

Escape Gray Skies on the Klickitat

Hike or bike a rails-to-trails gem when the weather turns iffy

SUSAN SAUL



Members of the Klickitat Trail Conservancy hike a stretch of the Klickitat Trail in the Columbia Gorge. Six access points allow hikers and bikers to do sections or the complete 31-mile trail.

BY SUSAN SAUL

Southwest Washington hikers looking for an escape from endless days of gray skies and rain head east to the dry, sunny end of the Columbia River Gorge.

A fantastic dry-side hike is the 31-mile Klickitat Rail Trail. This old railroad grade starts at Lyle on the Columbia River and climbs gently up through narrow canyons to wide-open prairies on the Goldendale Plateau.

The lower 10 miles of the trail parallel the federally designated wild and scenic Klickitat River as it rushes and plunges from the Klickitat Glacier on

Mount Adams to the Columbia River. The landscape ranges from oak and pine forests to wildflower meadows and stunning columnar basalt cliffs. The upper 13 miles through Swale Canyon are wild and remote with a true wilderness feel.

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission acquired the abandoned rail corridor in 1994. Adjacent landowners filed a federal suit challenging creation of the trail; the court dismissed the suit. Some rough times followed as landowners harassed hikers and bikers; in 2001 a biker was cited for trespassing by the Klickitat County Sheriff's Office after bicycling

part of the trail, which is entirely on public land. The state attorney general's office chastised the county prosecutor and a judge dismissed the charges.

That incident inspired local trail advocates to form the Klickitat Trail Conservancy in 2003 and volunteers began organizing group hikes on the trail. State Parks formally opened the trail to hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding. The trail now is managed jointly by State Parks and the U.S. Forest Service, which has jurisdiction over the section within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

There are six access points along the trail, allowing a variety of hike opportunities. Most of the property along the trail is privately owned, so hikers need to stay on the trail and keep dogs on a leash. Camping is not allowed, although backpackers can find off-trail camping on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife property along the Klickitat River near milepost 5 and milepost 15 on State Route 142. These are primitive sites without tables or water but they do have vault toilets.

Watch for ticks, poison oak, rattlesnakes, and goathead thorns that can puncture bicycle tires.

Lyle – Mile 0

The southern (lower) end of the trail begins in the town of Lyle. Approaching from the west of State Route 14, the trailhead is on the left just after crossing the bridge over the Klickitat River. It has parking and a portable toilet. The route from here to the trestle at Fisher Hill Bridge has new gravel surface.

Fisher Hill Bridge – Mile 1.6

Until new decking and handrails are installed on the high trestle, hikers have to bypass it by a short detour along State Route 142 and Fisher Hill Road. If starting your hike here, drive 1.5 miles north of Lyle and turn left on Fisher Hill Road. After crossing Fisher Hill Bridge, park on the shoulder of the road and access the trail. No facilities.

Starting at Fisher Hill Bridge, the trail passes through an impressive, narrow basalt gorge. Most of the adjacent property belongs to the Yakama Indian Nation, which maintains a traditional fishing site where tribal members dipnet salmon and steelhead as they have for centuries. The tribe asks hikers to stay on the trail.

Above the "Narrows," the valley widens with open slopes of Oregon white oak and ponderosa pine. In spring, prairie lupine, showy yellow balsamroot, and several species of desert parsleys brighten the hillsides. This trail segment provides great opportunities to observe bald and golden eagles, great blue herons, waterfowl, turkeys and deer.

About a mile before the community of Pitt, the trail leaves the riverbank. Several landowners have erected fences and gates across the trail. The gates are not locked; you may go through but be sure to close them behind you.

Pitt – Mile 10

Park across the highway from the row of houses. This access has a portable toilet. This segment of trail is more urban, passing by riverside residences and into the town of Klickitat.

Klickitat – Mile 13

The trail access is located along State Route 142 at the community park in Klickitat, a former mill town. The trail surface through town is newly compacted gravel and local residents have been voluntarily cutting grass and weeds along the trail in front of their homes, so say "thank you" if you see them at work. Support the local economy by shopping at the newly reopend Canyon Market for snacks, cold drinks and supplies.

The trail north from town is in poor condition due to flood damage and a missing trestle breaks the trail at about Mile 14. Bypass the missing trestle by taking State Route 142 north of Klickitat about 3 miles to Horseshoe Bend Road where a bridge crosses the Klickitat River.

Wahkiacus – Mile 16

This trail access is located at the intersection of Horseshoe Bend Road and Schilling Road. A large parking area and portable toilet are here. Go downstream from here towards the missing trestle for



View of the Klickitat River from the trail, which is jointly managed by Washington State Parks and the U.S. Forest Service. Hikers will find oak and pine forests, wildflowers in spring, and pleasant walking most any time of year.

a walk along the Klickitat River to the soda springs. Natural mineral springs rich in carbon dioxide once were used to make bubbly bottled water and dry ice. Some local hikers stop and drink the water or fill jugs to take home, but it is pungent with the smell of sulfur.

Up the grade from Wahkiacus, the trail leaves the Klickitat River and climbs into Swale Canyon. There are some residences along the first 2 miles, but above the canyon becomes wild and lonesome. In the middle of Swale Canyon, there is no cell phone coverage and you are a long way from civilization so bring plenty of water, food and the 10 essentials. State Parks usually closes the canyon from July through September due to fire danger.

Swale Canyon is an excellent mountain bike ride. Most riders start at the top and ride down to Wahkiacus, Klickitat or all the way through to Lyle. Bring a spare tube or two because those goathead thorns are a big hazard.

Harms Road – Mile 28.5

Get to this access from Lyle by turning off State Route 14 onto Glenwood Avenue, which becomes the Centerville Highway. The Harms Road intersection is approximately 15 miles from Lyle. Take

this gravel county road north for a half mile, cross Swale Creek, and park on the road shoulder. A portable toilet is located here from October through June.

You are on high prairie up here: no trees and expansive views of Mount Adams, the Columbia Hills and the Simcoe Mountains. Look for prairie falcons, golden eagles, meadowlarks and other birds of open country.

Warwick – Mile 31

Continue east on the Centerville Highway another three miles to the point where the old railroad grade crosses the highway. You can park on the shoulder of the highway. It is a pleasant, flat walk between Warwick and Harms Road. The end of the trail is just east at Uecker Road.

To find out about Klickitat Trail Conservancy sponsored events, visit www.klickitat-trail.org. KTC usually offers several hikes, bike rides and work parties each month year round. Friends of the Columbia Gorge sometimes sponsors hikes on the trail as well, particularly during its spring wildflower hike series. See www.gorgefriends.org.

Susan Saul is a WTA advisory board member from Vancouver, WA. ♦