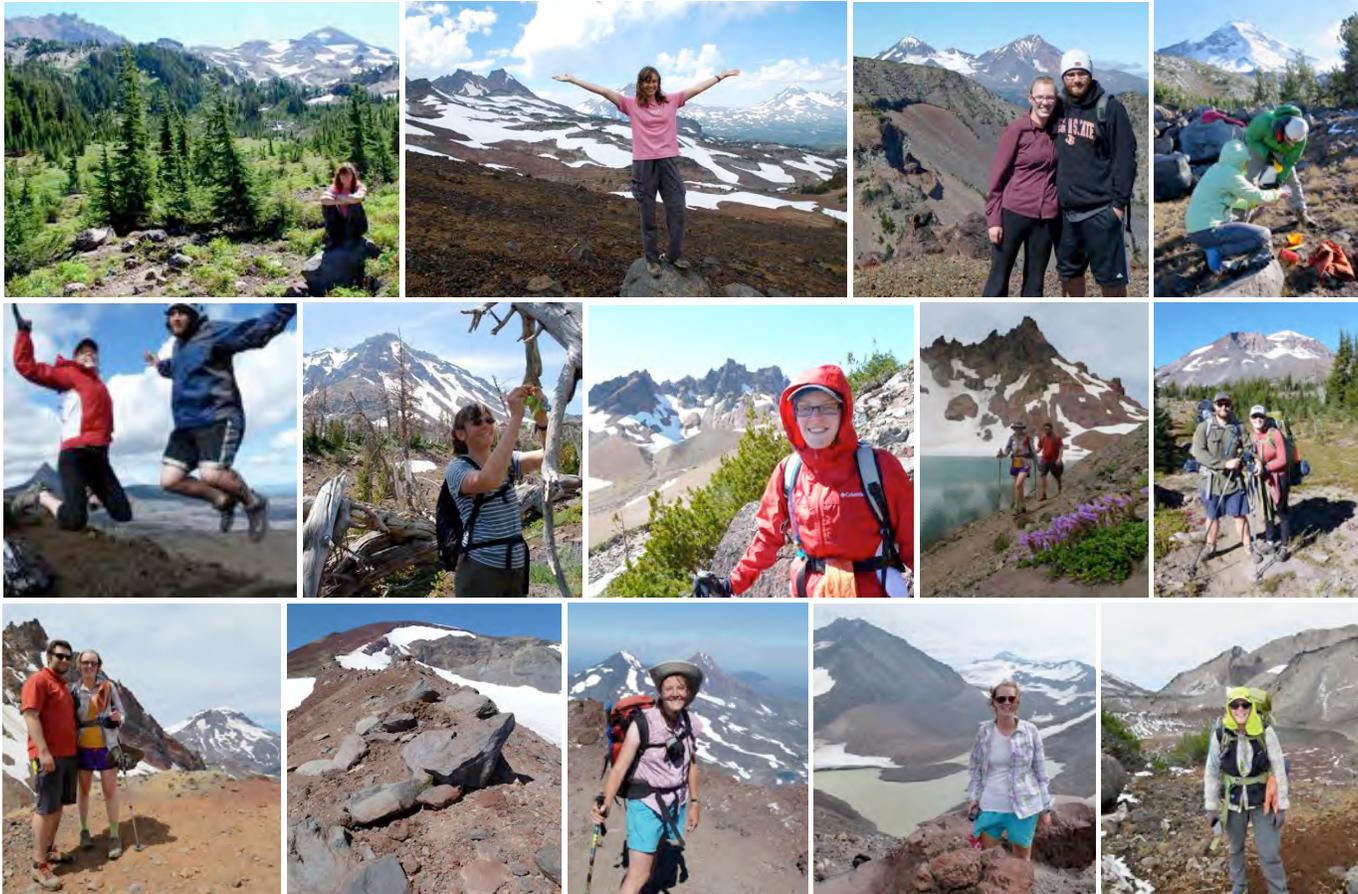




ALL Sisters Collection, 2006-2016

We've Been A Long Way - Dayhikes, Climbing South Sister & Backpacking Loops



Left to Right: (top) Sunshine Ellen, Tam gap & cliff, frozen at Camp Lake; (middle) Little Belknap, North, Broken Top crater - afar and there, Green Lake Pass; (bottom) Broken Top crater pass, South route and summit, Collier viewpoint, off-trail above Chambers Lakes

Perhaps because of its appealing name, my first hike in Oregon was in the Sisters Wilderness. The Sisters include South, (Oregon's third highest, 10,358 feet), Middle, and North. Broken Top is a volcanic cousin near South. Most trailheads lie in one of three areas: near (1) Sisters; (2) McKenzie Pass; (3) Bend. From the Willamette Valley, all are LONG drives (120-150 miles) that we usually tackle via long weekend venues staying in Bend or Sisters. After years of posting all our trips, we have done so many that I am organizing this collection around the above regions, highlighting representative trips – culminating with our TWO 2014 & 2015 Sisters backpacking loops... although climbing South Sister and FINALLY making it to the Broken Top Crater Lake are my REAL favorites!

Trailheads Near Sisters

This section covers trails closest to Sisters, with access via Three Creek Lakes or Pole Creek area.

Three Creek Lake/Park Meadow – First Hike in Oregon, July 1998

I have done Park Meadows twice: it was my first hike in Oregon (below); in 2014, we used this trailhead as our Sisters loop exit point (see loop section at end of this report). Although easy, it is not my favorite hike in the Sisters.



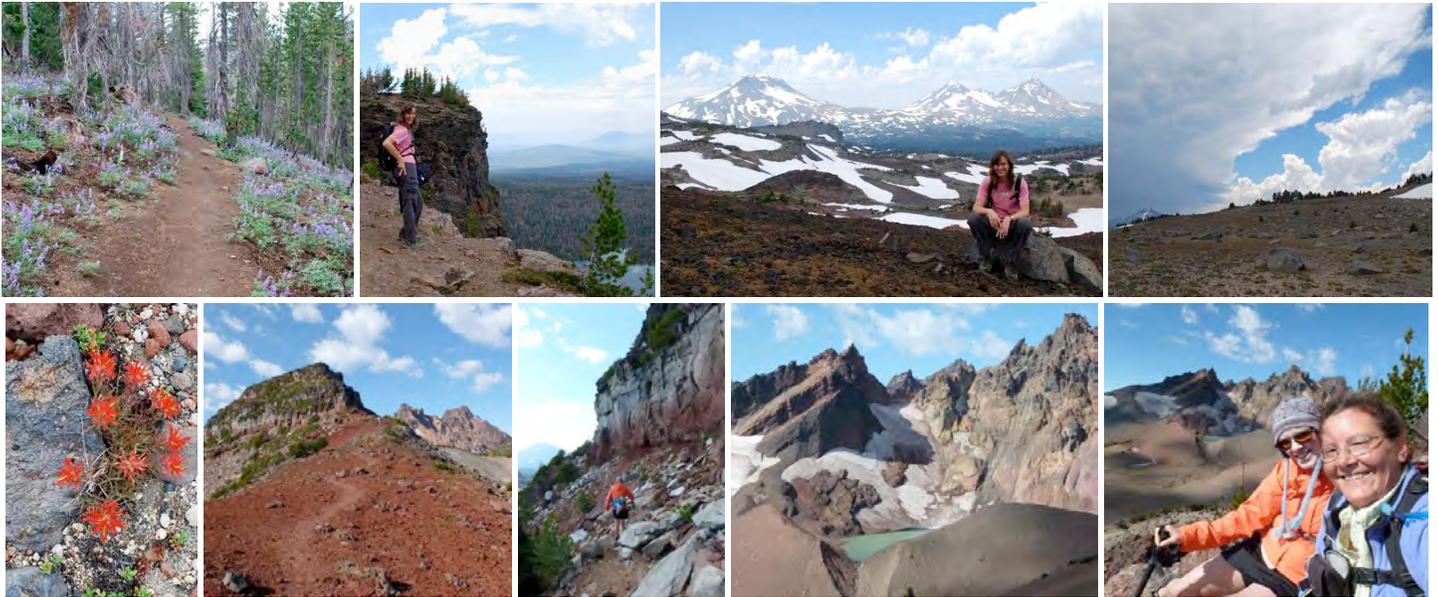
Left to Right: John in meadows, off-trail views from where we stopped in the snow - Broken Top, South, Middle and North

My first hike in Oregon was encouraging: views of all Three Sisters and Broken Top. Given the holiday weekend, John came down here because Washington's weather sucked. Our original goal was to climb South Sister – but it was raining when we woke up at 5, and so we went back to bed. We rose again around 8, deciding to head for Sisters anyway – our new aim: hike to Park Meadow. After driving in rain for 2 hours, a miracle happened at Santiam Pass: the entire east side was clear, sunny, and warm. Soon, we were driving

through lava, low scrub, and lodgepole pine – ultimately stopping at the Park Meadow trailhead. After walking a mile on some kind of high clearance vehicle road, the path narrowed and meandered FOREVER along the western side of these forested hills - all the while providing teaser views of the Sisters. Indeed, our guidebook says 4.9 miles to Park Meadow proper. Park Meadow was just coming out in terms of greenery and flowers. Recently melted snow gave way to shallow tarns, reflecting first Broken Top and then South Sister. We crossed a few creeks that seemed to be raging with snowmelt. We met several happy parties, including backpackers, horse-folk, and dayhikers. The views of the Sisters, while nice, were obstructed by forested hills. Given that we wanted more commanding views, we made a B-line through the trees - figuring correctly that Oregon's eastside forests would provide nothing of the arboreal challenges of those in Washington. Of course, we did hit hard-pack snow - not to mention navigational problems with minor valleys and rock outcrops. Although it always seemed we were just a couple bands of trees from the mountains, we topped off twice - the trees just getting more expansive. Finally we found a melted ridge of slate-like stone and lunched with mostly complete views of all the Sisters and Broken Top. The hike back was easy - as was the drive; despite our late start, we were back home before sundown.

Three Creek Lake/Tam McArthur Rim – Featured Hike From September 2010... One of MANY Variations

Tam represents a series of high plateaus at 7000-8000 feet – part official trail, part climbers' path. I have done Tam four times: Ellen and I hiked to the trail end in 2007; Allison and I made it to the base of Broken Hand in 2008; Allison, Marshall, and I figured out how to go around Broken Hand in September 2010; Allison and I repeated said journey in 2013. Tam is one of my FAVORITE Sisters hikes!



Left to Right: (top) highlights from Ellen and my first trip – early trail & lupine, cliff, gap at official trail end, major storm... time to go!
(bottom) highlights from Allison and my 2013 trip - lava and paintbrush, red ridge, heading around Broken Hand, the fabled view!

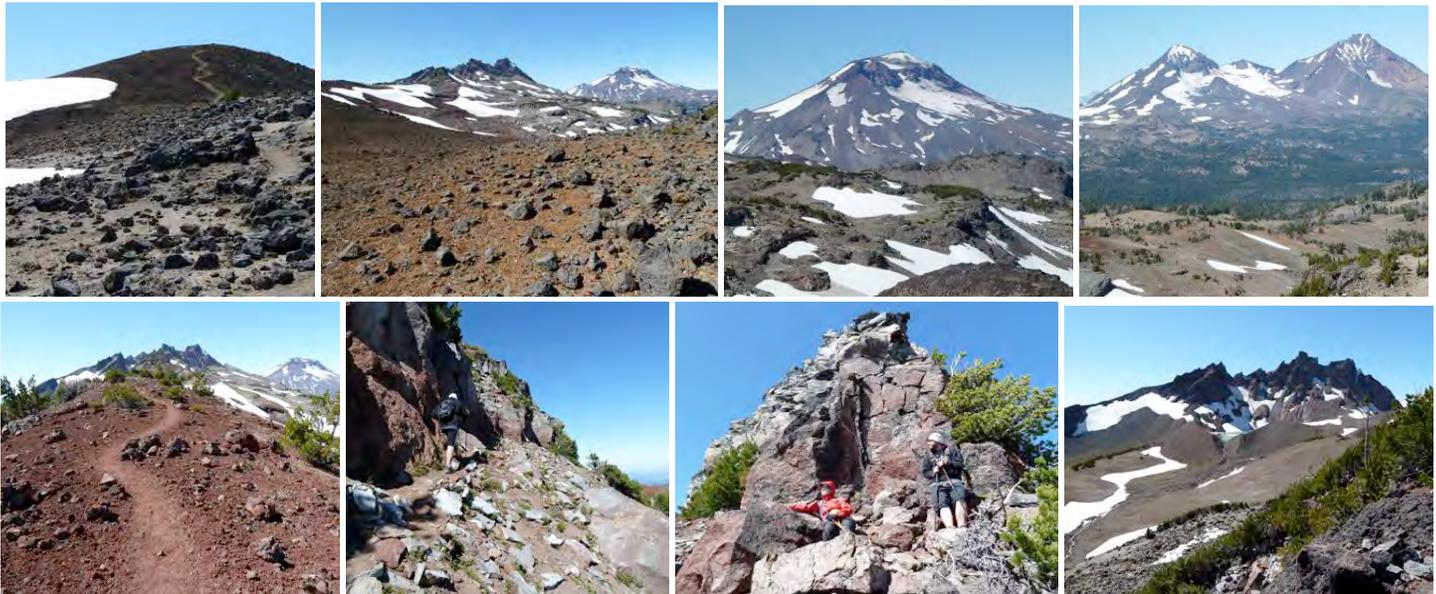
Not surprisingly, the trailhead was MOBBED when we arrived at 10 a.m. The skies may have looked friendly – but it was often cold and VERY windy. I plodded steadily up to the first plateau on my own – given that Allison and Marshall were fussing with gear. There, we met up and hiked together, slogging up the ugly multi-trail-swath hill that leads to the second big plateau with the cliff vantage. After making it up, I did manage to find the correct trail to the cliff vantage – the one that winds along the edge of Tam and has these great views of the cliff edge with Three Creek Lake in the background. This pair of large families refused to cross the final narrow section – the mothers terrified. Given that the cliff area was mobbed, we spent little time here before moving on.



