

Painted Hills offer hikes, fossils and scenery

by Scott_Staats

Spring has finally sprung and it's time to trade in the skis and snowshoes for the old hiking boots. Even though the Cascades still lay under a thick, white blanket of snow, the high desert offers plenty of hiking opportunities.

One of my favorite destinations to the east for a spring outing is the Painted Hills, one of the three units of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. The year's first wildflowers are just starting to pop through the ground. Western meadowlarks and rock wrens sing their flute-like songs from bushes and boulders.

Painted Hills - all photos by Scott Staats Hikers at the Painted Hills Bentonite clay
Although the layers of red, pink, bronze and tan first attract the eye, my favorite part of the Painted Hills is the black lines interspersed within the layers. The scene resembles an artist's canvas. Just before finishing the painting, the artist made his final strokes of the brush bringing the black layers down to mix in with the other colors. Within this unit there are four short hiking trails. The Leaf Hill Trail, the Overlook Trail and the Painted Cove Trail are each about a quarter mile long. The Carroll Rim Trail is 1 1/2-miles long.

The Leaf Hill Trail encircles a small hill where much of the ancient floral history of Eastern Oregon was learned from the large quantities of plant fossils there. Many of the 35 different species of plants that existed 30 million years ago are no longer found in the Pacific Northwest.

The Overlook Trail provides excellent views of the Painted Hills as it climbs gently up the ridgeline. The moderately strenuous Carroll Rim Trail rewards hikers with an outstanding aerial view of the Painted Hills, the surrounding canyons and Sutton Mountain.

The Painted Cove Trail winds around a crimson hill and passes through some of the more colorful and interesting geologic features of the Painted Hills. Visitors get a close-up view of the popcorn-textured clay for which the unit is noted.

About 33 million years ago, volcanic ash-fall from ancient Cascades eruptions, settled in deep deposits forming the colorful layers in the hills. Natural processes altered the layers into bentonite, a type of clay which expands greatly when it absorbs water. The "popcorn-like" appearance occurs when the drying clay contracts, cracks and breaks apart. Bentonite clay particles are very sticky and absorbent and are often used as emulsifiers in toothpaste and chocolate, and as kitty litter.

The other two units of the monument are the Clarno and Sheep Rock units. The Clarno Unit is about 15 miles east of Fossil on Highway 218. The Sheep Rock Unit is off of Highway 26 just before Dayville. If you want to visit all three units in one day or in one weekend, one suggestion would be making a loop clockwise, heading first to Madras, through Antelope and hitting the Clarno unit first.

Anyone wishing to take photographs should visit the Clarno Unit in the morning, the Sheep Rock Unit in the early afternoon and the Painted Hills Unit later in the day for the best lighting.

The Clarno Unit has the oldest rock and some of the oldest fossils in the park. There are three trails about a quarter mile long each. The Clarno Nut beds contain some of the best fossil plant examples on earth. Visitors can walk up to the base of the cliffs and see entire fossilized logs sticking out, carried by ancient mudflows.

From the Clarno Unit, continue on Highway 218 to the town of Fossil. While in Fossil, be sure to stop at the museum, the old school house and especially the fossil beds behind the high school where the public is invited to dig for free. Many of the rocks there contain leaf imprints.

From Fossil, follow Highway 19 through Kimberly to the Sheep Rock Unit. It's a good idea to stop at the new visitor center and museum first to learn all about the fossils in the monument. Ask to see the impressive 16-minute orientation video made by the Dayville High School students.

Visitors can hike one of several trails in the Sheep Rock Unit. One highlight is the three-mile Blue Basin Trail. A high point of the trail offers excellent views of the John Day River valley and Blue Basin, where some of the most famous paleontologists in the world explored and collected.

"The monument is a unique place of international significance," said John Fiedor, park ranger and chief of visitor services at the monument. Fiedor has been at the monument for about 15 years and 30 years with the National Park Service.

He says he hasn't gotten bored with the place yet. "I've said things ten years ago that I can't say anymore because science changes, what we've learned has changed. There are new things being dug up here all the time. Underneath the ground here is the unknown."

The High Desert Museum assisted with the design of the 2,500-square foot museum. Youâ€™ll be walking through 50 million years of time. There are thousands of fossils to view as well as 200 feet of murals that depict eight different time periods.

According to Fiedor, the monument averages about 120,000 visitors a year. About 5 percent are international visitors. â€œPeople come not only for the fossils but also for the beautiful landscapes,â€• Fiedor said. â€œAll three of our units have a different and scenic landscape. Mixed in with this whole array of beauty is what I like to call a fossil fruitcake.â€•

The diversity of fossils in the monument is tremendous â€“ over 2,200 species of plants and animals have been identified. There are close to 40,000 individual specimens at the visitor center. Currently there are three scientists and two lab technicians working at the monument. In the entire National Park Service, there are only about a dozen paleontologists; three of them are stationed at the Fossil Beds.

Visitors can view scientists at work in their lab through a large window. There is also a TV screen that shows work being done under a microscope. Youâ€™ll see what the scientists see. There is also a classroom for kids where they can color, make stamps and look through microscopes.

The historic James Cant Ranch, located across the road from the visitor center, is one of the best preserved examples of early 20th century ranching in the John Day River valley. It covers the human history of the area, including Native Americans, soldiers, miners, trappers, explorers and ranchers. Much of the original ranching equipment is on display.

With warming temperatures and clearing skies, it's time for a road trip to the John Day Fossil Beds.

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