



On Trail

Explore the Gorge, Again

With waterfalls, wildflowers, cool rocks and grand views, you'll be back soon

Come springtime, I'm often asked by friends and co-workers where to hike for the best waterfalls, the prettiest wildflowers, the best views. Where should I take visiting friends? Where should I hike with my dog? My recommendations always point them in the same direction—the Columbia River Gorge. Sure, I could suggest a bigger, farther, higher destination, but the Gorge has plenty to offer for the casual hiker and avid enthusiast alike.

For the waterfall lovers, two trails are always at the top of my list, Latourell and Wahclella Falls. **Latourell Falls** is a pretty 250-foot ribbon easily seen from the roadside viewpoint. But most, hurrying to move on to Multnomah and the other attractions, fail to take advantage of the fantastic hike to Upper Latourell Falls, a 2.5-mile loop to an amphitheater of columnar basalt and a wooden bridge that crosses Latourell Creek just below the 120-foot upper falls. A bit farther out the Gorge, past the waterfall loop near Bonneville Dam, the **Wahclella Falls** hike is a 2-mile lollipop loop to a plunging 350-foot multitiered falls. In heavy runoff periods, the narrow canyon to this falls is filled with streaming cascades while Wahclella Falls thunders and fills the head of the canyon with mist.

For those interested in a longer waterfall hike, I recommend **Eagle Creek**, with several falls of various types, including the popular and often-photographed Punchbowl Falls, and the 175-foot Tunnel Falls, where the trail actually passes through a dripping tunnel blasted behind the falls. At the height of spring, the Eagle Creek Trail also puts on quite a wildflower display along the way. Columbia windflower, starwort, coast manroot, queen's cup, mountain monkeyflower and columbine are just a few of the flowers you may see. Get an early start on weekends as this is a local fave. It is also a popular hike for those with dogs.

Coyote Wall. Photo by Eli Boschetto.

Eli Boschetto

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While the Oregon side can retain snow on the higher trails well into early summer, the south-facing Washington side often offers more early-season hiking options.

For big displays of springtime wildflower color, I direct eager hikers to the sunny, exposed slopes on the Washington side: Hamilton Mountain at Beacon Rock State Park and Dog Mountain, specifically. These trails are a bit longer, steeper, and more strenuous, but they offer incredible wildflowers filling slopeside meadows with stunning views up and down the Columbia Gorge.

Both **Hamilton Mountain** and **Dog Mountain** are popular trails, and the parking lots for these fill up quickly on clear spring and summer days. Hike either of these trails and you will soon know why—explosions of wildflowers of every size, shape and color. On shaded sections of trail, you'll see sweet pea, candyflower, mountain violet, Oregon grape, chocolate lily, fairyslipper and waterleaf. In the open meadows, you'll find carpets of balsamroot and lupine sprinkled with paintbrush, larkspur and prairie stars. Both of these hikes have considerable elevation gain and offer up-and-back or longer loop options. Hamilton Mountain even offers a couple of waterfalls to view along the way. Hit these on weekdays, if at all possible, for empty trails and a much more pleasant experience.

I just hiked **Cape Horn** for the first time last year. This 7-mile loop trail has a little bit of everything: shaded forest, open meadow, wildflowers, big views of the gorge, interesting geology and a walk behind a tall, wispy waterfall. This one has a few confusing junctions and crosses State Route 14 at one location, but makes for an enjoyable, uncrowded hike. *[Editor's note: This trail is closed seasonally January 1 to July 1.]*

Another location to escape some of the crowds, but still reap the same rewards, is to keep heading east out the Gorge, past Bingen, to the **Coyote Wall**. This 8-mile loop starts with shaded trail amid oak, maple and ponderosa forest, sprinkled with buttercup, mountain violet and candyflower. It then turns and climbs to the top of a basalt plateau overflowing with yellow balsamroot and blue lupine, before descending through a rock garden of lava boulders. Pack a picnic for this one and savor the views of the Gorge from the upper meadows.

When it comes to the Columbia Gorge, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The Gorge offers hikers trails of every length, difficulty and variety.

Latourell Falls. Photo by Josh McCullough.





From top: Hiker behind Tunnel Falls, Eagle Creek, on the Oregon side of the Columbia River Gorge. Rainbow captured in the falls at Cape Horn found on the Washington side. Wildflowers line the trail and views go on forever at Dog Mountain on the Washington side. Photos by Eli Boschetto.

In the springtime, with the waterfalls gushing with runoff and the wildflowers exploding on trail-, creek-, and hillsides, you can't go wrong, no matter what you pick. That's why I keep recommending the Columbia River Gorge, and why I keep going back myself. ♦

Hike It! Mileage provided is round trip.

- Latourell Falls:** 2.2 miles, 550 feet gain.
- Wahclella Falls:** 2 miles, 300 feet gain.
- Eagle Creek:** 6.8 miles, 650 feet gain.
- Hamilton Mountain:** 7.4 miles, 2,000 feet gain.
- Dog Mountain:** 8 miles, 2,800 feet gain.
- Cape Horn:** 7 miles, 1,350 feet gain.
- Coyote Wall:** 8.2 miles, 1,900 feet gain.

For State Route 14 closure info, see p.8.



WTA Volunteers in the Columbia River Gorge

WTA volunteers are critical to maintaining and building trails in the Gorge.

Last year, WTA volunteers completed over 3,000 hours of trail work in the Gorge. More work is scheduled in 2010 as the Forest Service plans to bring nearly 30 miles of "new" trails into their system on the Washington side. Many of these trails are unsanctioned user-built trails in need of reconstruction and rerouting in order to be sustainable over the long term.

This spring, WTA began work at Cape Horn, using the trail as a classroom for the second annual trail Skills College. Completing a new trail project at Beacon Rock State Park is top on the agenda for two of WTA's Youth Volunteer Vacation crews.

Visit www.wta.org to see a list of upcoming events, including regular weekday work parties. ♦

Columbia River Gorge Endemic Wildflowers

You can only see these flowers in this gorge

The Missoula (Bretz) Floods carved out the Columbia River Gorge during the last ice age, creating the only significant gap in the Cascade Range over their 700-mile stretch. This meeting of Eastern dryland and Western boreal flora on the basalt cliffs and transitional meadows resulted in an environment that now contains no less than 14 endemic or predominantly Gorge plant species, from the spectacular cliff-dwelling *Penstemon barrettiae* with its throaty pink blossoms and blue-green leaves to the steely fretted foliage and unique purple umbels of the appropriately named *Lomatium columbianum*. Other plants to keep an eye out for include the lovely blue-flowered Mountain Kittentails (*Synthyris missurica ssp. stellata*) and Poet's Shootingstar (*Dodecatheon poeticum*).

—text and photos by Josh McCullough, PhytoPhoto.com



Lomatium columbianum



Penstemon barrettiae



Synthyris missurica