

Golden and Silver Falls State Park

Oregon is waterfall country, and two of the best can be found in Golden and Silver Falls State Park, about 25 miles east of Coos Bay. Set amidst 157 acres of forest spared from early-day forest fires and logging, the park also offers a walk along a trail "above the falls" on an old road hewn from solid rock.

Getting to the falls involves a drive through picturesque river country, with picnic areas, boat ramps and campgrounds along the way. The upriver spots are popular with locals, and the state park gets lots of visitors in summer, but the trip is worth the effort and works in every season. Be advised the road is narrow with many sheer drop-offs and no shoulders, and is not recommended for large RVs or vehicles pulling trailers. The last five miles is a single-lane gravel road.

In summer, the weather can be cold and foggy (or windy!) in town while upriver it's a nice summer day. You can sit right under lacy Silver Falls for a refreshing shower. Don't try that in winter or spring, though, when the falls are roaring full blast! Sunny interludes in springtime bring out wild rhododendrons and other flowers. In autumn, the huge, leafy maples blaze with color. The park is also a showcase of old-growth Douglas fir.

Outfit yourself depending on the season; in summer bring swim gear, sunblock and bug repellent. In winter and spring, waterproof footwear for walking on the trails.

Getting There

From the Coos Bay Visitor Center, go south on US 101 for 1.6 miles to the "Y" intersection at the south end of town and bear left on state route 241, following signs to Coos River, Allegany. The road crosses a bridge over railroad tracks, then goes over Isthmus Slough Bridge.

Bear left across the bridge on 6th Ave and follow it 0.5 mile to a "T" intersection. Turn right (E) on Coos River Rd., following signs to Coos River, Catching Slough, Golden & Silver Falls.

The route winds out of the residential district, with bay views opening up. Pass Southern Oregon Marine

shipyards, where ocean-going barges large vising boats are fabricated and repaired.

The road crosses Catching Slough Bridge, with a brief, commanding view, and then drops to near water level. This is still very much a tidal estuary, with a mix of fresh water and seawater mingling in and out twice daily. Just ahead is the green steel span of Chandler Bridge. Cross the bridge, following



Silver Falls cascades over a dome-like outcrop.

signs to Allegany, and bear right (E), with the road on the river's north bank now. The waterway will split into two rivers, although the confluence isn't visible from this side. Next landmark is Doris Place boat ramp, followed in a couple of miles with Rooke-Higgins County Park, offering camping, day-use and a boat launch. Picnic tables above the river have nice views of the water and surrounding pastures.

The road curves along the still-navigable river, past more ranches and homesteads, passing the former Allegany School, now a post office and community building.

Another few turns and you're in Allegany. A little logging community once flourished here, with a sawmill and other businesses and dwellings. On a hill just west are old church buildings and a schoolhouse.

The settlement was supposedly named by a settler from Allegheny County, Penn., who either didn't know

how to spell it or wanted to distinguish this Allegany from others in Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas and California. At any rate, the word means "beautiful river" in the Seneca Indian language, so it's a fitting name. The Millicoma River splits here into a west and east fork.

Continue on the main road past Allegany, following signs to Golden and Silver Falls State Park.

If Allegany is beautiful river, what's Millicoma? The origin is unclear; historians think it's a reference to the local Miluk Indian tribe.

Just over 1 mile, past Marlow Creek, is an unusual, two-forked road separation, with the right side leading into Weyerhaeuser's Millicoma Tree Farm. Take the left fork, following signs to Golden and Silver Falls. The two roads parallel each other for a bit.

About 4 miles from Allegany is Nesika County Park, with a day-use area coming along a few turns before a campground. Both offer a nice place to stop, stretch, and breathe the natural incense of big myrtlewoods. In fact, this is an official Myrtlewood Tree Corridor, and it's easy to see – and smell – why. They arch magnificently over the road, and fill the air with their distinctive scent.

Myrtlewood, also called California laurel, is highly prized in this region as an excellent hardwood for carving. You'll hear claims that it grows only in southern Oregon and the Holy Land, but it's actually found from here all the way to Baja California. As for the myrtlewoods of the Holy Land, they're a different (although related) tree.

The road turns to gravel just past Nesika County Park, following the river, then wending away from it, only to return again. Use caution and be alert for oncoming vehicles. The river's east fork branches off; we'll follow Glenn Creek from here. After a last stretch of homes, the road narrows to one lane, hugging a hillside of swordferns and dense brush. The trees get bigger. The river rushes through a cataract of huge boulders. And then you're in Golden and Silver Falls State Park.

There are three trail choices from the parking lot. Trail signs are often missing due to theft and vandalism.

In winter and spring, Silver Falls is in full thunder, sending off a rainbow-laden spray. In summer, it's a mesmerizing curtain of mist.

Visitors sometimes scramble up the rocks to get inside the waterfall. (It's actually easier to get to the falls from the Above the Falls trails, about which more in a moment.) At any rate, the official trail ends here, so return to the parking area.

Golden Falls Trail: This level and easy trail will take you to the bottom of Golden Falls. Go east from the parking area across the footbridge. The trail splits just across the bridge.

Follow the east fork, straight ahead, on a 10-minute stroll through grand old myrtlewoods to the foot of the falls, named in 1880 after Coos Bay physician Charles Golden. The sheer rock walls offer a look at an exposed section of the siltstone Tyee Formation that underlies the region.

