



Grant's Getaways: Polk County wanderings

Across Oregon, some of my favorite places to explore are those as close as my own backyard. Sometimes they hide in plain sight!

This week, Jeff Kastner and I wandered across Polk County and discovered terrific mountain bike trails, an enticing parkland with a covered bridge, a winery with deep Oregon roots, and one of the best "smelling" places in the state.

Scenery zips past at a shattering pace when you fly across 'Bonzai Downhill' at Black Rock Mountain, near Falls City in Polk County.

Black Rick Mountain offers "free riding" mountain biking across 500 acres of state forest land and riders call it "a little piece of heaven."

The volunteer organization that makes it all work is called the [Black Rock Mountain Bike Association](#), "BRMBA" for short.

Longtime rider, Rich Bontrager, told me that the group is approaching 15 years old and is a couple thousand members strong. He noted that it all started with a simple dream.

"I think we all need to help get people off the couch and out in the forest," Bontrager said. "To see that there's other stuff out here than the city pavement or a computer game – this place draws folks seeking something new and different and exciting."

It all begins with designing the features that include ramps, jumps and berms, which are approved by the Oregon Department of Forestry and then built by the club members.

Bontrager noted that the concept of a mountain bike destination play area is a first for the Oregon State Forest.

"Forest managers take a look at our proposals and make sure the ideas won't create an environmental hazard or be too close to a watershed," he said.

BRMBA member, Todd Glasgow, said that "feature" ideas are really born from the experiences that riders have as they take on trails across the U.S.

"Oh yes, we ride other areas, see other things and incorporate them into our own ideas and then take a spin on it," Glasgow said. "While some material is bought and some donated, a good majority of the wood that we use is fallen timber found in the forest."

Whether catching big air or enjoying the freedom that comes from speeding down a forest trail on two wheels, the riders agree that there's something for every level of experience at Black Rock Mountain.



"You're out here in the trees and you're away from everything else," said Glasgow. "You're far away from the daily grind. You can have a stressful day or stressful week and you come out here and ride a bike – it's all gone! It's one of the hidden gems – off the beaten path."

That may be true, but that's changing fast as more visitors discover Polk County's hidden gems that are worth the time to seek out and enjoy, such as [Luckiamute Falls](#) at Falls City, where the Luckiamute River cuts a

bee-line through eastern flanks of the coast range and falls in a 20-foot tall.

It's a good start for a day-long adventure across a rural county that's perfect getaway from city hub-bub and noise.

In fact, some Polk County backroads don't give you much choice except to get off the road to see the sites! [Ritner Creek Covered Bridge and Park](#) on SR-223 gives you the opportunity to take a stroll. It's an interesting place because really – the bridge shouldn't be here at all.

Forty years ago, the bridge was in ruins, but local school children thought the historic bridge was worth saving and a local ballot measure did just that in 1974.

The rebuilt bridge is now a fine place to beat the heat before moving 30 minutes east to scenic [Eola Hills Legacy Vineyard](#) where owner, Tom Huggins, is living his dream.

Huggins planted his first grapes in 1982, making Eola Vineyard is one of Oregon's earliest vineyards. In fact, Huggins said Eola Wines was the 38th to be established during the early days of Oregon wineries.

He said he was drawn to wine making when he discovered: what's not to like?

"Everything the Oregon wine people did revolved around making wine, selling wine, growing grapes and they all just loved what they were doing," Huggins said. "I decided that I'm going to try and do it too."

Huggins grows Pinot noir and other wine grape varieties across 160 acres just a handful of miles east of Rickreal.

Eola's Legacy Vineyard is a great place to relax and savor the stunning view of the wide scenic apron of the Willamette Valley.

Located off SR-99, just four miles south of Rickreal, be sure to explore an oasis of calm and serenity that's been up and running family operation since 1990.

Manager and co-owner, Rhonda Johnson, said [Lavender Lake Farms](#) helps the world smell better.

"Visitors can come out and cut their own flowers when we're in bloom and they can watch us distill the lavender into oil," she said. "We also have a gift shop and they can buy products that are made with lavender and we also have food so folks can taste lavender spices cookies and other baked goods."

Johnson added that lavender history reaches back through the centuries of Roman, Greek and Egyptian cultures.

It's been used as an aromatic perfume, a cleanser, medicine, and lavender is found in many delicious food recipes.

Lavender is easy to grow. The plants tolerate heat and cold, doesn't like fertilizer and it's a pretty addition to any landscape.

"Once you see one or two of the buds open up to a flower, that's exactly when you want to cut it to dry it," added Johnson. "If you wait until they open up to a flower, they won't stay on the stem and will fall off."

Lavender Lake Farms, like all the stops in this Polk County wandering, is open year-round.

If you would like to explore more of Oregon – consider a walk on the wild side with my new book: "[Grant's Getaways Guide to Wildlife Watching in Oregon](#)."

You will enjoy 48 uniquely Oregon adventures highlighting my fish and wildlife encounters. Scores of colorful photos by "Grant's Getaways" photographer, Jeff Kastner, show off some of our finest moments in the field.

The stories offer detailed directions and promise to set you on your own path of discovery across Oregon. The new book is also available as e-book download so you can take my new book with you on the road.

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