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Flowing water in the Trapper Creek Wilderness in southwest Washington. If you're finding crowds in the Alpine Lakes, maybe it's time for a trip to a more obscure wilderness area.

Photo by Craig Romano

Hidden Wild

Journey to Washington's lesser-known wilderness areas for a welcome change of pace

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Solitude is a key component of wilderness. But if you've ever hiked the Alpine Lakes Wilderness on a summer weekend, you know it can be a veritable superhighway on the trails. Other wilderness areas may be less crowded, but they get all the glory: places like the Pasayten, Olympic and the Glacier Peak Wilderness.

If you're looking to day hike or backpack away from it all, consider these more obscure wilderness areas. Some are small, and others are just not so well known or less visited. For more information, visit the website www.wilderness.net.

Trapper Creek Wilderness

Gifford Pinchot National Forest

Small but significantly important, the 6,050-acre Trapper Creek Wilderness in the extreme southern reaches of Washington's Cascades protects an intact watershed and some of the region's largest, oldest and most impressive trees. Surrounded by a sea of clear-cuts and "managed" forest, Trapper Creek is biologically rich and home to elk and endangered spotted owls. And while this wilderness is densely forested, Observation Peak, a 4,207-foot former fire lookout post, offers stunning views over the uncut valley and out to Oregon's Mount Hood.

Trapper Creek itself is a cascading delight and seekers of solitude will delight hiking along this wilderness waterway. A rather large network of trails, some built by the Portland-based Mazamas, traverses this primeval pocket wilderness. Lots of opportunities for loops exist. Observation Peak can be reached by a 2.8-mile trail from the north or a spectacular 6.5-mile trek up Howe Ridge from Trapper Creek. Consider the Trapper Creek Trail for its ancient trees and the Soda Peaks Lake Trail to the only lake within the wilderness. —Craig Romano

Colonel Bob Wilderness

Olympic National Forest

The only wilderness area on the west side of the Olympic Peninsula, the 11,961-acre Colonel Bob Wilderness protects a cluster of rugged summits on the Quinault-Humptulips divide. With annual precipitation exceeding 130 inches, Colonel Bob's valleys are choked and cloaked with greenery of jungle proportions. The wilderness's forests are ancient and impressive, supporting cedar, hemlock, spruce and fir that were old when Columbus, Drake, Cabot and De Soto set sail for the Americas.

Three trails lead into the wilderness, including two to 4,492-foot Colonel Bob Peak. Pete's Creek, the shorter of the two, gains 3,500 feet in just over four miles. It's a rocky and steep slog but one that will reward you with eagle-eye views of Mount Olympus, Lake Quinault, Moonlight Dome (a wilderness study area) and the Pacific Ocean. The Fletcher Canyon Trail climbs out of the Quinault Valley for 2.3 miles into a steep deep emerald valley flush with ancient giants and home to cougar, bear and elk. —Craig Romano

Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness

Umatilla National Forest

At 177,465 acres, the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness certainly isn't a little wilderness, but this large protected tract of the Blue Mountains is known to few people outside of Walla Walla, Lewiston-Clarkston and the Tri-Cities.

Straddling the Oregon-Washington border, over 110,000 acres of the wilderness are within the Evergreen State. And despite being in the state's hot and dry southeast corner, with elevations exceeding 6,000 feet, the Blues are draped in evergreens.

Consisting primarily of broad tableland summits and deep canyons harboring pristine rivers (the two largest lend their names to this wilderness) the Wenaha-Tucannon is a land of deep contrasts and sublime beauty. Old growth ponderosa pine forest graces the wilderness's lower elevations while western larch, grand fir and lodgepole pine dominate the high country. Patches of mountain mahogany grow in the Blues, its northernmost limits.