The height of Golden Falls, according to a variety of sources, ranges from 254 ft. to 377 ft., depending on where one determines the bottom is among the jumbled boulders. The names are also debated.

According to newspaper articles of the era, the waterfalls were called Coos River Falls before the 1880 renaming for Dr. Golden, and it seemed logical to name the nearby falls Silver.

Its height is also debated because of jumbled boulders at the base, but 254 ft. seems to be an agreed-on number, making this and nearby Golden Falls among the tallest in the Coast Range. The end of the Golden Falls Trail seems to be the best place to photograph this waterfall.

Above the Falls Trail: From the parking area, cross the footbridge and turn left (N). The path heads up the canyon, switchbacking through towering old forest. In about 5 minutes is Silver Falls. (This is a safer way to get "under the falls" if you're here in summer and want a shower.) The trail continues on a switchback above the route just ascended.

Note the width of this trail, enough for a vehicle. This was in fact once a main road, blasted out of the mountainside in some places, over which came oxen teams, old Model Ts, even log trucks!

Water oozes out of the siltstone cliffs thick with moss. Pass through a cleft of rock as big as two houses. Hear that roaring from the gorge? It gets louder with each step . . .

Now comes the famous stretch cleared with dynamite, then suddenly you're right above the falls!

Lone trees jut dramatically over the void, and flat rocks offer perches from which to contemplate the grandeur.

Keep a tight rein on pets and youngsters.

The rich woodland soil and constant waterfall spray creates prime conditions for an array of native plants and wildflowers, including delicate maidenhair ferns, tiny seasonal orchids, and wood sorrel, the latter with lavender-veined white blooms among the clover-like leaves. Piggy-back plants abound; much easier to say than their Latin name *Tolmiea menziesii*.

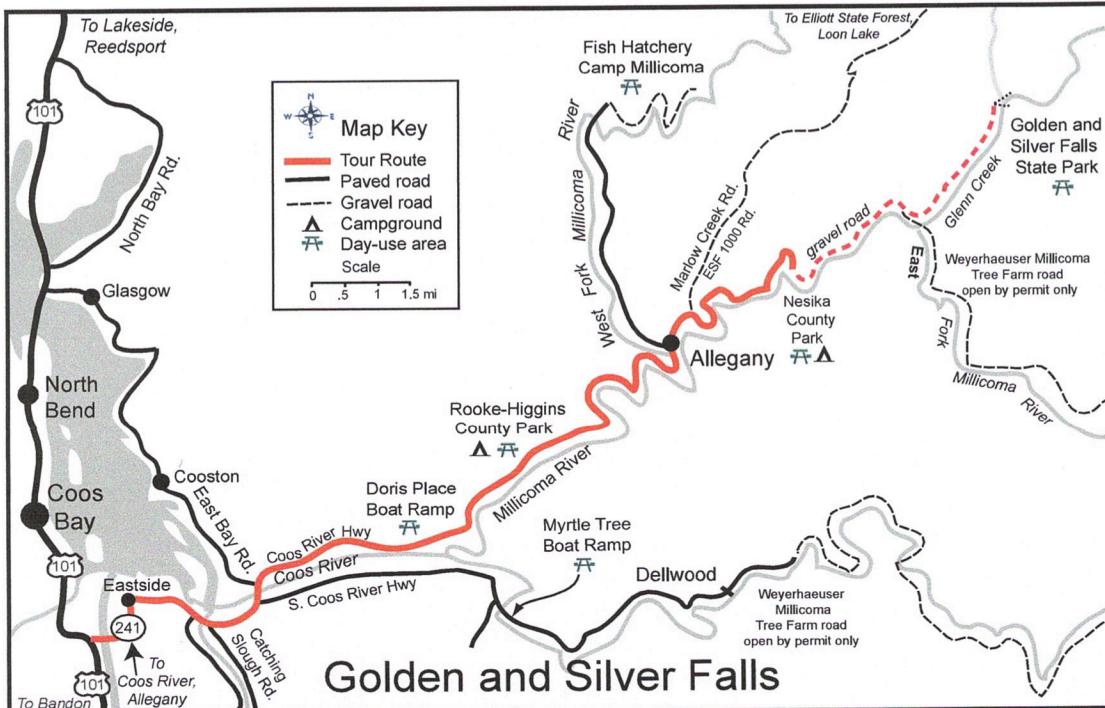
The pioneers who made this road used it to get to forests and valleys to the east, eventually to Loon Lake, and from there down to the Umpqua River. This final harrowing stretch at the top was completed in 1901 by men who hung from ropes and bored six-foot holes into the cliffs to set their charges.

An early photo shows an eight-horse team pulling an iron boiler over the road, and an auto stage line ran from 1912 to 1916.

There were homesteads in the Upper Glenn Creek Valley from the late 1800s to the 1950s, as well as a Civilian Conservation Corps camp and state prison work camp. For a while there was a sawmill that trucked finished lumber over this dizzying route, sometimes twice a day!

The park boundary ends just beyond, so turn around and retrace your footfalls to the parking area.

(In case you're wondering, the original logging road crossed a bridge at the base of Silver Falls, and continued down the west side of the creek. That's why the trail doesn't seem as wide at the bottom. The bridge at the bottom deteriorated and was dismantled in 1964.)



Excerpted from the local guidebook "Out Our Back Door, Oregon South Coast Driving Tours and Day-Hikes," by Tom Baake.