John Day Fossil Beds National Monument

by Scott_Staats

A Trip Into The Past I often wonder what it would be like to have lived in Oregon millions of years ago. Every time I visit the John Day Fossil Beds I get a better idea.

I can picture the saber-toothed cat waiting patiently behind a giant redwood tree as the group of oreodonts makes their way closer to a stream for a drink. As one of the smaller sheep-like creatures separates from the group, the cat pounces, scaring up a rhinoceros that was resting nearby. I can almost see the dark ash-laden sky from recent volcanic eruptions and the thin layer of volcanic cinders lying on the ground. An occasional shaking of an earthquake sounds like distant thunder. Ken Love at Blue Basin John Fiedor, Chief of Visitors Services Visitors Center â€“ All photos by Scott Staats Although this could be a scene from a future Jurassic Park movie, it would have been a typical day 25 to 30 million years ago in the area known today as the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. The Cascade Range was still forming and not yet high enough to block the moist flow of the Pacific air, giving the area a much wetter climate than it has today. Strange plants and animals, most now extinct, called the area home. It would be millions of years until humans would set foot in the area but much is known from the rich fossil record left behind. There are few places on earth where the geological and paleontological (fossil) history is so well preserved. Established by Congress in 1975, the monument is divided into three separate units and covers 14,000 acres. The Sheep Rock Unit, which contains the visitor center, is about nine miles west of Dayville. The Clarno Unit is 18 miles west of the town of Fossil and the Painted Hills Unit is 10 miles west of Mitchell. The fossil beds contain one of the longest and most continuous records of evolutionary change in the world, with fossils dating back to 45 million years ago. The Clarno Unit has some of the oldest fossils in the park. There are three trails in this unit, each about a quarter mile long. The Clarno Nutbeds 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 of the rock. My favorite highlight in the Sheep Rock Unit is the 3-mile long Blue Basin Trail. From the high point of the trail there are excellent views of the John Day River valley and Blue Basin, where some of the most famous paleontologists in the world have explored and collected.The Painted Hills Unit is noted more for its scenic beauty with layers of red, pink, bronze, tan and black. The Leaf Hill Trail circles a small hill where much of the ancient floral history of eastern Oregon was learned from the large quantities of plant fossils. 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. The Overlook Trail provides excellent views of the Painted Hills as it climbs gently up the ridgeline. These three trails are each about a quarter-mile long. The Carroll Rim Trail, a moderately strenuous 1 1/2-mile round trip, rewards hikers with an outstanding aerial view of the Painted Hills, the surrounding canyons and Sutton Mountain. Lighting is best for photos towards evening. A wide variety of mammals lived in the area of todayâ€™s fossil beds in the ancient past. They included saber-toothed cats, camels, horses, rhinoceroses, sloths and oreodonts. In 1978, a complete fossilized skeleton of an oreodont was uncovered. These animals were among the most successful of all mammals, existing for over 30 million years and accounting for over half of all animal fossils found in the monument. â€œThe monument is a unique place of international significance,â€• said John Fiedor, park ranger and chief of visitor services at the monument. Fiedor has been at the Fossil Beds for 15 years and 31 years in the National Park Service. He advises visitors to stop and see the new 2,500-square foot museum. Located in the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center, the museum gives visitors the opportunity to â€œwalk through 50 million years of time,â€• according to Fiedor. â€œThere are thousands of fossils to view as well as 200 feet of murals that depict eight different time periods.â€• The diversity of fossils at the monument is tremendous â€“ over 2,200 species of plants and animals have been identified and there are close to 40,000 specimens at the visitor center. Currently there are three scientists and two lab technicians working at the monument. In the entire Park Service, there are only about a dozen paleontologists, and three of them are stationed at the Fossil Beds. Kids as well as adults will enjoy viewing scientists at work in their lab through a large window. There is a TV screen that shows work being done under a microscope -- what the scientists see, visitors see. There is also a classroom for kids where they can color, make stamps and look through microscopes. The Cant Ranch Museum, located across the road from the Paleontology Center, covers the human history of the area, including Native Americans, soldiers, miners, trappers, explorers and ranchers. Ken Love of Portland has been coming to the fossil beds long before

the area became a monument. â€œI love the varied geology and the wildflowers,â€• he said as he paused along the Blue Basin Trail. â€œJust look around; how can you not be impressed with this beauty?â€• If you are interested in the prehistoric past and donâ€™t want to wait for the next Jurassic Park movie, then head over to the John Day Fossil Beds and get your own front row seat to 45 million years into the past. There is no camping or lodging in the monument but motels, bed and breakfasts and campgrounds are located throughout the area around Dayville. Information: John Day Fossil Beds National Monument - 541-987-2333, or www.nps.gov/joda. Fish House Inn Bed and Breakfast in Dayville â€“ 888-286-3474.Lands Inn Bed and Breakfast near Kimberly - 541-934-2333

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