Left to Right: Tam from early in hike, North & Tam, cliff view of Broken Top & South, looking back at cliff

Continuing, we thankfully encountered far fewer people. Even though the snow situation on all the mountain flanks seemed higher than usual, we were surprised to find the “permanent” snowfield area open (i.e. the snowfield was there but the adjacent trail was snow-free). This was a disappointment for Marshall, who had been looking forward to hiking on snow. Once we hit the viewpoint gap above the snowfield (as far as Ellen and I got on our first trip here), it became appreciably MORE chilly and windy – to the point we did not lunch here, as had been the original plan. Setting out along this impressive red ridge, we spread out again as we each differentially changed clothing. Halfway to Broken Hand, we briefly lost the trail at this confusing rock-pile – which required some scrambling. Charging ahead, I set my lunch-spot sights on this wind-shielding rocky area below the final climb to Broken Hand. Shortly after I arrived,

Marshall showed up and said Allison had quit 5 minutes back – famished. But he retrieved her and we FINALLY enjoyed a real lunch on the sunny lower flanks of Broken Hand, mostly out of the incessant, cold wind. Given my history with this hike, I remained skeptical we were going to find the legendary Broken Top crater lake viewpoint. Climbing steeply for 10 minutes, we reached the base of Broken Hand proper. The right side (which Allison and I explored last time – to no avail) was HORRIFIC: high angle, icy snow. Although I did notice there was a rudimentary path heading under the cliffy upper face of Broken Hand’s left side, I was too tired and frustrated – plus, I assumed that all these footprints did was service lunch spots (given 4 lunching parties seated variously).



Left to Right: (top) beginning of climbers' path, along the red ridge, South Sister detail, Middle and North Sister detail (bottom) red ridge, right-side "trail" under cliffs, Allison and Marshall at final viewpoint, final view

Thankfully, Marshall's relative energy and curiosity paid off. While I was resting, this female dayhiker appeared as if from nowhere and said I could NOT stop here because, if I continued left – including breaking through trees – I would find "Shangri-La" (her exact words). I knew INSTANTLY that that was the Broken Top crater lake viewpoint. Heading down the skinny boot-track, I met Marshall (now returning from his discovery to get me) in 2 minutes. Compared with Broken Hand's right side, the left side "trail" was a piece of cake. Although I'm sure some people might balk at its slight exposure, I had ZERO problems with it. We pushed our way through a couple pine clusters before arriving at this rocky promontory under the reddish face of Broken Hand's main tower. There, the opaque blue perfection of Broken Top's crater lake appeared in an otherworldly bowl of lunar rock. Temptingly, we could see an OBVIOUS trail leading right up to the lake – including several parties hiking it – that seemed to originate on the Bend side of the Sisters. Even though it was me who had longed to see this spot the most (based on WAY more research than, say, Allison), I think she and Marshall were both significantly more impressed than me. Our hike back was uneventful, other than its high level of glee and satisfaction.

Pole Creek/Soap Creek – Interesting Wilderness Route Near North Sister
For many reasons, I have only done this hike once – with Ellen in July 2009.



Left to Right: oven-like trailhead, starting up Soap Creek, middle and upper Soap Creek – the last with North Sister

This trip is prominently featured in the Mountaineers' in-color, glossy "100 Classic Hikes in Oregon." Although authors claim this destination to be, "without question... one of the most dramatic locations in Oregon" (supported by a gorgeous shot of very green meadows), Ellen and I would tone that assertion down. Although Portland's forecast was hot, I assumed that because we were going to the mountains - 7000 feet - it would be cooler. In fact, Bend was 95-100 - and I can't say we felt more than five degrees below that. Ellen and I rendezvoused in Salem around 9 a.m. Saturday, making it to the Pole Creek trailhead at noon. Driving Pole Creek (a new place for me) entailed 10 miles of gravel road, 40% of which was washboard. Even in the car, you could feel the heat radiating off the bone-dry land - all thin lodgepole forest. Nevertheless, the large trailhead was full - and over half the cars were still there at the end of the day (i.e. lots of backpackers, loop hikers). Indeed, I wanted to see this trailhead, in part, because I would like to hike said loop someday - and Pole offers one of the shortest access points. At the time, though, all these visitors surprised me because rangers had, the day before, questioned our ability to hike this route, insisting there was lots of snow above 6000 feet (we saw virtually none). After using the surprisingly clean pit toilet, we made our way up the VERY dusty trail. Being that it was solar noon, it felt like an oven. If there

were views of the Sisters during this first mile of trail, I was too insane to notice - not to mention gagging on the dust Ellen was kicking up. I commented that one or both of us would SURELY dry-heave or vomit from heat exposure. Although we never did, we were both nauseous by the end of the day. We then joined up with the Sisters loop trail - which we descended 0.5 mile (heading left/east). Before the loop trail crossed Soap Creek, we left the official path. Compared with other unofficial routes I've done, Soap was less scenic and less trafficked. Although the creek itself (left on the way up) was an easy landmark, it often vanished into rolling mini-canyons that could not be directly followed. So, much of our route was several hundred feet away in mostly-thin forest. Even though we never felt lost during the 2 miles we navigated, we did bring lime green flagging tape and left ties in the trees along the sketchier sections (removed during our return). We also noted someone else's duct-tape and post-it notes flagging en route. Good things about the route: it was intellectually interesting, which slightly distracted us from the heat; and Soap Creek was pretty, a stark contrast with the bone-dry earth. Bad things about the route: we were close enough to the occasionally marshy creek that the bugs were INSANE. Ellen earned several hundred bites that day; although I was similar, mine didn't itch or swell up to the extent that hers did. During the final half-mile, the route began feeling more alpine - with teaser views of North and Broken Top. Even so, we NEVER found any luscious meadows... only sandy volcanic soil interspersed with sparing hardy plants. Above, the sky was weirdly white with wispy high clouds, making for a less beautiful view. Eventually, we topped off on this mini-ridge above upper Soap Creek. A cairn on the other side signaled this was the place we were supposed to cross. We ascended another shallow ridgeline, hoping to find unobstructed views and green meadows... but there was only more rolling terrain, mostly thin forest and/or silver snags. Ellen and I picked a shady, ant-ridden spot amidst some bleached deadfall. There, we ate lunch - feeling ill and dehydrated.



Left to Right: Broken Top and South Sister, Broken Top and Hand, Ellen and best view of North Sister, paintbrush

After 20 minutes, we were both re-energized to the point that we again went exploring - hoping (unsuccessfully) to find an unobstructed view. But we did find satisfaction in being able to say we were the only ones up there. After returning to our lunch spot, Ellen vanished to dig a hole and then we made our way back down. We agreed that the route down seemed completely obvious - to the point we felt silly for using the flagging tape. Half a mile down, we met some backpackers coming up; they said they appreciated our boot-prints, but were surprised we had gone the extra mile with the tape. Ironically, our only navigational confusion was finding the loop trail (where we had not taped because we thought it would be obvious) among some confusing social trails. We also came across some teenagers illegally setting up a ghetto-looking camp right by Pole Creek, concerned the whole place would be on fire because of something stupid this group managed to do (this area did burn down until 2012 - the result of lightning). Getting back to the trailhead by 5:30, we drove back to Sisters, checked into our hotel, washed up, and enjoyed a five-course meal at Jen's Garden.

Pole Creek/Camp - Chambers Lake - Surprisingly Easy For a Fourteen-Miler!

I have done this as a day-hike once - with Allison and Marshall in September 2012. In 2015, we tackled this trail as part of a loop traverse of Middle and North (see loop section at end of this report).



Left to Right: trailhead, crossing Soap Creek, rickety upper crossing of North Fork Squaw, cool rock area, first views of South sister

This was a hike I'd always wanted to do because the Sullivan guidebook pictures were so beautiful - even in simple black and white. But the 14.2 mileage had, for years, intimidated the crap out of me. Then one day, I found myself chatting with Sisters-aficionado and volcanologist colleague Jeff; Jeff was, like, "you can totally hike that in a day." And so the following weekend, Allison, Marshall, and I did just that. Our trail begin much like Ellen and my Soap Creek trip - only Allison, Marshall, and I crossed Soap Creek and, soon thereafter, left the Sisters loop trail to begin a gentle and civil climb up through forest (sadly and as stated before, this entire area burnt down the week after we did this hike!). After an hour, we came to this rubble-strewn river crossing at North Fork Squaw Creek, several rickety logs serving as a ghetto-bridge. From this point, the trail continued to climb - but the way became more convoluted as it crossed and wound among several rocky outcrops. Soon, the way topped out on a more open plateau, with views of all the Sisters and Broken Top. At the time, I thought (and hoped) the views of North and Middle would get better the closer we got to Camp Lake; in fact, the first open plateau provided the best views of these peaks on this hike. As we dropped more into the lake basin, the rolling lower hills largely eclipsed these peaks and their elusive (and no-doubt shrinking) glaciers. As we climbed further, South became the dominant focal point - more meadow greenery becoming partially covered with snowfields. At times, the trail seemed to go ON and

ON. After nearly 3 hours, we arrived at the shimmering shore of Camp Lake. From this angle, South reminded me of Mt. Rainier as seen from the west side: the taller volcanic crater, flanked by an lower amphitheatre of rock. Indeed, maybe that resemblance is why I have always been drawn to this hike. Although the lake was beautiful, I was intimidated by the surrounding terrain – which did not look easy to navigate (a requirement, if I ever want to try a loop traverse of North and Middle). Not only were there many small hills and valleys blocking broader views of that route, there were also steep snowfields – some bearing clear tracks of scramblers attempting said traverse. After a short lunch, we proceeded down, relying heavily on many alphabet games to pass the time and miles. Aiming to finish this hike in 5 hours, we came in just 20 minutes over... not too shabby!



Left to Right: (top) North Sister & “yellow dragon” flank, Broken Top, Middle & North Sister from first plateau; (bottom) Middle Sister close-up, our only trail snow, South Sister... getting closer to Camp Lake

Trailheads Near McKenzie Pass

The McKenzie Highway begins in Sisters and, within 30 minutes, reaches amazingly scenic, lava-strewn McKenzie Pass.

The Magical Obsidian Trail

This is the only area in the Sisters Wilderness that involves a limited entry permit that you must obtain in advance. In August 2008, Ellen and I obtained permits and did the classic day-hike lasso-loop. Allison, Marshall, and I thru-hiked the PCT portion of this area during our Sisters loops in 2014 & 2015 (see loop section at end of this report).



Left to Right: meandering in lava, first Sisters view during hike, Glacier Creek, Ellen and Sunshine

For my 41st birthday festivities, I wanted to hike the Obsidian Trail, a legendary route in Oregon. Remarkably, I was able to call the McKenzie Ranger Station less than a week before and secure permits (something you sure can't do at, say, the Enchantments). I booked a hotel in Sisters the night before, and Ellen and I headed up on Thursday – where I greatly enjoyed my pre-birthday dinner at Jen's Garden. Given that the Obsidian Trail is 12 miles/1800 feet up/down, we were up/out the door early (8 a.m.). The McKenzie highway takes off from Sisters just before the downtown area. Early and from near Sisters, all the mountains were visible, the skies clear and sunny. Within 15 minutes, we were surrounded by this gigantic lava flow on both sides of the road. We drove a good 10 miles as such, the highway extremely narrow. At several points, the lava has been blasted to accommodate the precise width of 2 very small lanes (i.e. there were no shoulders or wiggle room – something to consider if you dare to bike or RV this area!). Although Mts. Washington and Jefferson were still visible, the Sisters were becoming shrouded by clouds (most billowing up from the Willamette Valley to the west). For a few moments, I was concerned our hike views would suck... but this was not the case. Scenic McKenzie Pass is the point where the PCT crosses the highway. It is also home to this odd little lava castle (a.k.a. Dee Wright Observatory). The icy winds blowing at the pass were of concern as we ran up the observatory stairwell, wondering whether we were going to be granted the forecast sunny and warm day. About 7 miles south of the pass is the well-marked Obsidian Trailhead turn-off. We left the highway here and proceeded nearly all the way around the small parking loop before finding a spot. Even so, we saw few people on the trail - suggesting the permits must be doing their job! Indeed, a ranger did circle the area in his truck and asked to see our permits. We set out hiking at 10 a.m., our packs more full with clothing than they would have been had we not stopped for our quick jaunt at the frigid

observatory. Although the hike was long, I wouldn't call it steep - especially during the first 3.4 miles in the forest. Given the warming afternoon, following what had been a rainy night, the entire forest seemed to rise with steamy vapor - giving it an eerie feel (but eliminating what is usually a dusty trail). Perhaps to distract us from our usual forest-induced boredom, blow-downs appeared within a mile and kept up most of the day... some a dozen or more feet long, littered with numerous trees. We joked about how we felt like we were running hurdles, Ellen even jumping one of the single-tree blockages. Unfortunately, there was also fresh horseshit (even though we never saw horses). At about 2 miles in, we encountered snow patches, testimony to how heavy our last winter had been. Although I was concerned this would mean the trail higher up could still have substantial snow, this was not the case. At just before 3.4 miles, we noticed this odd red-black color through the trees: a gigantic wall of lava, 30-50 feet high. It would have seemed weirder - but we'd just hiked Fall Creek/Green Lakes (see Bend area section) and a similar lava flow had been encountered there too.