An easy 6.0-mile round trip hike to the 6,387-foot Oregon Butte lookout, highest summit in the wilderness, will reward with breathtaking views of the region's sun-kissed summits and deeply cut canyons. The 14-mile Mount Misery Trail across the rooftop of the Blues makes for an excellent extended trip. And while the Tucannon River lies just outside of the wilderness, this trail makes for an excellent spring and fall hike. Trails here are quiet except during autumn when hunters are legion in pursuit of elk, which are prolific in the Wenaha-Tucannon. —Craig Romano

Juniper Dunes Wilderness

Bureau of Land Management
Spokane Office

The Juniper Dunes is a tiny little wilderness tucked away in eastern Washington (it totals just 7,140 acres). It's completely fenced and has no developed trails. But it preserves one of the few remaining intact desert ecosystems in eastern Washington, including stands of 150-year-old Western juniper. Deer, badgers and kangaroo rats are among the residents here. Some of the shifting dunes can measure



Above: The Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness in southeast Washington's Blue Mountains.

Left: The arid desert landscape of the Juniper Dunes Wilderness near Pasco is teeming with plants and wildlife.

Photos by Craig Romano

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over 100 feet high. Temperatures soar above 100 degrees in the summer, so it's best to plan a visit in spring. In 2007, the Bureau of Land Management worked out an arrangement with private land owners to allow road access to the wilderness entrance. —Andrew Engelson

Glacier View Wilderness

Gifford Pinchot National Forest

Another tiny wilderness, this 3,123-acre wilderness is situated in some prime view real estate just to the west of Mount Rainier National Park. Forests ranging from Douglas-fir and western red cedar to subalpine firs and mountain hemlocks higher up are home to all sorts of wildlife, from elk to mountain goat.

To explore the Glacier View, try the 3.75-mile Glacier View Trail, which gains 730 feet and attains a high point of 5,450 feet. It's best hiked from July through October. Guidebook author Joan Burton shares her thoughts:

"The hike to the glorious views from this former lookout site offers a superb treat for children and families. Begin with a gradual ascent through meadows, flower fields and rock gardens ornamented with constantly changing flower species, and the songs of birds. Follow a long path through trees before coming out into the open. At the top the views of Mount Rainier are breathtaking. Glacier View indeed! Children will understand why Native Americans called it 'The Mountain That Was God.'

The first steep 0.25-mile takes you to a signed path leading into the Glacier View Wilderness. Then catch your breath and take the left trail marked Glacier View, enter sub-alpine forest, and bypass a clear-cut through old firs and hemlocks. Follow the crest of a long ridge leading up to the old lookout site. Peekaboo views of the mountain will tease the children. They can imagine they are carrying food and supplies to the once-upon-a-time resident lookout.

Finally the trees will disappear and all they will be able to see are green-carpeted foothills and vistas of the southwest glaciers of Mount Rainier: the Tahoma, Nisqually, and Puyallup. See if your children can find Mount Adams, Mount St. Helens, Gobblers Knob, Mount Beljica and Goat Rocks on the map. On a clear day families find that from this former lookout it's easy to lose all track of time." —Joan Burton

Indian Heaven Wilderness

Gifford Pinchot National Forest

If you like lakes, you'll love the Indian Heaven Wilderness. A forested high country southwest of Mount Adams, the Indian Heaven is more familiar to folks from Portland and southwest Washington than the rest of the state. It's a lovely country—not filled with jagged peaks or glaciers, but a quiet, subtle landscape of alpine lakes, meadows and a variety of firs. The wilderness is a high plateau encompassing 20,960 acres—averaging about 4,500 feet in elevation. Wildflower meadows burst in bloom in late spring. But this wilderness is also known as "Mosquito Heaven," and should be avoided until August unless you're prepared to deal with hordes of legendary mosquitoes. Later in summer, the Indian Heaven is home to a bumper crop of huckleberries. For centuries, Native American tribes converged on the area to pick berries, trade and race horses (the Indian Race-track Trail takes you to the ancient raceway).

For a great overnight, hike the loop around Bird Mountain, following the Cultus Creek Trail past Deep, Cultus, and Deer Lakes. Then, turn north on the Pacific Crest Trail and circuit back, with a stop at Wood Lake. The hike is 7 miles, gains 1,200 feet and reaches a high point of 5,200 feet. The best time to visit is August–November. —Andrew Engelson ♦

Naha Lake, Indian Heaven Wilderness. This small wilderness is best visited in late summer, when bugs disappear and huckleberries are ripe. Autumn brings a vibrant display of color.

Photo by Rocky Rockwood

