

Round Mountain Trail

by Scott_Staats

Although the Cascades boast more numerous and popular hiking trails, a trip to the Ochocos will often provide more solitude and some spectacular scenery. While hiking the Round Mountain Trail, I usually encounter more deer and elk tracks than those of hikers.

Most of my hikes there could be summed up with the following: blue sky, birdsong and beautiful wildflowers.

Round Mountain Trail Round Mountain offers a challenging bike ride 8.5 mile hiking trail is accessible via trail head on Forest Road 42. All photos by Scott Staats. On my last outing, I no sooner got out of my rig when I heard, and then spotted, my first western tanager of the year. Shortly afterward, the flutelike song of a hermit thrush echoed through the tall ponderosa pines. Twice I was startled by ruffed grouse exploding into the air almost at my feet. As if the climb alone didn't increase my heart rate.

Other birds seen along the trail included chipping sparrows, mountain chickadees, flickers, juncos, gray jays, Steller's jays, red-breasted nuthatches and red-tailed hawks. Keep your eyes and ears tuned for the calls and pecking sounds of pileated woodpeckers, which are common to the area.

The open meadows near the summit are blanketed with yellow flowers of the arrowleaf balsam root. Native Americans used the roots of this plant to prepare medicines. Indian paintbrushes and lupine are mingled into the landscape as well.

The top of Round Mountain itself is not as spectacular as the view from it. Two radio towers and two small buildings set at the 6,753-foot summit. Although I can see the mountain from my deck, my 10 X 42 binoculars weren't powerful enough to pick out my house about 25 miles to the west.

However, the peak offers great views of Big Summit Prairie, Wildcat Mountain, Lookout Mountain and the entire Oregon Cascades, as well as Mount Adams in Washington. I could also pick out Twin Pillars and the remnants of the 2000 Hash Rock Burn in the Mill Creek Wilderness Area.

At the summit I met two hikers from Bend who started their hike from Walton Lake. I began my hike at the lower trailhead for Lookout Mountain just off of Forest Road 42. After a lunch at the summit, I began my descent and ran into a group of mountain bikers from Bend who said they like to ride the trail about twice each year.

They noted that the Round Mountain Trail was more challenging than other bike trails in the Deschutes National Forest, but added that the trail had some drainage issues and was in need of some maintenance and tree removal.

For those not relishing the sight, sounds and smell of sheep, you may want to call the Lookout Mountain Ranger District (416-6500) to find out when sheep are in the area. Hikers and bikers also need to be aware of guard dogs within the sheep herds, which can be aggressive.

There are a few options for hiking the trail. The best is to park one vehicle at the trailhead near Walton Lake then drive to the other trailhead on Forest Road 42, which is 6.5 miles from the Ochoco Ranger Station. The trail is about 8.5 miles long.

The trail is marked with blue diamond and white diamond markers. The blue markers are for cross-country skiing and the white are for hiking. In many places, the trail passes through large stands of mature ponderosa pine with interspersed open, grassy meadows and springs. Small stands of aspen lay tucked within the pines.

On the hike back down the mountain, a mule deer doe jumped up from under an aspen tree only 20 feet from me. She stared at me for a few seconds then ambled off. Some small clearcuts can be seen along the trail but overall the Forest did a good job keeping the trail away from old timber sales, providing hikers with more of a natural experience.

Signs along the trail designate the Round Mountain Trail as a National Recreation Trail. During the Carter Administration, national forests were told to nominate trails for this designation and the Ochoco National Forest chose the Round Mountain Trail. Under this designation, the trail is to be maintained at a higher standard than other trails.

Besides hiking and mountain biking, horseback riding is also popular on the trail. Wild horse can be seen anywhere in the area. Local hikers and bikers may want to save some gas and travel time and find out what the Ochocos have to offer.

Getting there: Drive 15 miles east of Prineville on Highway 26, then turn right on County Road 123. Just past the ranger station, turn left on Forest Road 22 to Walton Lake. Just past Walton Lake look for a sign to the trailhead on the right. To reach the upper trailhead, continue up Forest Road 42 past the ranger station for 6.5 miles.

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