In contrast with Fall Creek/Green Lakes, though, the Obsidian Trail actually **CROSSES** this lava flow. In contrast with trail descriptions (which rate this trail as difficult), I thought the lava trail was well-built and easy (shit - horses can do it!). By the end, I was even hoping we'd get to do a more free-form lava scrambling. After climbing to the main field, we were granted our first views of the North and Middle. Unfortunately, we were not high enough to see over the rise of lava to Mts. Washington or Jefferson. Interestingly, some trees had found niches in the lava. Although we didn't hike long in the lava field (only 0.7 mile), it was one of two scenic highpoints of the day... and there is nothing like this in Washington's Cascades. The lava flow ended in this open meadow along one of several spring-fed creeks in the area. Forging the shallow water, we came to our first sign of the day: Glacier Creek left, Linton Meadows right. We went left - **AND** strongly recommend it if you want your dessert first (which Ellen and I needed after tromping 3.4 miles of viewless forests!). But we actually didn't know this at the time... nor did we suspect this given that the first thing either option did was re-enter **MORE FOREST!!!!** Going left meant 0.7 miles in subalpine forest before a view (vs. 1.7 miles the other way). After 15 minutes, we arrived at a scenic open meadow (Sunshine, I believe) filled with grass and lupine. Three 20-something male backpackers were resting by another trail junction sign; they were on the second day of a 4-day trip, having sustained wet weather while crossing several lava fields after setting out from McKenzie. Although the trail junction sign indicated only 2 options (left to McKenzie, right to Linton), Ellen and I were more intrigued with this unsigned **BUT** distinct climbers' path heading straight up Sunshine toward Middle. Given that the signed trails looked uncertain in terms of view-whore satisfaction, we decided to head up the climbers' path for awhile. This path initiates one of the key routes up Middle, a more serious ascent than South. After 10 minutes, we crossed into this **VERY** open meadow with a couple tents. Although Ellen wanted to climb further, I wanted to do the rest of the loop. As this was my pre-birthday trip, I got my way. While trying to find a place to pee, I heard the aforementioned guys and then saw them climbing the hogback ridge above us - clearly on a trail. Consequently, we scrambled up the hillside, huffing and puffing up steep scree at 6600 feet.



Left to Right: (top) Obsidian area highpoint, obsidian; (bottom) Sister Spring, spring-fed creek... source of Obsidian Falls

Thankfully, the views were grand from the ridge-top - as were the **INSANE** amounts of obsidian. Even though this trail did not entirely live up to its legendary reputation, I was impressed with the obsidian. You read these guidebook descriptions that talk about shiny black rock everywhere and can't imagine it's that much. At the highpoint, the entire region - the outcrops, the cliffs, the trail itself - were all obsidian. Solid areas on the ground had been chipped away, revealing black glass that reminded me of Vishnu Schist in the Grand Canyon. Everywhere along the trail glittered as though the ground had been strewn with light-catching silver... total bling, as Ellen put it. After also enjoying the grandest view of the day, we continued down the obsidian-strewn trail - bling everywhere. As Ellen rounded this nondescript corner (revealing a high open meadow dotted with tarns), I heard what we discovered were the aforementioned backpackers shrieking - all naked in one of said water features. Being the one dawdling behind, I missed whatever full-monty show Ellen received up front; most of what I saw were the guys manually covering their junk... which honestly looked sort of small compared with the rest of them. Ellen and I continued, Ellen joking about how the bling on the ground was so sparkly that she never **REALLY** saw any naked men in the tarn. Once we were into the next tarn area, we explored some of the many springs more closely - albeit not in the buff. Amazingly, at least four holes in the ground were all bubbling up ice-cold water amidst slate-like rock-piles, each trickling into one large creek that, within a quarter mile, formed Obsidian Falls. Here, we passed 2 parties - a large group who didn't say hello, and a friendly solo female hiker with her dog. As we began descending, I accurately predicted that our alpine views would be gone as the trail meandered back into mostly forest... much to Ellen's disappointment. There were a few florally-scenic meadows, but there

were no more serious alpine views - although, at one point, you could see the tippy-top of South. And so we slogged 1.7 miles back to the upper edge of the lava flow. Our final moment of excitement came along this steep slope where a giant tree (2 feet in diameter!) had fallen over the trail. Given the steepness of the terrain, there was no climbing over that baby; the only way around was to get FULLY down on hands and knees in the mud and wrestle underneath. Clearly, no horses were going to make it around this! With muddy knees, we crossed the lava - looking like we'd done more than we had. The hike back through the woods seemed to go faster, although - much of the way - we were near this couple with a very loud dog. We assumed it was a medium-sized dog but - when we overtook them - we learned it was a tiny dachshund that also aggressively chased you. A mile from the car, we encountered official trail crewmembers with chainsaws (and mosquito head-nets) clearing the deadfall. Given the nice grade of the trail, I pretty much jogged back to the car... which killed several toenails! But we made it out by 3:30, 5.5 hours after starting. Unfortunately, our drive home was frustrating: NEVER drive the McKenzie highway down into the valley (OMG did that suck!): slow, boring, and service-lacking in the bathroom sense of the word. But we arrived in Salem by 7 and were pleased to learn the Indian restaurant downtown had improved since the last semi-abysmal time we sampled it: birthday gulab jamun!

The Equally Magical Little Belknap Trail

This hike follows the PCT, but north of the highway. I have done Little Belknap three times: Allison and I hiked it first in September 2008 (for her 25th birthday) – then again in 2011 (our warm-up for climbing South); Allison, Marshall, and I did it in 2010.



Left to Right: hiking through and along the forest islands, in the lava, Mts. Washington & Three Fingered Jack & Jefferson

Given that Allison loved hiking the lava fields of the Galapagos, I knew that I needed to find a hike fully IN the lava fields for her pending birthday. There appeared to be several options near McKenzie Pass: Black Crater, Four-In-One Cone, and Little Belknap Crater. During the week before this trip, the weather did not look like it was going to cooperate – and we considered just a one-day trip up Belknap followed by dinner in Sisters. But then the sunny conditions decided to prevail. Our well-executed plan: leave Salem Saturday morning, hike Little Belknap (the shortest of the options), and then repeat Tam Sunday. But I did make one mistake: I thought the trailhead was AT McKenzie Pass. While Allison was visiting the car, I pulled out the guidebook and discovered the trailhead was half a mile BEYOND the pass. This was a bit of relief because the pass was a madhouse – DOZENS of people climbing all over Dee Wright Observatory (which, to my surprise, Allison was NOT interested in exploring). And so we headed down the highway to this peaceful forested parking lot (3 other cars) located in one of the forest islands that dot the lava fields. After hiking 5 minutes through open woods, we crossed a short lava section... and then we hiked along the edge of a smaller forest island. Here, I enjoyed fantastically sweet huckleberries that were growing on reddening bushes by the trail. We next arrived at a sea of lava that would last the rest of the way (i.e. the hour it took us to climb Little Belknap's summit). Ahead, we saw a couple backpacking (the woman wearing a huge skirt) but they stayed ahead of us all the way. Given their MASSIVE packs and obvious fitness level, we wondered how much of the PCT they were doing. Compared with the easy lava Ellen and I crossed along the Obsidian, Belknap's lava was more challenging: lots of loose-rock areas that seemed like they would be hard for horses or people in tennis shoes. This seemed surprising given how accessible Belknap is – not to mention the fact that I (total view-whore) felt that this hike was WAY more view-intense than Obsidian. Although Allison hadn't done the latter, she (also a view-whore) felt this trip and its constant views were AWESOME. As we climbed, we enjoyed sustained, full views of the North and Middle, as well as less interesting Big Belknap (which had no summit trails). Once we gained the summit ridge, Mts. Washington, Three Fingered Jack, and Jefferson were all visible to the northwest (indeed, the view of Mt. Washington was the best I've ever seen). Also at the ridge, the PCT continues into the Mt. Washington Wilderness and the Little Belknap summit side-trail proceeds right. A large party was visible on and then descending the summit as we left the PCT. Little Belknap's final crater is composed of distinctly red lava; despite looking small and nondescript (aside from its red nipple, so to speak), Little Belknap is responsible for much of the lava in this area - apparently spewing voluminously for eons.



Left to Right: the red nipple summit, Allison and Big Belknap Crater, largest cave, Allison next to deep and smelly pit

After scrambling up to the summit, Allison and I decided to give ourselves almost an hour of sun-time there, which we enjoyed by ourselves, snacking lightly because I knew how big our dinner would be. Indeed - it was shocking to have this whole place to ourselves on such a gorgeously sunny Saturday. The guidebook suggested there were interesting lava caves near the summit and so – on the

way down - we planned a little exploring time for these obvious holes that we'd spied during the climb up. Unfortunately, I can't say they were that cool. Rather, they were either extremely small or verging on dangerous (i.e. deep dark pits that smelled like they were full of moldy, toxic water). After our short jaunt by the caves, our hike back took hardly any time at all. The low, late-summer light cast a beautiful glow on the Sisters the whole time. The 20-mile drive back to Sisters took a little longer than expected (mostly owing to slow traffic and windy roads) but we still arrived around 5 p.m., sufficient time for a Handi-wipe wash and clothing change in the public bathrooms. Allison (who has been dieting for several months) described our five-course dinner at Jen's Garden as a marathon, MUCH harder than Little Belknap. Not surprisingly, I disagreed - eating everything. By around 8 p.m., Allison and I were on the road for our hotel in Bend. There, Allison enjoyed a much-needed 10-hour sleep – just what we needed for another trip up Tam!



Left to Right: (top) trailhead, water for PCT thru-hikers, me and lava view of Sisters, summit climb, Washington and red nipple summit (bottom) trail-sign, North & Middle, old burn beyond Belknap, Washington active fire, PCT CLOSED sign erected while we were out

The Miraculous Black Crater Trail – Not Bad For 2500 Feet UP

I have done this hike three times – with Jenn and George in August 2013, with Allison in October 2014, and with Allison/Marshall in July 2015. This has become one of my favorite hikes out of McKenzie Pass – it has unique views and makes one feel really strong!

We first did this hike in the midst of my mother's broken ankle recovery, mentioned at the end of the Norway-Netherlands-Ankle story. I'm expanding that summary here: This was a hike Allison and I had always wanted to do because, well, it's an obvious landmark in the area - the first trailhead along the McKenzie Highway from Sisters. Being more demanding (8 miles, with 2500 up/down), we never found a good time to commit to this difficult hike. But last summer, Jenn/George happened to be in Sisters for a wedding... and we miraculously found time to spend a full day together doing this hike. Indeed, I hadn't seen Jenn/George and family since they moved to North Carolina 3 years ago. Back in May, they had called, said they'd be in Sisters, and asked if I'd be interested in meeting up. At the time, I was skeptical because, prior to my mother's fall, I was supposed to be in Montana. But, of course, all that changed. Driving out late Wednesday (staying in Sisters), I was both nervous and relieved to be getting away... the first trip that had nothing to do with my mom. The next day, Jenn/George and I headed up Black Crater (George's parents generously taking the kids into Bend for the day).



Left to Right: Jenn/George on pre-summit plateau, Rankled Ankle song, Allison/Marshall and our non-smoky view of South/North

Although the temperatures in Sister were in the mid-80's, most of this trail is thankfully in shady forest – and even when it finally breaks out at 6500 feet, there was a breeze from the west. While the trail is relentlessly uphill, Jenn and George are always in top shape – and clearly motivated me up that thing. The trail is also 90% civil, with gentle, well-constructed switchbacks for the first 3 miles... and only a couple spots that were weirdly steep. During the last mile, the trail becomes more open, climbing this sandy, dry hillside via many small zigzags. At the top of this hill was a large, broad plateau of lava, a serpentine trail leading up to this crumbly black lava summit block (reminiscent of the Tam cliff). After a short scramble to the actual top, we peered into this gaping, old, tree-filled crater that was very long. To the west, we enjoyed commanding views of Mts. Jefferson, Washington, and Three Fingered Jack. To the east, the skies were smoky – but we could still make out all the Sisters... unusual because, from all other McKenzie-featured hikes, South is eclipsed by North and Middle. Indeed, I honestly didn't think Black Crater would offer anything new – but it was a very cool approach and the

summit views were unique and remarkable. But the most memorable part of the hike will always be the fact that George carried/played his artisanal, home-made ukulele and Jenn wrote/performed a song for my mother ("The Rankled Ankle") – which, yes, we videotaped at 7200 feet for her pleasure. Although I didn't originally plan to stay in Sisters a second night, it was SOOOOO great to be with Jenn/George that I did just that... and joined the whole family for dinner. Wish we could do this every summer!

Trailheads Near Bend

For me, these trails are the farthest away – as solid hour past Sisters along the Cascade Lakes Highway (via Bend).

Fall Creek to Green Lake – With Cool Obsidian!

