On Trail

Feature »

Hike in History
Hit the mother lode at Cougar Mountain

When winter shuts down hiking in the high country, I look to the Issaquah Alps for my inspiration. I have a special affection for Cougar Mountain, and not just because it's on my Newcastle doorstep. With 3,082 acres and 36 miles of trails that can be combined in a variety of ways, Cougar offers something for my every mood: a brisk morning run, a short hike between raindrops, or an all-day adventure in the backcountry.

In winter, when Cougar's lush landscape lies dormant, clues to the area's human history are revealed. Bricks mired in muddy trails, crumbling foundations covered in moss and ferns, collapsed mine shafts sprouting saplings and salmonberry—all are remnants of Cougar's days as a major supplier of Pacific Coast coal.

The discovery of coal deposits on Cougar Mountain in 1863 transformed Seattle from a sleepy village to the economic center of Puget Sound. Coal miners worked these hills for 100 years (1863 - 1963), tunneling 6 miles under the mountain and later strip-mining its surface. They hauled out 11 million tons of bituminous coal and left behind mountains of mining debris. Seattle's first railroad was built to haul coal from Cougar Mountain to Elliott Bay piers, and when President Hayes visited Seattle in 1880, the highlight was his train ride and tour of the Newcastle mines.

Once the mining ceased, suburbia began to encroach. Conservation activist and guidebook author Harvey Manning recognized Cougar Mountain's natural and historical value. Thanks largely to Manning's efforts, Cougar Mountain Regional Wildland Park was created in 1985, permanently preserving its rich heritage. Surrounded by Bellevue, Issaquah and Newcastle, it is the largest urban wildland in the United States and the crown jewel in the King County Parks system.

The Ford Slope exhibit, a fascinating piece of history

All text and photos by Abby Wolfe.

Abby Wolfe

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Mother Nature has been reclaiming this ravaged landscape for decades now, and as I hike, I play guessing games. Is that depression a collapsed mine shaft? Are those vegetated mounds really debris piles? Is that a natural gully or an old strip mine?

If you too enjoy hiking through history, come to Cougar Mountain to ponder bygone days. Here are two short hikes that hit the highlights.

Red Town Loop

From the Red Town parking area, head left up Red Town Trail, which was once Hill Street in the neighborhood of Pacific Coast Coal Company houses that were all painted (you guessed it) red. Just past the intersection, the large pit on the right is a cave hole, a spot where the ground has collapsed, or subsided, into old mine shafts. You'll see many more of these, as well as knolls that hide building ruins and tailings piles. As you hike the trail, imagine it a hundred years ago, when there were 50 homes, a hotel, saloon, church and school.

Pass the Bagley Seam Trail (a collapsed shaft with an exposed coal seam), and at 0.3 mile, turn right down Rainbow Town Trail. Just before the intersection, the large gully on the left is an old strip mine. As you head down the

What's in a Name?

When coal was discovered on Cougar Mountain in the 1860s, the area became known as the Newcastle Hills, after the famous English coal town. (Modern-day Newcastle sits atop the old Newcastle mining town, and its pioneer cemetery contains the graves of early miners and immigrants.) After World War II, a local landowner thought the coal-mining connotation sounded grimy and low-class, and proposed changing the name to Cougar Mountain. The new name stuck.

with an excellent exhibit about the mining era. Take a moment to absorb it all. Check out the old mine cart and rusty relics nearby. The 22-foot arch of the mine entrance is now plugged with concrete; the tunnel behind it descended 1,740 feet to 200 feet below sea level. During its heyday (1905 - 1926), Ford Slope was the largest producer of the Newcastle mines. At its peak, 11 electric locomotives worked underground, loading 600 tons of coal per day into cars that were hauled up the 42-degree slope by a steam hoist. While standing in front of the mine, look behind you in the woods to locate a large "H" that marks the hoist location.

Retrace your steps up the trail a short way and turn onto the Steam Hoist Trail, which takes you over Coal Creek by the site of the 1916 concrete dam (still there, tucked under vegetation), built to create a mill pond and serve the sawmill that cut planks and beams needed for tunnel supports and buildings. Much of Cougar Mountain was logged during this era, and timber traveled to the sawmill over a skid

road made of greased logs. You can still see old bricks in the pond, and the four concrete blocks you pass are sawmill footings.

Walk a bit further, and look down on the massive foundation of the steam hoist, nearly hidden in summer but clearly visible as parallel, fern-covered mounds in winter. The steam hoist pulled five loaded mine cars at a time up Ford Slope, using a 36-inch steam piston to drive a huge winch with 2,000 feet of cable.

