

Metolius River: Great Hiking And Fishing

by Scott_Staats

Here's the dilemma: you want to hike and you want to fish, but many of the area's rivers are flowing high and many of the trails in the high country are still muddy or under snow. What do you do?

The answer is the Metolius River.

The natural beauty and the geologic history keep drawing me back to the Metolius. My favorite hike is from Wizard Falls Fish Hatchery up to Canyon Creek, a five-mile roundtrip. Before starting the hike, be sure to stop in at the Head of the Metolius to view the birth of this river. Most rivers usually have their beginnings from small springs that turn into small streams that turn into larger streams and finally form a river, but the Metolius skips that process and boils out of the ground into a full blown river.

The entire Metolius River basin was formed from past earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and glaciation. About 5 million years ago, the basin didn't exist; the land was at the same elevation as the top of Green ridge, which now rises abruptly nearly 2,000 feet above the valley floor.

Then about one and a half million years ago, Black Butte erupted and backed up water from old stream channels it now sits atop, creating the swampy area south of Black Butte. The water seeps through the porous rock under the butte and emerges again at Metolius Springs. The Metolius River is considered one of the nation's largest spring-fed rivers.

Metolius River at the Hatchery. Photo by Scott Staats After visiting the springs, drive seven miles down the road to Wizard Falls Fish Hatchery. Bring a pocket full of quarters for the fish food and watch the trout feed like a bunch of voracious piranhas. Built in 1947, the hatchery raises six species of fish and hatches up to 5 million eggs each year.

The Atlantic salmon raised on site are direct descendents of the nation's first successful hatchery rearing of this species. The original eggs came from Quebec in 1950. These landlocked salmon are stocked mid-summer into Hosmer and East lakes.

For those interested in a hike, the trail begins at the hatchery parking lot and heads upriver, passing through old growth Douglas fir, ponderosa pine and cedar. Osprey nests can be seen in the tops of snags along the river. Canada geese and dippers are the most common sight on rocks and islands. Bald eagles and a variety of

songbirds can also be seen darting in and out of the riverside vegetation.

About a quarter mile before reaching Lower Canyon Creek Campground, a series of large springs flow into the river from the opposite bank. These springs drain the western slopes of Green Ridge. It's easy to see why parts of the Metolius are managed under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

This section of the Metolius River Canyon remains fairly natural and wild. Where the river drops over bedrock shelves, the water takes on blue and green colors, while the many rapids add some white to the scene.

A lot of small islands can be seen in this section of river. They appear to be formed from past logjams that catch sediment and other debris until plants take hold. Look close in the crystal clear water and you can see kokanee, rainbow trout or even some of the larger bull trout in the river this time of year.

From the springs, it's a short walk up to the confluence of Canyon Creek and the campground. The river is very deep and narrow just below where the creek empties in and I can just picture Native Americans standing there on the boulders hundreds of years ago spearing or netting salmon.

Another hiking option is to walk downriver from the hatchery to Lower Bridge. It's possible to walk down one side of the river and back the other, making a 6-mile loop. The trail skirts some private property about halfway down on both sides of the river, but overall it is a beautiful, tranquil stretch. The river is slower here compared with the upstream section and hosts more waterfowl such as mergansers and goldeneyes.

Fly-fishermen at the springs near Canyon Creek. Photo: Scott Staats Just as anglers today fish the river for fun (fishing is catch and release only), Native Americans fished the river in the past for salmon, steelhead and other species. The Indian word for the river was Mpto-ly-as, meaning white fish or stinking fish. This probably relates to spawned out salmon that get a white fungus on them before dying.

“The natural beauty of Metolius makes it such a great angling experience,” said Jeff Perin, owner of The Fly Fisher's Place in Sisters.

Perin offers these tips to fly anglers on the Metolius: use light tippets and long leaders, study the hatches or ask local fly shops. He also suggests using emergers and cripple patterns, something in transition. Photos in his shop of 26-inch redband and a 32-inch, 15-pound bull trout are enough to get any angler excited to grab their fly rod. Perin notes that the Metolius River is challenging for both the novice and the expert.

Besides redbands, bull trout, and whitefish, the river also supports populations of kokanee, brown and brook trout. Kokanee come up the river from Lake Billy Chinook the end of August through the end of October to spawn. Angling is restricted to catch and release for all fish.

Getting there: Go west from Sisters on Hwy 20 for 10 miles, turn right at sign for Camp Sherman on Forest Service Road 14. In a few miles, follow the signs to “Head of the Metolius.” Wizard Falls Fish Hatchery is another 7 miles on the left.

Scott Staats is a fulltime outdoor writer who has lived in Central Oregon the last ten years. His articles have appeared in local, regional and national publications.

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