I have done Fall Creek/Green Lake three times: Ellen and I first hiked it in August 2008; Allison, Marshall, and I did it in 2012 – and were lucky to camp here during our 2014 backpack (see loop section at end of this report).



Left to Right: (top) tame creek near trailhead, fresh hail from overnight storms, best waterfall, middle creek area; (bottom) more middle creek area, upper creek area along the Newberry flow, obsidian detail

Although today looked like it was going to offer better weather (which it did, from the standpoint of no rain or thunderstorms, as had been the case during yesterday's trip up Tam), the skies were less attractive: heavily hot and humid, and more hazy with smoke blown up from fires in northern California. Our goal was legendary Green Lakes via Fall Creek, which guidebooks warn involve extremely high use. In contrast with all the hype, neither Ellen nor I put them as high on our impressive list as Tam. Anyway - after a decent hotel breakfast, Ellen and I headed out through Bend, following directions provided by our hotel toward Mt. Bachelor. Within 15 minutes, though, I realized I'd left my camera back at the hotel... and so we got very good at navigating Bend in our efforts to retrace steps and set out again. We arrived at the trailhead by 10 a.m. Although the tops of South and Broken Top were visible, neither photographed well because of the hazy light. Today's hike was about the same distance and gain/loss as Tam - but 1000 feet lower down in elevation. As we set out, we noticed pea-sized hail piles that were - in some places - thick enough to resemble snow patches. Why, given such an obvious storm, the skies were so hazy was beyond me... but we did appreciate that the trail was damp, meaning no dust. The trail followed Fall Creek the whole way up. Within 5 minutes, we crossed one of several bridges. Within 15 minutes, I heard big water in the distance and, knowing there was supposed to be a waterfall, insisted we leave the trail and find it. Getting to the unmarked falls required more work than I expected, and had I not been listening carefully, I would have missed them completely. But we left the trail and scrambled down this steep, rocky slope - arriving at the base of a 25X25 foot waterfall. Sadly, the mosquitoes were numerous and relentless - with Ellen frustrated by them most of the day. Although my tact was to ignore them, even I was itching 10 bites most of the week after this trip... not to mention wondering whether any of my hot flashes were, in fact, West Nile fever.



Left to Right: upper creek/lava flow and South, Broken Top and South from lunch spot along biggest Green Lake, Ellen and new friend

Although Ellen was not impressed with the majority of the ascent, I liked watching the personality of Fall Creek change as we climbed. Eventually, we reached the start of the subalpine section - the trees thinning into meadows, the creek becoming smaller and quieter. I knew we should start hiking along some BIG lava flows (Miller and Newberry - different from Newberry Crater, a separate place

entirely). When we finally saw the lava, I couldn't believe my eyes – probably because I SOOO enjoyed lava hiking in the Galapagos – not to mention fond childhood memories of lava hiking in Hawaii with my dad. Today's lava appeared as this monstrously tall behemoth above and through the trees... like the rock/debris-covered Carbon Glacier, only there was no ice under this more complex and colorful rock. Ellen arrived shortly thereafter and we enjoyed a proper lunch at the lake shore, views of South and Broken Top. Our hike down took 90 minutes and seemed more tedious than the climb up. At the trailhead, Ellen decided we should get our feet wet in Fall Creek, which we did. Aside from an angry driver flipping Ellen off for slowing to pull over and take a picture, we had a non-monumental drive back. Contrary to Bend's happenin' reputation, we found Friday night Bend dead. After dinner at McMenamin's, we grabbed some so-so ice cream at a candy store, and then bought take-out egg rolls - proper fare for watching the Beijing Olympics opening ceremonies.

Scrambling South Sister – A MAJOR Accomplishment!

This hike is the farthest from Bend. Allison and I have memorably climbed South Sister once, in September 2011; at the time, we said we'd probably never do it again (and so far haven't!).



Left to Right: Mt. Washington area fire, trailhead, proper climbing attire, horrible slog up to loop, post-loop open climbing

While not rope-up technical, South Sister is a scramble with some permanent snow: 13 miles, 5000 feet up/down... longer and steeper than Camp Muir and St. Helens (which I have done several times - when I was fit, skinny, and in my 20's). Although some people advocate backpacking to Moraine Lake and dayclimbing from there the next day, I would not make this choice because I do not always sleep well in a tent (plus – the camping situation at Moraine is crazy and limited). Anyway - during my early years in Oregon, I had “climbing South Sister” on the brain a fair bit – driving out there three times and then being thwarted by FOUL weather or FIRE. And yet this last-minute trip – never on the docket the prior year – worked out. Having said that, I was in the mountains a LOT the months before this climb, including three weeks at or above 10K. Feeling confident, I called Allison and talked her into giving South Sister a shot with one week's warning: balls-to-the-walls all the way up/back in one day. Of course, we also figured we needed a higher elevation warm-up hike the day before (as if South Sister was insufficient labor for our Labor Day weekend). So we took out a hotel in Bend Friday, Saturday, AND Sunday night. The plan was to get into Bend late Friday, do our warm-up hike Saturday (followed by a pre-celebration meal at Kokanee Café), and then get up super-early and do South Sister Sunday. Because we'd be trashed, I didn't want to drive back immediately after the climb. Hence, our hotel Sunday night – followed by a morning drive back on Monday to avoid returning holiday traffic. In general, we executed most of this plan. As should be obvious from the pictures, though, one of the unknowns that has fucked up previous Sisters outings is FIRE – namely, on this trip, the one by Mt. Washington that grew large as we drove over the Cascades. Fortunately, the wind carried most of that smoke west – and so it did not impact the climb. Nonetheless, as we started coasting down to the Mt. Washington viewpoint (it was 8:30 p.m.), Allison and I were eerily amazed to see a ribbon of glowing orange; it was so impressive, in fact, that we pulled out at the viewpoint and watched it – along with MANY other cars – for a good 10 minutes. The next day, our planned warm-up hike to Four-in-One Cone was foiled by navigational errors; a mile in, we took a wrong turn wound up on some branch of the Obsidian Trail. Given that we lacked permits for this trail, we turned around and headed to our old standard: Little Belknap. Instead of climbing the nipple, though, we hike a mile towards Mt. Washington (yes, INTO the fire) until our dinner reservation-defined turn-around time. Hiking back, we were stopped by a ranger who had closed the trail and was now gathering PCT thru-hikers. Later that night at our hotel, MANY backpackers arrived very late... rescued and put up for the night via a PCT angel in Bend. Our earlier attempt at helping hitch-hiking backpackers at McKenzie Pass was REJECTED. We joked that it was because the car smelled SOOOO bad – rotting food (Allison's fault), horrible BO (both our faults), and farting (both our faults). But we cleaned up in Sisters and Kokanee's did not reject us! The meal was EXQUISITE - Allison envious of my DIVINE braised lamb shanks.



Left to Right: first big views - route, the fun begins, our ONLY snowfield crossing (Mt. Bachelor in the background), stocking up

After a mixed night of sleep, we were out the door by 6 a.m., at the trailhead by 6:30. Remarkably, Allison admitted later she would have wanted to get up even EARLIER!!!! I just hope she remembers that if we ever do this trip again... because she was NOT into getting up earlier the night before. Although the parking area was NUTS, we parked within 100 feet of the outhouse. Nearby, we discovered our first trail obstacle: a shockingly full creek, all the stepping stones under water. Following lots of boot-tracks, we

bushwhacked up to the road - and then followed it to where the real trail headed up Kaleetan Butte. En route, Allison was annoyed at me for needing to re-tape my little toe... which had four layers of blisters on it from all my trips this summer. The first 1.5 miles of this climb is in the woods – on an at-times SHOCKINGLY steep trail. Thankfully, it was cool and we made it up the first 1200 feet in an hour. This was good because my personal goal was to do about 1 mile every hour, with a 1:30 p.m. safety turn-around time. Initially, it didn't feel like there were too many people on the trail – although we were among a dozen ascending this first section. Although I also tried to take a mandatory rest/drink break every hour, I did not carry enough food – and packing a full sleeve of Pringles was probably not wise... but it was TASTY! The other thing neither of us brought enough of was water, having followed specific recommendations (2 L per person) stated in the guidebook. Allison drank half of her allotment JUST during this initial climb. While I stretched mine out farther than Allison, I suffered greatly come the last couple miles – feeling dizzy, sick, and headache-y. Upon reaching the first plateau, we took a rest/drink break, and discussed the water situation. Given full views of South and the completely obvious climbing route, we decided it would be wise to start collecting snow ASAP... that way it would melt by the time we needed it, and then we could iodine tablet-purify it. For the next mile or so, the trail was fairly flat (i.e. the 5000 foot up/down is HIGHLY concentrated at times). But the views of Broken Top, Moraine Lake, and South were magnificent – and I kept telling myself: good enough if I didn't make the summit. By this point, it was obvious that a ton more people were behind us... and even more were above us. And, even though it was pretty bad, it was actually NOT as bad as I thought it would be given that it was Labor Day weekend. All in all, we estimated that we passed 120-150 people – several parties of which had actually camped ON THE SUMMIT and were now descending.



Left to Right: (top) more trail, greenery rest area, CF#2, CF#3 approaching and in; (bottom) tarn junction, high-angle red section

At the point where the climbing route began climbing in earnest, Allison gathered the first of several Nalgene bottles of snow – initially on a side patch next to the path. Although it looked clean while we chipped it out with my ice axe, it was silty and gray upon melting – and NOT pleasant to drink. Allison seemed worried about consuming it, but I assured her that it wasn't dangerous with infectious microbes... HOWEVER, silt does have a laxative effect (felt at the end of the day). Consequently, we deemed our emergency snow water “more-anal.” After climbing another 20 minutes, we arrived at our first route-covering snowfield – actually the only snow we walked on, other than in the crater. And we encountered CF#1 here – given a single set of soft, bucket-like tracks for those ascending and descending. For me, up was fine and down was a little more unnerving. From the top of the snowfield, we climbed some more on a generally civil path. Eventually, though, we came to a scary scrambling rock-pile area (CF#2) – part of it loose scree and part of it solid rock covered with grit. I was so unnerved and in such a mess of people that I did not take ANY good pictures going up... but did shoot some images after descending it on the way down. After exiting CF #2 via shrubbery, the route was civil for awhile. Near the mound with the adjacent snow (leftmost image below), Allison (now consistently ahead of me) and I met up for a longer rest/drink break. Given all her water consumption, Allison had to use a shrub – which, believe it or not, was available. Shortly after this break area, we saw CF#3 in the distance: this chaotic, loose boulder-heap that was a free-for-all in terms of route-picking. At the top of CF #3, we arrived at this glacial tarn and the start of the red section. Here, other climbing routes (e.g. Green Lakes) join up for the final run to the summit. In contrast with many lurching parties, Allison and I had been regularly energizing – and thus continued. Deflating some of that energy, I overheard some guy say we still had 1200 feet left... SERIOUSLY? Indeed, for MOST of the rest of the climb, I was doing 50-pace segments followed by breathing rests. The red section was astonishingly steep: a sustained 40-50° angle, composed of wildly loose shit - 2 steps forward, half-step sliding back the whole time. I began the red section at 11, and crested the crater rim (which, it should be STRONGLY NOTED, is NOT the summit!) at 12:20, 6 hours after setting out. During this climb, my mind was mush: counting, breathing, resting... repeat, repeat, repeat. I didn't feel there was an obvious transition between the “straight-up” section and the final “ramp” that – at least from a distance – looked shallower, cutting from the ridge around the top part of the crater. Thus, when I stepped onto the crater rim, it was frankly SHOCKING because I had little idea I was that close. Of course, I then realized that the summit was ACROSS the crater, the BIG view I really wanted. Jesus, I thought, I have to cross ALL THAT... SHIT! Almost at my feet was Allison, lying on the ground resting while this dude party chatted her up. Even though she'd kicked my ass most of the way so far, she seemed more tired and less motivated by the final section (although she did eventually do it). Stealing half her chocolate-walnut bar, I started marching across the crater snowfield. Everything here reminded me of Rainier's summit – based on seeing friends' pictures of that final crossing. Indeed, this climb totally made up for my never having bagged Rainier. Halfway across, I was drawn to cutting over to the right side of the crater – where many people were walking on a rock trail (vs. sloggng through snow).

There, I was surprised to find several campsites with rock wind-blocks and towers. The views to Broken Top and Green Lakes were also impressive. Getting to the final summit – a clear highpoint along the ridge-like line – was ultimately tricky with more loose rock and scrambling. Frustratingly, you didn't get THE BIG VIEW until FULLY on top: Middle and North, plus the spectacular Chambers/Camp Lakes area between them. If the Mt. Washington fire impeded anything, it was the more hazy views of Jefferson, Washington, and Three Fingered Jack. If Hood should have been visible – we did not see it. ANY hiking guide that attempts to say the views from lower down (e.g. Moraine Lake) are equal to that on the summit are full of shit. If you want the big views, you not only have to get to the crater rim, BUT you ALSO MUST cross the crater to the opposite side. Based on my observations, 10% of the people who made it to the rim turned around without crossing to the summit... an INSANE mistake, even though the summit was crazy. With Allison still nowhere in sight, I asked someone to take my picture – but that was fine... there were plenty of volunteers. On the return, I hiked directly across the crater snowfield – and then waited with Allison's dude party friends, collecting more snow in my now-empty Nalgene until she returned. When she returned, it was the dreaded time to start the SCARY descent!