To complete your hiking loop (1.6 miles), follow the Wildside Trail back to Red Town Trailhead. As you descend the steps, the large hill on the left, as well as the smaller knolls you see, are mining debris. It's worth noting that, despite its wild state, none of the terrain around you is natural. The hills and gullies, even the course of Coal Creek, were reshaped by man during successive mining efforts.

trail, note the "Cave-in Danger" sign–an immense cavity lies beneath the trail. The jumble of concrete blocks you see on the right are remains of a 1920s fan house that pulled air and noxious gases from the Ford Slope mine; its airway also served as a secondary escape route for the miners. (The pole fans you see in the area are more recent installations to diffuse mine gases.)

The Ford Slope mine is straight ahead, along

Above: Old bricks in the mill pond

At right: Coal car at Ford Slope mining exhibit

Coal Creek Trail

The top section of Coal Creek Trail packs a lot of mining and railroad history into a short distance. From Red Town parking, cross Lakemont Boulevard to reach the trailhead. In the grassy field, the concrete ruins you see under a tree are remnants of the Coal Creek Hotel's boiler room.

Descend the Coal Creek Trail, and you immediately encounter an awesome cave. It's actually an air shaft into an old mine, the bottom of which is 518 feet below sea level. This is also an important site for railroad buffs. Right across the creek was the terminus of the 21-mile Seattle & Walla Walla Railroad. Built in the 1870s, Seattle's first railroad hauled coal from these mines to Elliott Bay, a highly profitable venture that streamlined coal distribution up and down the Pacific Coast. Pause to read about the railroad at the kiosk, then continue down the trail.

In the pasture above, you can see brick piles from the generator house, which used steam to power electric generators that provided electricity. Go down the steps, and you pass the concrete foundations of the steam plant itself. Don't trip on the bricks embedded in the trail! A small bridge on the left provides access to the railroad terminus, but there's nothing to see, so stay on the main trail and cross the next bridge. Between the two bridges, notice that the steep hillside across from you is eroding into the creek, which long ago wiped out this section of railroad bed.

North Creek Falls on the Coal Creek Trail.

Once you cross the second bridge, look down—you're walking on coal eroded from the nearby seam. Watch for lumps of coal as you walk this section of trail, which now follows the old railroad grade. Next to the bridge you'll see a large post with white paint and the number 20: this was the number of miles from the railroad's origin on the Duwamish River.

By now, you've probably noticed North Creek Falls. In winter, the falls are whitewater, but in summer, the rock and creekbed are stained a colorful orange, thanks to iron salts leached from the coal seam. Just past the protruding spur (mine waste) on the trail's south side, look up the hillside and see if you can spot concrete footings from the coal bunkers. They are much more visible in winter, and I've counted four

so far. Mine cars from Ford Slope dumped their loads into the tops of the bunkers, which in turn dropped sorted ore into railroad cars.

Next, follow the short spur to the right, and you'll see a row of planks across the bottom of Coal Creek. These amazingly preserved 12-inch x 12-inch planks date from the 1880s; they were part of a box flume created to keep the creek from washing out the railroad grade. (A problem that persists to this day; the trail had to be rebuilt in Summer 2009 due to the creek's shenanigans.)

As you continue down the trail, note that it remains on a nice flat bench (courtesy of the former railroad), while the creek drops into an increasingly steep gorge. Along the way, you'll pass the sites of former orchards and gardens, and, uphill on a flat, the location of the old Newcastle school (built 1914, burned 1969).

At about 0.6 mile, look on your left for a side trail leading to a concrete pad. This was the site of the locomotive turntable, which had the machinery to turn huge train engines 180 degrees, enabling trains to go back and forth from Coal Creek to Elliott Bay.

You can follow this trail all the way to Coal Creek Parkway (3 miles), but I usually turn around at the "twisty bridge" just beyond the turntable, making it a leisurely 1.3 miles. ♦

Check out - but don't fall into - this air shaft near the Coal Creek Trail.
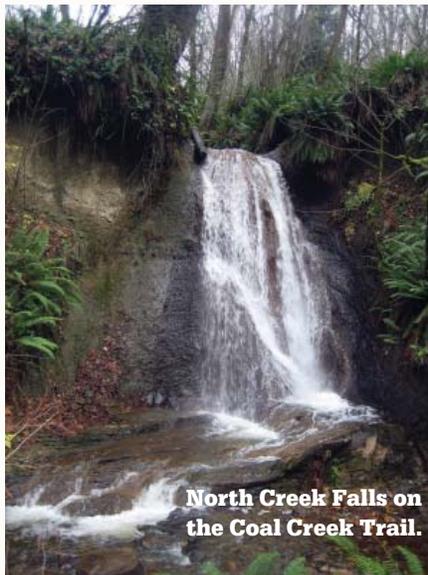
Learn more

Read **The Authoritative Guide to the Hiking Trails of Cougar Mountain,** published by Issaquah Alps Trails Club. Originally co-authored by Harvey Manning, it provides a wealth of information on the history and natural resources of Cougar Mountain.

See more

Take a longer hike on Cougar Mountain and you'll see even more mining relics.

See www.wta.org/cougarhistory to read about more great hikes departing from the Sky County Trailhead.