

Notes from a Nice 5-Day Hike

By Marybetts Sinclair (2016)

Day 1: The trail begins in Corvallis and toward Philomath is all on paved multi-use paths and roadway shoulder. The route passes the Starker Forests office, where hiking permits for the rest of today's hike must be obtained during business hours. At the west end of Philomath hikers pass along the fence at the Georgia-Pacific mill near the Highway 20/34 intersection and along the Highway 34 shoulder to Old Peak Road. Near there on the east side of the highway is the Marys River Grange Hall, which is an alternative starting point for Day 1. Another Alternative starting point midway between Corvallis and Philomath is the Benton County Fairgrounds on 53rd Street and Reservoir Road.

From Highway 34, begin with shouldering a level then uphill section on Old Peak Road, a residential county road where the hiker can walk past country homes, gardens and small logging operations. You may see deer eating fruit from apple trees in the fall! You then continue onto a Corvallis Watershed-protected gravel road with beautiful stands of mature Douglas Fir, edible berries such as red huckleberries and thimbleberries, nettles, and signs of logging operations such as trees being felled. Next comes part of the trail called Lower North Ridge Trail, a dirt path which parallels Woods Creek Road along the north side of Marys Peak. The main North Ridge Trail branches from the C2C and leads to the parking lot on top of Marys Peak. Lush foliage and deep shade are found on the trail, and a keen eye detects signs of Marys Peak's past, including logging cables and remnants of an old railroad. Hikers may sleep on Forest Service land near the end of Lower North Ridge Trail, and may hear owls at night, hooting in the treetops. Undesignated campsite; no fires allowed. Water may be found in ditches and small creeks.

Day 2: This day's hike continues on a graveled road past privately-owned tree farms. Stellers jays (once called "the loggers friend") can be heard frequently. Don't leave any food scraps behind in camp for them, as jays and other corvids (ravens, crows) prey on the nests of the endangered Marbled Murrelet. You may see vultures and redtail hawks sail overhead.

Views from the east looking west over the hills of the coast range, and tall timbers, give an expansive feel. Travel via Shot Pouch Road down to Sugar Bowl Creek, then onto a new and beautifully designed trail which is perfect for mountain bikes as well as people. This segment has lush riparian foliage, with tall green maples and alders, elderberry trees, understory plants and wildflowers. Further on, emerge from the deep greenery and onto graveled Harlan County Road, and Big Elk Valley. This beautiful pastoral area was settled by European settlers beginning in the 1870's, and some residents can trace their ancestry to those folks. As you walk, stay alert to sounds of on-coming vehicles and be prepared to step to the shoulder to allow vehicles to pass, and also be aware of blind corners. You follow Big Elk Creek, and see a tree-covered hillside, beautiful wide fields, private homes, oceans of blackberries, and signs of logging activity. Along the way you may see vultures, crows, jays, redtail hawks, swallows and woodpeckers, as well as farm animals such as cattle, goats and horses. As the valley opens out farther, one can see across it far away to tree-covered hillsides, beautiful farms with alfalfa fields, grazing cattle, and historic houses and horse farms. After 5 miles on Harlan Road, you will arrive at Big Elk campground, a green, rustic and lovely place to sleep. Splash in the creek, fill-up on tap water, make fires in approved fire areas, and hear flycatchers, kingfishers and other water birds (bald eagles have been spotted, too!)

Day 3: The most challenging day of the hike, today hikers continue west along graveled Grant Creek Road to the end of Big Elk Valley. Travel off the road and onto trails, up a lush creek draw and onto a trail which switchbacks and climbs to the Hogback, Bull Run, and Gopher Ridge.

Next, continue on decommissioned logging roads which are wide, lush and soft to the feet, through forests of Douglas fir, maple and alder, and an understory of ferns, nettles, salal, huckleberries, elderberries, salmonberries and blackberries. In spring and early summer the roads are carpeted with buttercups. The air begins to feel coastal, with increased moisture and sometimes morning fog.

The trail crosses a small creek, then goes up a short series of switchbacks up above the creek and takes us up to the landing. No water is found at the top. Native doves may be heard in the trees. Wide flat areas once used for logging landings are possible camping spots for the night.

Day 4: Travel along Gopher Creek/Hilltop to 1000-Line Road. The trail crosses Hilltop Road (FS Road 31) where it begins to climb for about a mile along a ridge above Gopher Creek. This section is also on decommissioned logging road and passes a tall rocky cliff with rock piles below, and on the other side of the road, huge lush maples rise majestically from the steep creek bed below. Now the trail winds down to an emerald-green dell, where huge Douglas fir and cedar trees abound on all sides of a small creek. Oxalis, nettle, huckleberries, wild ginger, monkeyflower, soloman seal and other understory plants create a fairyland environment. The trail now winds uphill to Palmer Mountain, circling a hilltop. Here, the old road is grown over and grassy, while on either side unusually tall and green alder trees line each side, creating a “boulevard” effect. It is drier here and blackberries being worked by bumblebees, yarrow, and other dry-area flowers and plants are found. Hikers can see “Mary’s Backside” as they look to the east. Pileated woodpeckers and ravens are also found, one curious raven followed after hikers. The trail goes near but not to the top, but hikers who venture off the trail have been rewarded with vistas to the west and south. The trail now winds down from Palmer Mountain, on gravel roads which are sometimes used by permitted woodcutters to obtain green alder firewood. It goes downhill for several miles, intersects FS Road 5031, which is a dirt road surrounded by a large, majestic and very shady Douglas fir forest. With permits, alder woodcutters, and gatherers of salal for the florist industry may be found in the area.

Hikers may camp anywhere they desire along this road. Although 10 miles from Ona Beach, the ocean waves can be heard, the air is fresh and cool, and there are frequent signs of elk. You may also hear signs of logging activity, or smell the mill in Toledo.

Day 5: Today’s hikers continue west on FS Road 5031 for a few miles (depending upon where they camped). The road goes very slightly downhill through the mature forest which includes tall alders, a few spruce and hemlock, ferns and other understory plants. At one point the hiker will traverse a trail which has been hacked out of dense salal thicket by C2C volunteers, then onto the Hitselberger Tree Farm. This working farm shows the steps necessary to farm timber trees, from a recently-cut and denuded hillside to replanted areas with young trees. The trail [in 2016] goes steeply down, crosses a bridge over a creek, and goes steeply up onto Wolkau Road. After only one-half mile, the road joins with North Beaver

Creek Road and proceeds downhill. Here, the C2C takes on a new aspect, as we are out of the dense canopy and can see a long ways towards the ocean. Marine air is brisk and fresh, and views are lovely. Like Big Elk Valley, this valley has been planted for hay, and cattle graze on many places. Lovely farms, historic houses, and small “hobby farms” line the road, and across the road are tree-lined hills. At Ona, hikers pass an access road to Drift Creek Wilderness and continue on towards the coast, on a flatter part of the road and past Beaver Creek Marsh.

Travelers will have views across the marsh to lush tree-lined hills, and in the marsh this calm and pretty creek flows into an estuary and supports a wide diversity of migratory and native birds. Travelers might see marsh wrens, osprey, peregrine falcons, and waterfowl such as ducks and great blue heron. The marsh also supports other animals such as beaver and river otter. The last 2 miles of the trail continue on Beaver Creek Road, and eventually hikers will come to US Highway 101 and Ona Beach. Fresh ocean breezes and the roar of the waves come closer and closer until finally you are there. Highway 101 must be crossed with care due to heavy traffic, but once across you are in the park, and can cross a bridge over Beaver Creek, from where you can see it flow into the ocean. Then take off your boots and go put your feet in the ocean!!