Left to Right: (top) what – NO TEAR-DROP LAKE(?), crater snowfield and lava edge, me in the crater; (bottom) Middle and North Sister, Middle and North detail, descending to the tarn

In contrast with Allison, I had long accepted that going down would take just as long as going up because I did not want to fuck up my knees. Left to her own young devices, Allison – like many others – could have made the descent in 2-3 hours (vs. my 5)... but, being with me, she had to wait because I was a TOTAL WUSS. Indeed, folks who made it down in 2 hours were mostly 15-30 YO men who ran and slid down the loose rock. While it was impossible not to slide a fair bit, I approached every step slowly and deliberately – and I never fell, despite witnessing several out-of-control falls by crazy people. Allison and I met up at the tarn, and then again at the shrub-watering rest-spot mound (disturbingly, I had yet to pee ALL DAY). Here, the dude party arrived, thankfully giving me one of their extra bananas before they ran-slid by. Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the following: on the crater rim, Allison - because (she claims) she was dehydrated and altitude-sick - accidentally gave the more forward of the dudes her PHONE NUMBER... something she NEVER does, like, down at sea level (and, make no mistake, Allison is in a committed long-term relationship). Before dude party tore off, they reminded Allison they wanted to have beers with us later that night. I was, like, WTF? I am going to BED after I get back.



Left to Right: South Sister in sunglasses, Moraine Lake, soaking the dogs, our version of beer with the dudes...and one wookie!

Even after CF#1 – the snowfield (on which I finally used my ice axe – which I carried ALL THE WAY up/down the mountain) – I was still walking like an old lady – even down the civil trail sections. By this point, my knees were talking to me a bit – and I was worried the old ITB injury was going to flare up. By this point, we'd been passed by the majority of the crowds and the light was getting low. Although I'd accurately predicted it was going to be between 6-7 before I got back to the car, Allison kept waiting for me to pick up the pace... now that we were on a trail. We took another rest-stop along the flat plateau section; I did manage to take a meager, yellow pee, having swallowed a Nalgene-full of tablet-treated "more-anal" water since the summit. And then it was time for the jarring descent through the forest. Here, Allison left me in the dust – which became disconcerting as I fell into a hazy state of dehydration and exhaustion. For awhile, I hiked near this 20-something couple – the girl limping from (you guessed it) a knee injury sustained during the descent. But then I overtook them, the forest becoming dark and forbidding. Fortunately, despite my mushy head, I had enough wits

about me to fill my Nalgene at this creek that was 5 minutes above road – and start treating it (which takes 30 minutes). This was important because I knew there was no potable water at the trailhead. Crossing the road and following the trail to the parking lot, I was excited to reach the high-water creek because I was looking forward to soaking the dogs for a spell. That felt GREAT, I should add! It was 6:17 p.m. when I arrived at the car – 12 hours after setting out. Downing some car snacks and water, we hit the road and made the drive back to Bend, no problem. There, I figured I deserved a couple Arby sandwiches – given that Allison already had her healthy Trader Joe dinner waiting in the fridge. Indeed, we ignored the dude party text messages – trading that idea in for watching Star Wars in bed, while drinking beer from the Safeway across the street. The next day, we drove back to Salem – our spirits high from this TOTALLY satisfying accomplishment... and, as Allison noted, her first “real” mountain.

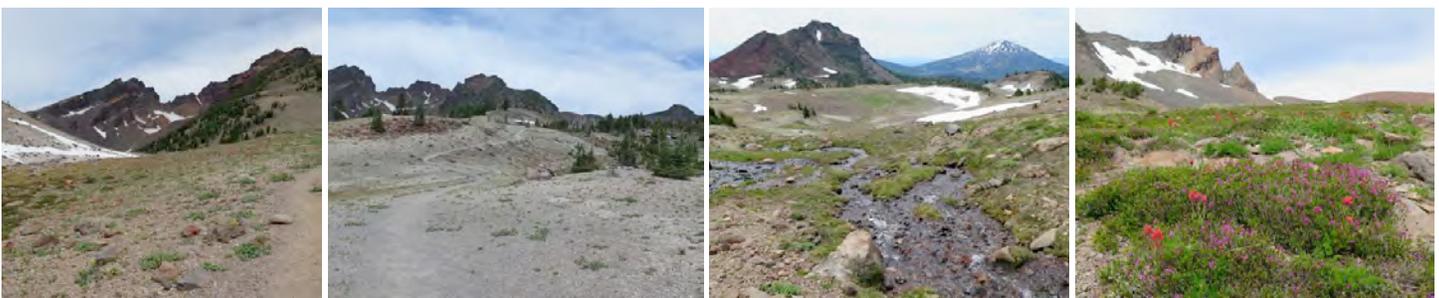
Todd Lake to Broken Top Crater Lake – FINALLY!

After YEARS obsessing about this place (see Tam McArthur Rim), we FINALLY hiked to this AMAZING place... AS GOOD AS South Sister! I'm sure our July 2015 trip will be repeated – hopefully via a backpack around Broken Top!



Left to Right: Bachelor and lower meadows above Todd, first views of Broken Top, fortress-like Broken Top, lovely flowers!

After years of hush-hush reverence, Sullivan FINALLY included this legendary hike in his most recent version of Oregon’s most popular hiking guidebook. Not that we used it... it’s easy to figure out using a map and there are PLENTY of on-line descriptions. That said, we HOPED to do the “short” upper-trail version (6 miles/1500 up/down – but with a terrible road to “Broken Top Trailhead”)... but wound up doing the manly (14 mile/2800 up/down) version. Heading to the Todd Lake trailhead (10 minutes before the Fall Creek trailhead), we determined that the dirt road which accesses the upper-trailhead was gated/closed. A few days later, I spoke with the local rangers and determined that they don’t open the road until late July/early August (regardless of snow!); that said, we noted a large number of illegal motorcyclists jumping the gate (the rangers were disheartened to hear this). Anyway - parking in what was an insane mess, we committed to what we knew was going to be a 14-mile day – half because we didn’t have any other options, and half because July 4th is always a day we try to honor our dad (who passed away that day) with a good hike. Although the parking lot was crazy, there were very few people on our trail. Most were at Todd Lake proper picnicking or playing in the water. Heading up from the parking lot, we climbed a couple miles to a 3-way junction with the Soda Creek and Green Lakes connecting trails. Although most of this trail passed through forests and green meadows, there were sprawling views of South Sister, Bachelor, and even Diamond Peak and Thielson WAY in the distance. Turning right, we hiked another mile towards Broken Top (now visible) before coming to another junction: left was Green Lake, right was to “Broken Top Trailhead” (i.e. the end of the bad, gated road). From here, the trail was all in high open meadow/rock and the views were magnificent – first up the fortress-like Broken Top crater with the Crook Glacier. For an hour, we thought the magnificent crater lake was up there in that nook. But the shape of the crater rim didn’t match the pictures we’d seen – and Broken Hand was nowhere in sight... so I started to wonder (correctly) if we didn’t have to climb around to the next crater opening.



Left to Right: continuing around Crook crater, Broken Hand comes into view (right feature), Ball Butte and Bachelor, flowers!

Eventually, we came to this odd water feature – a man-made “ditch” (as Sullivan calls it) - and we knew we had to leave the official trail soon. The upper/Broken Top Trailhead also came in from the left at this area. In front of us, Ball Butte (a large reddish volcanic feature) was clearly in our way... we knew we had to turn left at some point, following the uppermost stream between Ball and Broken Top left (with said stream originated in the Crater Lake). Climbing above the ditch, we came to an obvious stream but were not sure if this was the uppermost one. There were definitely social trails about but most seemed rudimentary... at least initially. Eventually we committed to following the leftside-creek one up – and thankfully passed another party (coming down) who confirmed we were on the right path, that it was easy to follow ALL the way up, AND there was no confusing snow to deal with (sort of true). Whew – that was a relief. Of course, climbing the last 1500 feet was challenging because we were closing in on 7500 feet – ALL of us sucking wind. For awhile, Broken Top almost vanished behind these impressive rubble piles. Although there was definitely a lot of rock, there was an equal amount of green meadows and beautiful flowers at first...something, like I said, Allison/Marshall said were gone a month later. There were also beautiful flowing creeks and snow-patches – both also vanished later in the season. Of course, the way then became pretty much all rubble – with an obvious rubble moraine heap blocking almost all views of Broken Top. We knew that we would eventually come to a creek outlet – and have to scramble up/along the river to the actual lake... but before making it to this, we had a

short/easy snowy plateau to cross – complete with a camper and his two barking dogs who came at us. Alas, this would not be our only brush with angry off-leash dogs - there would be more at the lake – all their owners notably commented sweetly, “oh – our dogs are NEVER like this...” as they physically restrained the animals from trying to bite us (to which we were, like, BULLSHIT!).



Left to Right: under the rubble, pass in the rubble, scrambling the rubble (Broken Hand in distance!), ah – CRATER LAKE!

Descending to the final creek and crossing another short snow-patch, we finally could see Broken Hand towering above. From our previous bushy vantage point on said feature, the climb up the creek to the actual lake looked HUGE and challenging. In reality, it was short and mostly sweet. That said, the “trail” was the hardest of the entire off-trail section – a skinny, sloping mess of grit that you had to watch your step on. From the top/outlet, we finally enjoyed the amazing view of Broken Top rising above the water. Of course, this view/lake section belied not only how huge the lake was – but also the fact that most of the rest of the lake was under snow/ice... and flowing off to our left. Continuing toward this rockier beach area next to what was clearly 90% snow the rest of the way, we hiked along the lakeside – briefly, like I said, threatened by another camper with angry dogs.



Left to Right: (top) icy lake with patriotic cupcakes, climbing to pass – anemone, lake from pass, Three Sisters from pass (bottom) left - Middle/North, Washington, Three-Fingered Jack, Jefferson, and Hood - right, victorious sisters

Because we thought we were only doing a ~6 mile hike, we had not brought major lunches; indeed, my only saving grace was the fact that I snuck a bunch of 4th of July cupcakes into my pack, intending to surprise everyone at the top. From the lake, we could see that most others were climbing up to this obvious pass above the lake between Broken Top and Broken Hand. Unfortunately, 25-30% of said route was over snow – and my first inclination was to skip the walk. But then we must have eaten the cupcakes and got a chocolate blast – because we were soon heading up, snow and all. In the end, it wasn't more than 20 minutes. The view from the pass ranks among the top in all of Oregon, featuring all three Sisters and all major peaks heading north, including Hood.



Left to Right: snowfield & Broken Hand, lower creek with capstone, last shot of Broken Top, me and my ribs... rib-o-rama!

Immediately over the pass was all STEEP snow – no easy/obvious trail continuing. It was unclear to us whether one could do some kind of high ridgewalk over to Broken Hand from this point – as had been suggested in some route descriptions. To me, the only “easy” way to Broken Hand seemed to be from below the crater moraine pass – making a WIDE cut around Broken Hand to Tam

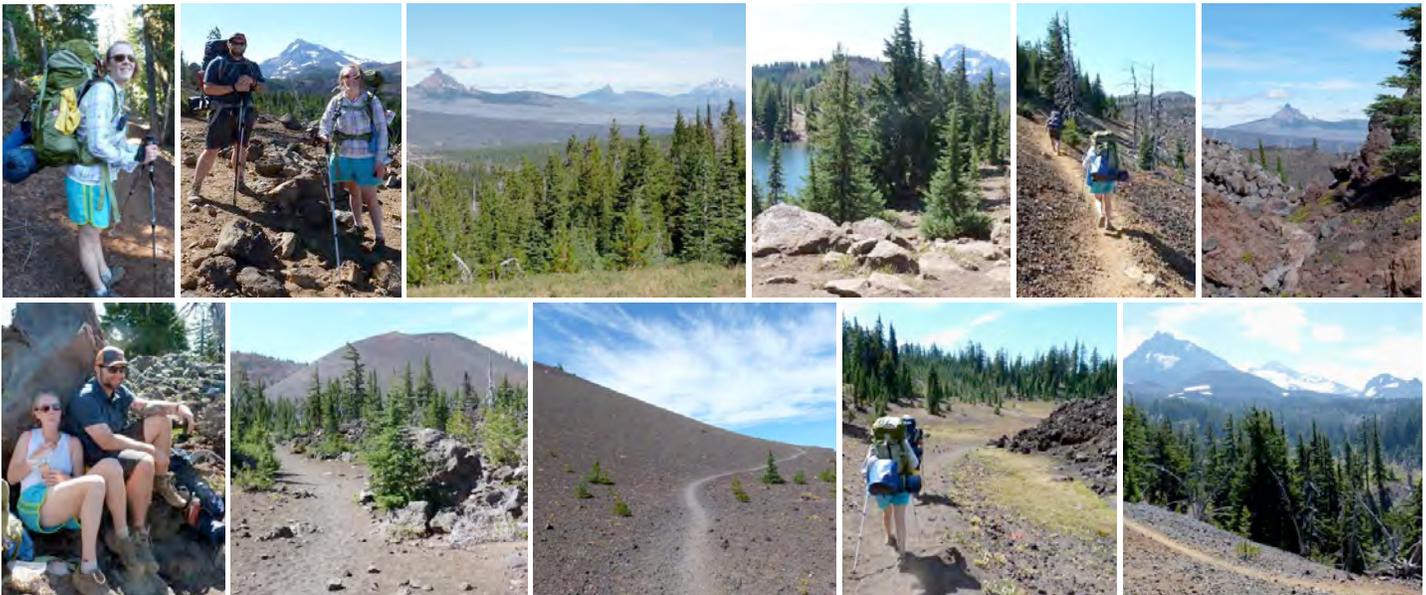
McArthur Rim. Pondering all these future planning ideas, we enjoyed a good 10 minutes gawking and taking pictures before heading down. In my attempt to avoid descending one steep snow-patch, I led Allison briefly astray and there was a lot of 5-pointing and cursing through steep, crappy rock. Given that we knew we had a solid 7 miles back, we did not dally much on the way down. While the upper 4 miles were tolerable, the final 3 miles were hot, dry, and uninteresting. Thankfully, the drive back to Bend was fast – because we stayed in and cooked quite the ‘merican dinner: ribs, beans, cornbread (homemade), and watermelon. Lastly, it should be noted that Allison/Marshall returned to hike the upper trail in August while I was in Switzerland: the road was definitely bad, the trail too crowded and almost too short, and the scenery less impressive (there was no snow or flowers – like today!).

