Smith Rock Offers Year Round Hiking

by Scott_Staats

When snow conditions arenâ€™t the best up in the mountains and you still want to get outdoors for some fresh air and exercise, Smith Rock State Park offers year round hiking.

The big bird soared like a hang-glider along the rock face, at times its wings seemed to touch the cliff itself. With a wingspan of up to seven feet across, the golden eagle is one of the largest birds of prey in North America.

Smith Rock Visitors to Smith Rock State Park, just northeast of Redmond, are privileged to view the eagles most times of the year. Golden eagles have nested on the canyon walls of the Crooked River for thousands of years. The resident pair lives in the park year round, nesting from mid-February to mid-June and feeding primarily on jackrabbits, cottontails, marmots and ground squirrels. Nests can be four feet across, up to 12 feet tall and weigh as much as 2,000 pounds. Look on the rock faces at the north end of the park road across the river to see two or three of the nests.

Besides being the most famous climbing destination in Oregon, hiking is also popular. There are about 12 miles of trails in the park designated for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding. It is estimated that an average of 415,000 people visit Smith Rock each year. In the past, about 80 percent of visitors were climbers but today thereâ€™s more of a mixture of climbers and those interested in hiking, picnicking, geology, birding, mountain biking and horseback riding.

The trail descends from the parking lot on the rimrock down into the Crooked River Canyon. Just before descending, there is an overlook with an interpretive sign explaining some of the geology of the park. Rock climbers can be spotted on the other side clinging to the precipitous walls. The river snakes its way through the canyon, carving ever downward and leaving behind its calming sounds.

Smith Rock as seen from Burma Road. All photos by Scott Staats. The footbridge was raised a few years back to protect it against the floodwaters of the Crooked River. Once across the bridge, hikers have three

options. Take a right and hike upriver about a mile to where a large irrigation canal enters a tunnel through a ridge of rock. From here, the Burma Road leads uphill, providing great overall views of the park and heads north toward Gray Butte.

Monkey Face The trail on the west side of the bridge leads straight ahead up and over Misery Ridge and eventually down toward Monkey Face and the Crooked River. A third option after crossing the bridge is to turn left and hike downriver. In a few hundred yards, hikers will discover a huge darkish rock jutting up to the right of the trail. This is an ancient volcanic neck or plug where lava and ash poured from eruptions millions of years ago.

A short distance farther is the most popular section of the park for rock climbing. White chalk and glistening hardware can be seen on the pinkish rock as climbers attempt some of the most challenging routes in the country. One climb is rated as one of the top three most challenging climbs in the world. Techniques developed on the cliffs in the 1980â€™s helped drive the development of sport climbing for the entire country.

As the trail makes a big winding horseshoe back to the north, it leaves behind the climbing walls and meanderers through juniper and ponderosa pine. Rock doves coo from the towering, jagged spires above. Look in the river for geese, ducks and great blue herons.

Volcanic Neck & Crooked River Not long after turning north, the prominent rock formation known as Monkey Face comes into view. The face is looking to the right and oftentimes you can spot climbers in its mouth.

Once at Monkey Face, hikers can retrace their steps or climb up over the ridge and end back at the footbridge. Views from the top are worth the effort but use caution when snow and ice are present. The trail continues a bit farther along the river past Monkey Face to some balancing rocks. Parts of Kevin Costnerâ€™s movie, The Postman, was filmed a short distance downriver from there. Roundtrip back to the parking lot is about four miles.

Permits are $3 per day or $25 for an annual pass. Day passes can be purchased in the park.

Smith Rock Geology

There are three main types of volcanic rock in the park. Ryolite is the hard rock, which can be seen in the large volcanic neck that juts up along the river and is the bulk of the rock in the park.

Next is the tufted ash, which is softer pink rock used by climbers. It came locally from ash blown into the air from volcanic vents then settled back to the ground, leaving a layer a few thousand feet thick. Time and pressure turned the ash to rock.

The third type in the intrusive lava, which is seen as the columnar basalt rimming the river canyon. This lava flowed overland from the Horse Ridge area east of Bend about a million years ago.