old McKenzie Highway) west to McKenzie Pass. From the pass, continue west 12 miles to the Linton Lake Trailhead. Proxy Falls Trailhead is 1.5 miles farther down the road. Use caution on the steep, narrow, twisting road. A Forest Pass is required to park.

Proxy Falls:

Lower Proxy Falls Fall is my favorite time of year, but unfortunately it always seems to be the shortest season. And living in the high desert doesn't exactly provide many opportunities to view fall colors "the junipers only turn red and orange when they die. Some of the most spectacular displays of fall color I've found can be seen at Proxy Falls. Hikers are also rewarded with an easy 1.2-mile loop hike to two sets of beautiful waterfalls plunging over 100 feet to the valley floor.

In fall, the vine maples growing in the lava fields turn every shade of yellow, orange and red. Huge Douglas fir trees and snags, black lava and background cliffs add to the diversity and make for great photos. The first section of trail leads across a lava flow then heads under the canopy of an old growth forest, where colorful foliage can still be seen.

Proxy Falls Trail Take a right at the first intersection. This short side trail takes you to Lower Proxy Falls, the tallest and most photogenic of the two. The trail ends in an excellent viewpoint overlooking the falls; the more adventurous can scramble all the way to the base of the falls.

After returning to the loop trail, hike another quarter of a mile to a second junction and turn right to Upper Proxy Falls. Here, visitors get to witness what appears to be a magic trick, or at least a mystery. All the water from the cascading falls empties into a large pool, but there is no outlet. Where does the water go? As with Linton Lake, it simply percolates through the underlying porous volcanic rock and resurfaces farther down the valley.

The trailhead parking can be crowded on weekends. The 1.2-mile loop stays mostly flat at an elevation of 3,200 feet. The short turnoffs to both falls are clearly marked and easy to find. Visitors are encouraged to follow the trail signs, leaving the trailhead on Highway 242 to first visit Lower Proxy, then Upper Proxy Falls. The trail is slightly easier this way.

This one way loop trail, located in the Three Sisters Wilderness Area, travels through open lava fields and dense forest, offering views of two distinctly different waterfalls. Be sure to call the Forest Service later in the season as the McKenzie Pass section of the road closes as the snow piles up.

Visitors need not travel to Iceland to view a landscape formed by fire and ice or to New England to see spectacular displays of fall colors. A trip over McKenzie Pass to Linton Lake and Proxy Falls will not only be a lesson in geology but also a great example of autumn's magnificence.

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