Around the Sisters, Version 1.0 – Lava Camp to Park Meadow Traverse (Labor Day Weekend 2014)

Backpacking around the Sisters has been a longstanding dream of ours. Over the last 6 years, however, we have watched many planning efforts get foiled by weather, bugs or fire. Finally in 2014, Labor Day weekend mostly worked out – but we only had 4 days, and thus could only hike a 40-mile “best-of” traverse (skipping the ~12-mile forest segment between Park Meadow and Scott Pass).

Day One – Lava Camp (Near McKenzie Pass) to Minnie Scott, With Side-Trip to Collier Overlook

Allison and I fussed a lot with this itinerary, deeming it “quite the puzzle” given that we hoped to avoid hiking more than 9 miles/2000 feet up in a day. In the end, we began our traverse at Lava Camp, near McKenzie Pass. After driving to Sisters Thursday evening (and enjoying my birthday dinner at Jen’s Garden), we set out Friday – placing Allison’s car at the Park Meadow trailhead, then piling into my car and driving to Lava (shuttle time = 1 hour). Neither was crowded. Yesterday, Sisters rangers scared us into believing our backpack was going to be a crowded nightmare; we did not find this to be the case – although our day two storm scared a lot of people away. Setting out, our packs were 27 (mine), 30 (Allison’s), and 35 lbs (Marshall’s). Hitting the trail at 10 a.m., we decided to follow the PCT to South Matthieu Lake – bypassing North. Said decision was based on NOT enjoying our previous experience hiking the up/down trail to dank and buggy North Matthieu (so disappointing that I never wrote it up). In contrast, the PCT offered a well-constructed trail with a more gradual incline, climbing above North and staying high through Scott Pass. Although much of the way was in forest, we were granted several excellent views of Washington, Jefferson, Three Fingers Jack, and even Hood. Obviously, today was VERY clear - consistent with the forecast. In contrast with North Matthieu, South was open and scenic, with beautiful beaches and no bugs. But we did not linger, climbing briefly to the junction with Scott Pass and the official beginning of the Sisters loop... not to mention: THE LAVA!



Left to Right: (top) setting out, Allison & Marshall with North, views over McKenzie Pass, South Matthieu Lake, to and then in the LAVA; (bottom) lunch, Yapoah Crater, skirting last of trailside lava, North, Middle, & Little Brother

Dropping slightly from the pass, we promptly climbed onto a moderately large lobe of lava that continued beyond Yapoah Crater, rising impressively in the distance. The trail was exceedingly well-constructed, as evidenced by the piles of horseshit. We wound our way through a few hummocks, and then crossed a bowl-like pass – which offered grand views of all the peaks between Washington and Hood. In search of some shaded views of the Sisters, we eventually found our lunch spot on this higher lava ridge. Up to this point, we’d seen less than 6 people. Between us and the Sisters rose Yapoah Crater, a moon-like dome with a hint of red that I had been looking forward to hiking. After lunch, we dropped to this sandy, lava-strewn plain – and then began contouring around and partly up Yapoah’s austere base. As we came to a mini-pass on Yapoah’s flanks, some horse-folks passed us – the horses responding negatively to the descent on lava. After Yapoah, the route returned to meadows and short bands of thin, dry forest. Unfortunately, the creek-beds in the lower meadows were all dry, causing some concern. Marshall also managed to trap a honeybee in the tongue of his boot – earning a full-on sting (alas, my first-aid kit “sting aid” pads were all dry as well). Fortunately, we were close to camp – as ascertained by the growing proximity of Collier Cone. Camp one, Minnie Scott Spring, was confirmed wet via a conversation with rangers the week before. On our fourth meadow crossing, we came to a seep of water – its presence given away by colorful flowers. Following the seep up a small hill to its source, we found a swath of campsites (complete with illegal fire-rings!) in the nearby trees. Unfortunately, more horse-folk were snacking at the far end of camp –leaving piles of horseshit, the aroma of which occasionally blew our way. After setting up camp and securing hanging food/smelly bags, we set out on what we originally thought was a 1.5 mile/~500 foot up/down climb up Collier Cone. Pack-free, we started hiking up the trail from camp – Collier’s dark cone looking impossible and imposing above us – and arrived at this two-way saddle. In one direction, the PCT continued towards this low, spiky lava ridge we

named Opie Dildock Pass I (and, no, we were not the only party to corrupt that name!); Opie II (probably the actual pass) was a little farther along, but not much higher. To the left, a scrambling path took off into a bowl behind Collier and then zigzagged up the cone's loose scree coat. We headed up the latter, knowing tomorrow's backpack would continue down the PCT. Well – said path was harder than it looked, burying our feet in tiny lava gravel with each step. After making it to another saddle at 6900 feet, we were granted a WINDY, puzzling, partial view of Middle and upper Collier Glacier. In fact, we were under the mistaken impression that “Collier Viewpoint” was the same as “Collier Cone.” Climbing the cone, though, it was clear there was a ridge between where we were and that view. And so we gave up, Marshall heading down a direct line to camp... Allison and I taking a less steep path on the other side of Collier. Once down in this austere basin, we noted an obvious scrambling path – this time in hard-pack earth (not crazy lava gravel) – heading up the ridgeline that separated our previous view from Middle/Collier Glacier. Although we knew Marshall would get worried (and he did), we headed up (it took us 15 EASY minutes to stroll up). Although the skies were no longer electric blue, we finally found the view we'd dreamed of seeing. Not wanting to dally, though, we admired the view 5 minutes before hiking back down to the PCT. At this junction, a HUGE cairn of lava and obsidian (4 feet tall, 3 feet in diameter) marked this great and well-used side-trail. Heading back up to Opie I, we were enthralled with the insane lava formations – most of which looked like medieval castles. Arriving back at camp around 4:30, we gathered water and prepared dinner. To keep things simple, we each planned our own meals – in my case “add boiling water to bag” lasagna (DELICIOUS); of note, I have had these meals in my pantry for 6 years now – bought the first year we THOUGHT we were going to do this trip!



Left to Right: (top) lower Minnie Scott (our camp was in trees above meadow), my tent with hazy North, Collier looms above camp, dinner; (bottom) scrambling down cone, looking down on Opie I, Allison and cone, Collier viewpoint - North & Middle, Allison on Opie I

Day Two – Minnie Scott to Mesa Creek: Not Naked, But Afraid... Rain Takes Hold!

Today was our longest and most demanding day. When I mapped the route, I came up with only 11.5 miles – but it was nearly 14 miles. Although the forecast HAD been good, the night clear (I know this well because I was up 4 times peeing), we awoke to overcast skies. While the day was not a total loss, it degraded significantly. After getting up at 7:30, we enjoyed a hot breakfast and leisurely pack-up – hitting the trail just after 9. Having packed limited clothing, I wore rain-gear all day – initially for warmth (cool temperatures and regular wind), but then for rain protection. After easily hiking over Opie I, we trekked across the moonscape plateau with the Collier viewpoint side-trail/cairn. At its southern edge, we came to what I recognized as the “classic” Opie view (Opie II): this impressive set of zigzags through crazy lava. In researching this trip, I had seen this view in many photographs; thankfully, it was much smaller in real-life (each zig only 50-75 feet long). What a relief: today's BIG pass was no big deal – could there be smooth sailing the rest of the day? Probably not! Descending Opie II, we continued through crazy lava– the trail civil despite undulating formations everywhere.



Left to Right: the only sun all day, magnificent Opie II zigzags, descending Opie II, interesting lava band, more lava beyond Opie II

After 30 minutes, we descended to Sawyer Bar: forest, meadow, and namesake super-rocky dry riverbed. In old guidebooks, Sawyer Bar is listed as a good campsite with reliable water; however, recent web-sources and rangers confirmed that water is no more at Sawyer Bar (unless there is still snow on the ground). Having said that, there were a LOT of beautiful flowers near the dry creek-bed – and the banks seemed damp... so water is near the surface. We met our first party of the day here: a couple coming off the Middle/North loop

traverse via Chambers/Camp Lakes. In response to questions about water sources, they reported little water other than a couple creeks in Obsidian, and a lake by dry Separation Creek. Unfortunately, they never hiked near Mesa and could not confirm that our planned camp had water – something I regrettably had not confirmed with rangers. From Sawyer, we climbed into mostly lush forest for a long time, the trail curving in and out of shallow ravines. Within 15 minutes, our first blast of rain arrived – causing us to duck into some trees and, in my case, pull out my pack-cover. Unfortunately, this was where I learned Allison and Marshall did not own pack covers, a decision that would challenge us as the rain became more sustained. Within an hour, we entered the Obsidian area – defined by an official sign 20 minutes before Glacier Creek/Sunshine Meadow, the trail junction where Ellen and I entered in 2008. I knew that as long as we stayed on the PCT, we were legal... BUT I was TOTALLY turned around as to which was the PCT vs. the Obsidian Trail.



Left to Right: (top) Sawyer Bar, Obsidian sign, Glacier Creek, Sister-less Obsidian area highpoint, high plateau tarn; (bottom) obsidian, Sister Spring, its product – Obsidian Falls, our views the rest of the day, Mesa camp the next morning

Based on my 2008 recollections, I THOUGHT the obsidian-laden high route Ellen and I hiked was the Obsidian Trail; in fact, that is the PCT. In fact, the permit-requiring Obsidian Trail is the access route from McKenzie (i.e. the point of the regulation is more about day-use and camping... not thru-hiking). Not understanding this at the time, I grew concerned when we started going up and over the cool obsidian-laden area... NONE of the Sisters visible (as they were in 2008). But we did see an awful lot of questionable camping: the aforementioned couple and at least 3 additional parties had camped or were camping near Glacier Creek; although we did see rangers later in the day, none were patrolling the Obsidian as we did our traverse. It is also worth mentioning that Sunshine Meadow is completely closed now, with strongly worded signs erected around Glacier Creek. Compared with our Opie ascent, the climb to the Obsidian area highpoint felt harder. We passed beautiful tarns, gorgeous obsidian, the miraculously large Sister Spring that forms Obsidian Falls. Here, the trail dropping into woods for a spell, the other side of the Obsidian Trail branches left. But we headed right – into what was all new terrain for me, terrain I LONGED to see under clear skies. To this day, I don't know how much of the high peaks one sees from this more road-less side of the Sisters... but my impression of the land - open meadows, each separated by low ridges of sub-alpine stands of fir trees – was that there would have been views of the Sisters. Oh well – that just means we will have to do this section again. Despite increasing rain and wind, the many creek-like beds we crossed were all dry. Perhaps correspondingly, there were few places that looked like appealing or sheltered camps. One misunderstanding I have since figured out about this area is that the PCT represents the higher of two trail options – the lower being Linton Meadows, which appears to have several springs and preferred camping. Of course, I do not recall even seeing any signs/trails there (probably because we were all face-down in the rain/wind). But we pressed on, meeting more and more parties who, like us, seemed blindsided by the stormy weather. Unfortunately, none could confirm water at Mesa – most having camped by Separation. Eventually, we met up with a trail repair crew who radioed the nearby ranger and he confirmed Mesa had running water. By this point, the rain was almost constant and we grew indecisive, ducking into stands of trees to avoid soaking Allison and Marshall's packs... and wasting time/energy looking fruitlessly for camp-able sites. After many fits and starts, we finally committed to reaching Mesa, HOPING it would provide the shelter we needed to ride out this storm. I'm not going to lie, though: the last 1.5 miles was UGLY, the trail muddy and puddled... our boots and socks officially wet. And the question was not whether Allison and Marshall's gear was wet – it was how much? To our surprise, Mesa was DESERTED. In slightly thicker forest next to overflowing Mesa Creek, the campsites - while plentiful - were not well-protected. We settled for this tiny area near a huge tree that provided us with a 10-foot radius of dry working space, including a dry log for sorting gear and sitting. In said space, we erected our tents – which were then moved to a rainy but flat adjacent area. We quickly boiled water and ate dinner on the log – before diving into our tents for a nearly 14-hour pseudo-slumber.

Day Three – Mesa Creek to Green Lake, Praise Jebus For So Many Things!

