

Steins Pillar Offers Hikers A Look Into The Ochoco's Ancient Past

by Scott_Staats

Steins Pillar looms over the upper Mill Creek valley bottom like a protective guardian. Although there are great views of the pillar from the road, hikers can get a close up and personal experience by hiking the 1.8-mile trail.

Starting in a forest of large ponderosa pine, the trail quickly opens up to a ridge walk with views of the Cascades. Here I met the Johnson family who were out enjoying a weekend hike in the Ochocos. The family of four has viewed the pillar from the viewpoint on the road but has never taken the hike to the pillar itself.

Steins Pillar can be seen from the road along Mill Creek. Photo by Scott Staats Vantage point allows viewing of Steins Pillar. Photo by Scott Staats Located just northeast of Prineville, Steins Pillar is one of the more easily accessible hikes on the Ochoco National Forest and a good choice to bring along the kids.

About 44 million years ago a range of volcanoes, which would have looked very similar to the present Cascades, jutted up from the area of the Ochocos. Great explosive eruptions sent avalanches of hot ash, pumice and volcanic dust sweeping across the landscape and eventually filling the valleys.

The more humid climate then turned the pumice and ash into clays, holding the rock together. Millions of years of erosion have left behind this more resistant remnant pillar.

The trail begins near a wetland area and meanders through huge old growth ponderosa pines. Stop at a pine and stick your nose in one of the cracks of the bark. You'll notice a vanilla or butterscotch scent. At the base of the tree, look down at the pieces of bark that fall off, resembling pieces of puzzle.

A short distance later the trail breaks out on the open western ridge displaying a panorama of the Mill Creek Valley, the Three Sisters, Broken Top, Mount Bachelor and the summit of Mount Jefferson.

As many times as I've hiked this trail, I'm still amazed after rounding the last bend to see the massive monolith right there in front of me. At eye level, you can look across to about the midpoint of the rock. Steins Pillar stands over 300 feet high and about 120 feet in diameter at its top.

The pillar was named after Major Enoch Steen who ventured into this area back in the 1860s. People misspelled his name so often that the incorrect version became official.

There's a great lunch spot to sit and look out over the pillar and the valley below. Look for violet-green swallows diving around the outcrops of rocks and listen for canyon wrens singing their distinctive song. About three miles to the northeast Wildcat Mountain marks the southern end of the Mill Creek Wilderness Area.

The trail to the overlook is 1.8 miles long. Another 0.2 miles of trail takes hikers down to the base of the pillar, which includes almost 100 steps. From there, you get a real sense of the enormity of the pillar as you look straight up.

This pillar was first scaled around 1950. There are overhangs on all sides that make for challenging climbs. Climbing activity on the pillar has decreased since Smith Rock State Park became popular. Plus, the rock is softer than that at Smith Rock and not as safe to climb. Climbing gear can be seen on several sections of the rock.

This section of forest, covering 1,070 acres, has been set aside as the Steins Pillar Recreation Area to protect the scenic values of the area. The management objective is to provide roadless non-motorized recreation.

On one hike, I startled eight deer bedding down for their afternoon nap near the trail. As they got up to mosey a short distance away, I continued down the trail not wanting to bother them. Farther on, I was greeted by a mountain biker and his dog heading to the pillar. Just before leaving the open ridge and entering back into the big timber, a red-tailed hawk soared over, screeching a warning. Only a few yards from the parking lot, I stopped to watch a lone deer by the wetland area.

While out on any trails, hikers should practice proper trail etiquette. For instance, avoid short-cutting which

causes unnecessary erosion and ends up making extra work for trail crews. Another good habit is picking up any litter found along the trail. At the end of the hike when you empty your pockets of candy bar and gum wrappers it will give you a good feeling knowing that you did your part to help out.

GETTING THERE - To reach the trailhead, follow Route 26 about eight miles east of Prineville and turn north on Forest Service Road #33 at the upper end of Ochoco Reservoir. The paved road up the Mill Creek drainage turns into gravel after five miles. Continue for another mile and a half to where a sign indicates the trailhead up Forest Service Road #500. At exactly two miles up this road is a small parking lot where the trail begins. Anyone wanting to first see what lies at the end of the trail should continue up Road #33 another mile and a half to the Steins Pillar Viewpoint. Stop in Prineville to pick up an Ochoco National Forest map before venturing out.

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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