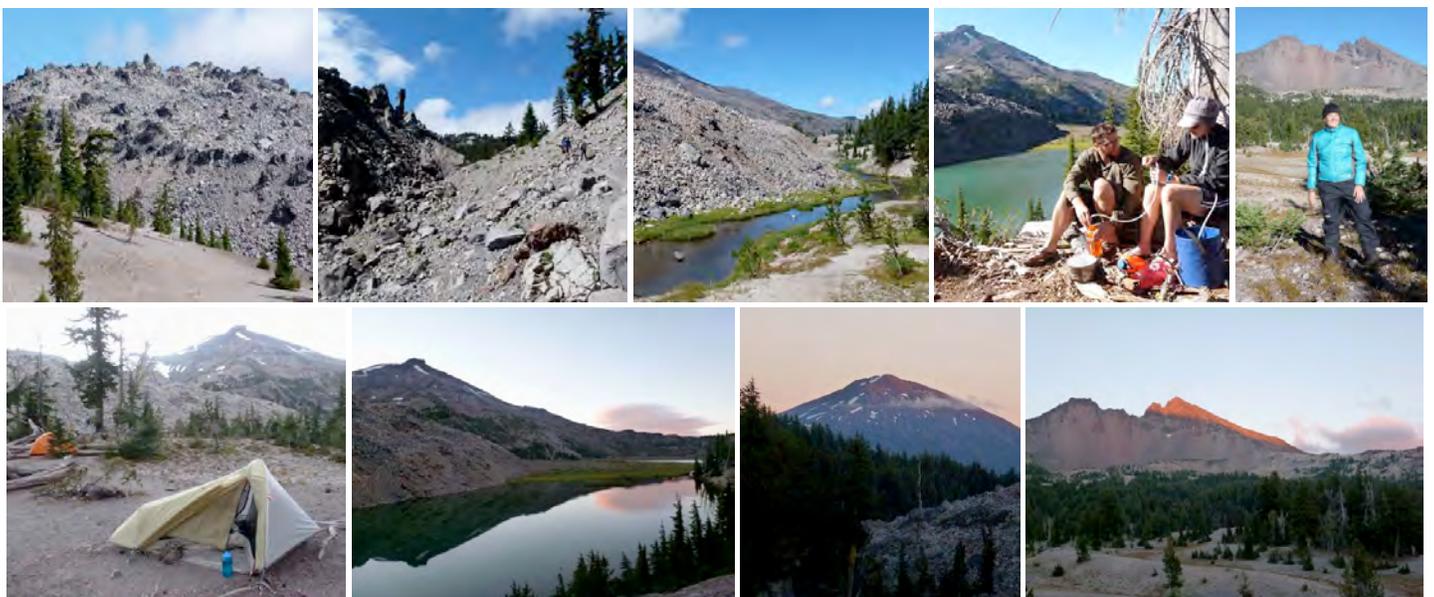
Although I did, in fact, sleep about 12 hours, I fretted greatly the times I was awake: What if it is still raining tomorrow? How will we dry Allison and Marshall's damp gear? What if our tents start leaking? What if our down bags start absorbing water through the tent floor? Should we bail at Green Lakes? If so, how will we secure a ride from the Cascade Lakes Highway back to one of our cars? Thankfully, the skies were promising (but not perfect) at 7 when Marshall and I emerged – Allison always the last out, always cold. In contrast with the original forecast (freezing overnight), it had stayed in the 40's – the storm-clouds blanketing the land and moderating temperatures. Despite our early start, eating, drying gear, packing, and pumping water took us until 9. By then, the skies were sunny and blue – with

puffy white clouds amassed only around the Sisters (I knew this because we SHOULD have seen South from camp). Hiking across Mesa's prairie-like meadow, we were confronted with a 500-foot ridge-ascent in misty, drippy, and muddy forest to the Wickiup Plain. The Wife, a rocky point to the east, was also visible. En route, we passed 4 storm-worn parties (including a family who also forget pack-covers) and some clean dayhikers with dogs. Hiking across the Wickiup involved a 2.5 mile jaunt. Most of the open land was covered by golden-grass – but with scattered low leafy plants that had fall-reddening leaves, most with artful post-storm raindrops. Although called a plain, the Wickiup is rolling and, in this direction, overall UP... gaining 500 feet. After about a mile, the PCT branches southwest – and the loop trail (which we followed) continues left and curves eastward, climbing a shallow area through thin forest.



Left to Right: Mesa Creek & meadows, PCT junction, Allison, Moraine – descent to lunch, ex-current

From the southeastern edge of the Wickiup, we made our way through forest, climbing our steepest ascent along the Kaleetan Butte. After staying ahead of Allison and Marshall to this point, I was feeling beat and falling behind. On the final zigzag, a solo backpacker doing the whole loop in 2 days passed me with some too-chipper message about hanging in there. In fact, what I needed was food – but we all wanted to hold out until Moraine Lake, which I thought was only 4 miles from camp (in fact, it was 6). Fortunately, we soon arrived at the intersection with the climbing-path – which Allison and I had hiked 3 years ago to the day... and I knew we were finally close to lunch. From above/along the climbing-path, Moraine had looked small; in fact, it seemed pretty large as we dropped into this white, sinter-y bowl to its shore. Here, we ate a full lunch and pumped water; thankfully, there were no disgusting algal/cyanobacterial blooms in Moraine (NOT the case at Green... YUCK!). Moraine, one of three first-come-first-serve “designated camping only” areas (with Matthieu and Green) in the Sisters Wilderness, should have been jam-packed – but it was eerily empty... a result of yesterday's storm scaring folks off. But this was HIGHLY promising because we hoped to get a campsite at Green. After lunch, we hiked along the southern shore of Moraine, and then mostly down through dry forest, losing 500 feet in 1.5 miles. Above, lava and obsidian towered above; at the time, I thought it was the Newberry flow... but I have since figured out that it is Miller. Halfway down, the trail crossed Miller via this at-first-impossible-looking pass. Shortly thereafter, we joined up with the Fall Creek trail - which WAS jam-packed with day-hikers. Given my bonked slowness up Kaleetan, I was DREADING what I thought was going to be a LONG, STEEP slog up to Green (1000 feet in 3.5 miles from the Moraine junction). Because I was now fed and hydrated, though, the climb was not that bad - Allison and Marshall didn't pass me until near the lake. Right around then, we were directed to campsites #4-6 by some departing backpackers; their leader said she had JUST told Allison 5 minutes before. But I apparently got more information, and was lucky enough to run into the ranger – who took me to, I swear, the BEST site at the lake (#5): on this low hill north of the lake, offering a commanding view of South, Broken Top, and Bachelor.



Left to Right: (top) Miller Lava Flow and cool crossing/pass, Newberry and upper Fall Creek, Green Lake and South, Broken Top; (bottom) tents and South, alpenglow – South, Bachelor, Broken Top

Despite being so close, Allison and Marshall vanished for an hour, leaving me – at times - fretting and hiking laps near the lake (having dropped my pack at #5). Somehow, they missed the campsite, continued down the hill, and were down bushwhacking along upper Fall Creek. Indeed, our mileage today was 10.5 – but Allison logged an additional mile JUST trying to find the campsite. Of course, I did

enjoy a fine chat with the ranger; while he agreed that the storm scared some campers away early, he felt – in general – people want to be home Labor Day Monday to “enjoy barbecue with the family.” This sentiment was in stark contrast with Sisters office rangers, who insisted we would NEVER get a site here today! Finally finding each other at 3, we enjoyed a relaxing afternoon: taking a river bath, enjoying a short nap, doing camp chores, and enjoying a beautiful sunset dinner. The only negative: the aforementioned algal/cyanobacterial bloom-water that Allison described as “tasting like dirty fish tank.” Given that today’s cleared skies meant a chillier evening, we retired after the breathtaking alpenglow vanished.



Left to Right: AMAZING reflection of South, South from pass, pass-plateau views of Broken Top, Allison/Marshall and South

Day Four – Green Lake to Park Meadow...The Neverending and Dusty Slog

Despite being relaxed when bedding down, I did not sleep well because I was so excited about finishing the loop and going home. As we agreed the night before, we were up at 7 – our aim to be on the trail by 8:30. Owing to a motivated but fish tank-mouthed Allison, we BEAT that goal by 30 minutes. The first half of today’s hike was all new terrain for me and I was excited to finally hike Green Lakes Pass, the highest point along the loop. From there, we would descend to Park Meadow – my first hike in Oregon 17 years ago. By this point, Allison and Marshall were completely dubious of my trail spec’s – and so there was this bet about how much longer today’s hike would REALLY be. My mapping suggested we had just under 8 miles and 1000 feet up/down left. Allison and Marshall bet it would be 9 – and they were correct. Of course, there are always extras in the mix – like our first task of the day today: hiking half a mile back to the trail junction. We then continued right along the shore of Green Lake – the colors and reflections MAGNIFICENT! Hiking by most of the other campsites, I estimated that at least 30% were empty... EMPTY on Labor Day weekend!?! The morning ascent of Green Lakes Pass was tame, ascending just over 500 feet on gentle ramping zigzags. After gaining the seeming top, I was not that impressed with the views. While the view onto South Sister’s crag-surrounded crater was new and unobstructed, none of the other Sisters or Broken Top was, like, RIGHT there. Indeed, there seemed to be a lot of trees and rolling ridge-lines in the foreground – sort of like how I felt on my first hike to Park Meadow. However, the pass was more like gaining a small plateau; continuing across the rocky scrubland, the views improved somewhat in terms of North, Middle, and Broken Top. But what actually impressed me the most were the albeit-small views of Washington, Three Fingered Jack, Jefferson, Hood, AND Rainier (yes – RAINIER... it was THAT clear!).



Left to Right: (top) pass/plateau views; (bottom) gentian, Broken Top and Park Meadow, South reflection in tarn, fire/burn and South

The descent to Park Meadow was rocky, longer than expected, and view-less once we hit forest. In contrast with lower sections, this area was not burnt in the 2012 Pole Creek fire. At some point, we passed the side-trail to Golden Lake – one of a few plan B’s had we not secured a campsite at Green Lake. Once we reached prairie-like Park Meadow (dotted with gentian... a sure sign summer is ending!), the views opened towards Broken Top. Here, we met a group of older women backpackers on the last day of their 9-day loop hike; despite looking modest, they admitted – with no provocation from us – that they had corrupted the name Opie Dildock to Opie Dildo. After saying our good-byes (the women heading up the pass), we left the loop trail – promptly rock-hopping Park Creek and pumping water (alas, our Nalgens and filter were still fish tank corrupted). Continuing, we were afforded a nice reflection of South in a small tarn – but then the burn began. For 4 out of the remaining 5 miles, we slogged through DUSTY burn; it was hot, dirty, frustrating, and – most defeating of all – composed of endless segments of up and down shit... not HUGE or STEEP, but just enough to drive you

insane, not to mention: add 500 MORE feet GAINED! Nope – did not remember that from 1998... but I was also not tired, dirty, and carrying a backpack on that trip. The final mile of trail was a wide old road (which I did recall from 1998). Although the novelty of the eerie Pole Creek burn was short-lived, there were some noteworthy things along this section: First, we crossed 2 raging creeks (Squaw and Snow), the latter via a scary log-walk given recent rains. Second, there were nice green grass areas growing back, reminding me of 1990's Yellowstone. Third, you could see all the Sisters through the stick forest. With little fanfare and no photographs, we arrived back at the car at 1 p.m., wasting no time as we made our way to Ray's in Sisters... where we stuffed our faces and rehydrated with fish tank-free water, before heading back to McKenzie/Lava for my car. Although I had considered extending my stay in Sisters to rest up after my restless sleep, the traffic was not hideous – and I hit the road behind Allison and Marshall, making it home by 4:30.

Around the Sisters, Version 2.0 – Pole Creek to Lava Camp via Camp/Chambers Lakes (Labor Day Weekend 2015)

Although we set aside 4 days for this 3-day itinerary (hoping to bag Middle Sister from Camp Lake on day 2), we found ourselves driving into a frigid snowstorm Wednesday night – and, thanks to a last-minute hotel cancellation, delayed our start from Thursday to Friday. Alas, we did not avoid more frigid and rainy weather!

Day One – Pole Creek to Camp Lake

After our unexpected down-day Thursday (spent huffing our way up to the first viewpoint on Tam McArthur rim in sometimes-blizzard conditions with thunder), we set out under GORGEOUS but chilly sunny blue skies on Friday (leaving Marshall's car at Lava Camp, then driving in mine to Pole Creek). This was our first time hiking this area after seeing it with intact forest in 2012 (before the fire). But we were in good spirits and enjoyed the easy trail and open views. Of course, the funniest thing was that we were following this pair of backpacking families; one was French and dad was trying to hike barefoot. The first 3 miles would have been OK for barefoot hiking (at least during the sunny part of the day) – but we're not sure whether they made it all the way to Camp Lake. Making our way through rolling burn, we met up with the loop circuit trail after about 1 mile – and then continued left another mile to Soap Creek. After log-crossing Soap, we took the dead-end Demaris/Camp side-trail and started our gentle but determined climb to Camp Lake (the end of the official trail). Given lots of greenery and trees during the climb, I can't say that it seemed like the fire had made its way up this draw. After an hour, I arrived to North Fork Squaw Creek – which seemed much easier to rock-hop this time around... even though there was more water running. Having gotten ahead of Allison and Marshall, I decided to sit down and eat most of my lunch and wait.



Left to Right: Pole Creek, South through trees, best views of Middle & North, Allison & Marshall – with South and tents behind in trees

Once they arrived, we hiked together up this steeper, convoluted rocky outcrop area (definitely NOT friendly for barefoot hiking!) – our first big views of snow-dusted North. Heading across several dry sandy basins with the best views of North, Middle, and Broken Top, I took more pictures this time – knowing the views would become more limited once we started dropping into Camp Lake basin. Although there was less snow this time, the dusting on the high peaks made the views as impressive. It also seemed like it took no time to arrive at Camp Lake this time (which we did around 3) – which was good because, for some time, we had been concerned with the large numbers of people heading up there (i.e. all vying for what a limited number of campsites). Fortunately, I had been given really good advice on where to camp by colleague/volcanologist Jeff, who had backpacked here last summer. Even though all the obvious lake-side/view sites had been taken, we readily found Jeff's site (tucked into these little moraine heaps on the other side of the lake) and staked our claim in this thin wall of wind-shielding trees. Indeed, South Sister was sucking in a LOT of VERY cold swirling mist – which promptly settled right into the Camp Lake basin as we began to set up camp. This was the first time in years I felt truly cold and under-prepared in terms of too-little gear; normally, Allison will mock, I am the menopause furnace and nothing bothers me once I add a layer or get into my sleeping bag. That my periods have been wack-a-doodle most of 2015 (skipping months at a time) probably explains this. The other issue was not bringing our vinyl water-gathering bucket; in the end, we improvised a container by turning inside-out one of our lightweight mini-dry bags. Nevertheless, the trek down to the lake involved a good 10-minute walk, including a slippery scramble down the little moraine. Thankfully, the lake-water did not taste like dirty fish tank. By around 6, the skies were clearing – AND COLDER – so we enjoyed dinner and were basically in tentia by 7... in my case, wearing ALL my gear and still occasionally shivering. Needless to say, it was not my favorite night out of camping.

Day Two – Camp Lake to Obsidian

Our morning began VERY promising – with blue skies in several directions... but FREEZING. Although we didn't bring a thermometer, we calculated that it was 15-20 degrees overnight, based on temps in Bend and accounting for elevation gain. Sufficed to say, we got a slow start – not hitting the trail until around 10. By then, clouds were rolling in fast – consuming half of South and all of North and Middle. Of course, this vanishing did validate our decision to shorten this trip (i.e. eliminating our extra day here trying to scramble Middle). Oh well. The first half of today's itinerary was all new terrain – and a little intimidating because it was not on an official trail (like I said: the official trail ended at Camp Lake). That said, there was an obvious track heading up this steep red ridge right across from camp... our first obstacle of the day (web reports suggested this was a challenging beast to descend in snow – and, having now seen the way, we suspect that is the case!). Making my way out ahead of Allison and Marshall, I huffed up the winding little track, enjoying still-decent views of South's lower flanks against blue skies. At the top of the ridge, however, I somehow managed to get off the route and found myself following this ever-diminishing path heading right and up (and towards Middle) relative to the continuing

ridgeline. After 5 minutes, the path seemed to completely vanish and I turned around, ultimately deciding that that must have been some sketchy climbers' route up Middle. Climbing back to the obvious trail, I met up with Allison and Marshall – who could not understand how I wound up off-route. Regrouping, we continued climbing up, this ceiling of graying clouds taking over the scenery.



Left to Right: (top) morning views of Middle, North, and South; climbing the obvious – but STEEP – red ridge... South clouds up!
 (bottom) Camp Lake from red ridge, Middle in the wet-looking fog, South from upper red ridge... still climbing toward South

Making for additional drama, we crossed a lot of small fresh snow patches, a theme that would continue for the next 2-3 miles. About 10 minutes after the second to last shot above, we crossed the highpoint of the traverse – gaining our first big view of the Chambers Lakes (the final shot above). In contrast with the shallow bowls around Camp Lake, Chambers Lakes were REALLY dramatic – nothing like I imagined they would be... definitely better. Indeed, the whole terrain between this point and Separation Creek (where we rejoined the official loop trail) was INSANELY interesting to me, like nothing I've seen in any part of the Sisters Wilderness. Definitely itching to go back and see this area under better weather conditions! Somewhere near the highpoint, we ran into a couple parties coming UP, both insisting the way from Separation had been very straightforward; while I agree with that statement, there were a couple challenging spots – including a section where we briefly lost the route! The descent to Chambers I, while steep with some sketchy footing, was obvious. Initially on rocky dirt through trees, the second half was rockier and open – featuring more snow patches. At times, it seemed like there were social paths leaving the main route to descend to the lake shore (although there were no tents or at the time – and, frankly, the terrain seemed too rocky-bumpy around the lake); but we stayed on the traversing route – which stayed maybe 30 vertical feet above the flat lake basin, making its way to this obvious saddle between Chambers I and Chambers II.



Left to Right: (top) traversing along Chambers I, climbing to shallow saddle between Chambers I and II, view of Chambers II
 (bottom) confused along Chambers II, finally on the right path along saddle II, first views of the Husband, upper Separation!

Although we could see NOTHING in terms of any high mountains (South should have been minimally visible), the dramatically colored lava – including lots of orange and red – in combination with the finger-like snowpatches was truly fantastic... even under sucky gray skies. Dropping into the next basin with Chambers II, we must have felt a little too confident and comfortable with our success at

staying en route so far. Either that or the way did just vanish into what was a more uniformly rocky and gray mess. In any event, we followed a VERY rocky path down – this time getting VERY close to Chambers II. There were many more social trails here. As before, the obvious goal was to get over yet another little saddle – but the choices seemed to be: stay lower down as long as possible or start heading up this talus heap. Although I briefly explored the former, Allison and Marshall found this at-first obvious set of cairns marching into the talus heap. Within 10 minutes, though, the cairns were gone and we found ourselves teetering up big scary rocks. Thankfully, another party was then seen comfortably descending this now-obvious path (obvious because we were higher up) nearer to the lake. Allison and I backtracked and made our way fully up this path, with Marshall cutting more directly to it via the scary talus. Ascending to the top of the second saddle, I was excited to get our first view of the Husband – a lesser peak in the Sisters on the other side of the loop (i.e. a sign we were almost out of the woods... or would be back down in the woods). Of course, the rain-squalls pretty much started coming in relentlessly from this point on. And so we had to finally put on our rain-gear and endure yet another BIG RAINY HIKE along this same section (i.e. the same rainy section we endured on our first loop backpack last year). Argh! Although the way from this point was straightforward – funneling down the but totally dry Separation Creek draw – there were a few spot where the path was sparse in open rocky areas... or surprisingly steep (there was this shelf-drop area with a tight series of slick dirt zigzags, albeit with plenty of small trees to hold onto). After said shelf, we passed an open dry, rocky creekbed with lots of deadfall (pretty much no path) under this cool lava face with what looked like a big black devil horn; we'd been seeing the face in profile a while – but looking right up at it was fascinating. From this point, the way became grassy dirt with a boot-beaten path all the way to the loop intersection.



Left to Right: (top) heading down the draw, the devil-horned face, looking back up the draw... should have been big view of South, Separation Creek at the loop junction; (bottom), oh cloudy loop, Obsidian Falls, across upper Obsidian, crappy tent-site

When we finally arrived at the loop intersection, there was a sunny lull in the rain-squalls and so we walked 5 minutes to the waterhole and enjoyed a proper lunch. Given that it was a little after 1 and we knew we had another 3.5 miles, we didn't dally – largely because, even though we had reserved Obsidian camping permits, we were concerned that if we didn't get there early, the most ideal campsites would be taken (famous last words). Although most of the remaining miles were less wet than last year, they offered no clear views of the high peaks. As we neared the Obsidian area, we began encountering large parties – at least 2 of which were unhappily leaving the permit zone, having been kicked out by the patrolling ranger. Well – thank god we have permits... that's what we thought. Passing Obsidian Falls, we began hiking across the upper portion of the permit area. Two more big parties (one was super-redneck!) were basically lounging in the meadows – seeming to squat on the flat areas (i.e. as if to basically saying to us – move along) even though we knew damn well they didn't have permits. In retrospect, we SHOULD have camped here – just back in the trees... because EVERYTHING down low was totally occupied. But because we felt a little threatened, we continued – encountering the ranger intercepting/kicking out another big party trying to illegally camp for the night. After they moved along, we presented our permits, got a big lecture about where not to camp in the lower areas, and then tattled on the rednecks... who we would later see hiking out, having been kicked out by the ranger. Continuing to lower Obsidian, we were quickly reminded how sparse the camp-sites were, especially with an officious ranger roaming the grounds. After 45 frustrating minutes of searching and arguing, we finally hiked WAY up from the trail near the Sunshine Meadow junction, and found this small but acceptably level bench in the trees – totally out of view from the path. Yes it was a bitch to get water, yes we had to place our tents RIGHT next to each other, yes it was viewless, freezing, and damp... but we were pissed off and just wanted to warm up, eat, go to bed, and get the hell out first thing the next day. Adding insult to injury, my organic mac-n-cheese (a brand I don't usually eat) SUCKED. Nonetheless, I was not quite as cold and slept reasonably well.

Day Three – Obsidian to Lava Camp/Home

Although our morning (and the entire day) was totally promising with ALL-CLEAR skies, it was FUCKING freezing when we awoke, packed up, and headed out... visible frost along the trail, a good dusting of snow visible on North and Middle once they came into view. Heading out ahead of Allison and Marshall, I hiked behind this fast trio of college-aged women – all wearing shorts... which I thought INSANE (supporting, again, the notion that my menopause furnace may finally be shutting down). I kept up with them until Sawyer Bar where decided I needed to stop and lose some clothing – thanks to the uphill climb to Sawyer in combination with the finally open skies/sun (i.e. everything prior to this point had been in chilly forest!). Of course, while I attempted to sit on a big chunk of lava and exchange layers, at least 20 backpackers passed – including Allison/Marshall and the party we tattled on yesterday. Continuing, we

began the steady climb up Opie II; had I not seen/done this section last year, I would have been intimidated. But today, it was a fast and exciting pass. After Opie II, I wanted to revisit the Collier Viewpoint... but no one wanted to slow our momentum. Oh well – it would have been AMAZING... but we had a number of fantastic views of North, Middle, and the in-between Collier Glacier from Opie II.



Left to Right: (top) my shadow near the top of Opie II, North from between Opie I and II, on Opie I, Collier & Middle; (bottom) more Opie I, panorama of Little Belknap (lava summit), Washington, Three-Fingered Jack, Jefferson, Hood (VERY FAINT), near Minnie Scott

Dropping from Opie I, we skirted around the impressive flanks of Collier Cone and passed our first night's camp from last year. Minnie Scott spring (the only water for several miles) was nothing more than a rocky puddle today – no water running down from the main source. On a mission, we continued up and down the undulating terrain – the skies gorgeous, the meadows golden, and the number of parties impressive. Increasingly hungry, we kept promising ourselves we would stop at one of the many low-pass viewpoints – but then arrived to some kind of large party with the same idea. Heading up the big climb that traverses Yapoah Crater, we FINALLY stopped in this scenic band of trees – good views of North and Middle, as well as all major Cascade peaks north to Hood. Polishing off all my snacks, I can't say I ate enough – but I knew we were 90 minutes from the car. Following a quick descent from Yapoah, we made good time across the impressive final lava field – excellent views of all the Cascades continuing. On our previous hike across this section, I must not have turned around much because I hadn't noticed all these impressive red-lava mounds... not to mention distant Black Crater. Indeed, under such intensely blue skies, the diversity of lava colors was amazing: gray, black, brown, red – all juxtaposed alongside golden meadows and evergreen trees. Soon, we arrived at likewise more-impressive South Matthieu Lake – the views of North excellent. Of course, there were also WAY more people along the shores – most daytrippers hiking in from Lava Camp. Although our time/speed to this point had felt very fast, the hike between the lake and the car took FOREVER... and started to feel monotonous and annoying – not helped by what was a continuing onslaught of dayhikers. Heading back to Pole Creek in Marshall's car, we efficiently made our way back to Ray's for, in my case, yogurt, bananas, Doritos, and kombucha. The drive home proceeded well – even though it was a nearly continuous line of traffic most of the way. Needless to say, central heating was EXTREMELY welcome for the next week... particularly because the weather pretty much went to shit most of the fall and winter... and possibly is continuing into spring! Ah – such memories of BLUE SKIES!



Left to Right: North & Middle from meadow, Yapoah, multi-colored lava, North & South Matthieu Lake

Sisters Epilogue – Revised 2016

Despite loop-associated bouts of bad weather, Sisters will always be my favorite hiking destination in Oregon – partly because of the epic lava, partly because of the concentration of beautiful peaks, and partly because it represents my first hiking experience in this state. Unlike a few hikers I know, I LOVE to repeat hikes. Thus, I am certain I will continue to repeat many great Sisters standards in the years to come. Of course, there are still some things on my to-do or unfinished business list. During the last collection update (2014), that list included: hiking to the Broken Top crater lake, seeing the Obsidian to Separation Creek section in good conditions (rained out in 2014), and doing the Chambers/Camp traverse as part of the Middle-North loop. As of 2016, we can say we hiked Broken Top crater lake and successfully navigated (survived!) the Chambers/Camp traverse... but, despite re-hiking a big chunk of the Sisters loop, we still have not seen the Obsidian-Separation – or some of the Chambers area – in good conditions. In addition to these ongoing goals, we also felt we should add "hiking around Broken Top" to our list – even though we have done all but maybe 1 mile of that loop now. As always, too, there is a little part of me, of course, that wants to climb South Sister again.