

Go nuts over Oregon Trail ruts

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It's hot, dry, dusty and not very scenic at times. And watch out for rattlers. But the Oregon Trail east of Boise is worth the trip.

Welcome to the Oregon Trail east of Boise and what the pioneers had to endure on their 2,000-mile cross-country journey from Missouri to Oregon.

If you're a rut nut (an Oregon Trail history buff), a wanna-be, or just like history and exploring wild country, take a drive on the Main Oregon Trail Back Country Byway from Mountain Home to Bonneville Point east of Boise.

You can take the auto history tour in a short day trip by driving southeast on Interstate 84 to Mountain Home and then driving gravel and paved roads back to Boise. A word of caution before you go: Make sure your rig's air conditioning is working.

It's not as hard as you think. Start by downloading the trail guide PDF at www.idahostatesman.com. It is part of a free, updated guidebook that will be available at Bureau of Land Management offices, visitors centers and businesses later this summer.

The whole byway takes you on three outings - a loop drive near Three Island State Park at Glenns Ferry; a drive from Glenns Ferry to U.S. 20 north of Mountain Home; and from U.S. 20 at Rattlesnake Creek to Bonneville Point.

We featured the first two sections in Idaho Outdoors the past two years as spring outings.

I drove the third stretch earlier this month and was surprised by some of the out-of-the-way places up against the foothills of the Danskin Mountains that you never see from the interstate.

On your drive you'll discover why pioneers used this section of the trail. Although a lot of the land looks barren, the route takes you to creeks, meadows and grasslands in the foothills that they needed for their livestock and for rest stops.

The roads along this section closely follow the Oregon Trail. However, much of the trail is on private property and not accessible for hiking, according to the guidebook.

It's disappointing that a lot of the ruts have disappeared over time because of road building and other development.



The expanse of the Oregon Trail can be seen along the foothills of the Danskin Mountain range. This is along Emigrant Road.

But the drive gives you a clear picture of what life was like on the Oregon Trail.

Start the trip by driving to Mountain Home on the interstate and taking the second (U.S. 20/Sun Valley) exit. You can get last-minute snacks or lunch and gas in town.

Start at the historical marker sign pullout on the west side of U.S. 20, 8 miles north of Interstate 84. This is Mile 0.

Here are some highlights from my drive and the guidebook.

MILE 0

Read the historical marker for an introduction on this part of the Oregon Trail.

Set your odometer to 0 and head back toward Mountain Home.

MILE 0.3

The remains of a round rock fort built in 1878 can be seen alongside U.S. 20.

MILE 6.3

Turn right on Reservoir Road at the south end of Mountain Home Reservoir and follow the directions in the guide to Canyon Creek Road and out of town.

MILE 22.2

The Rocky Road area is one of the first places to hike. It's a rocky section of the Oregon Trail that can be found to the south of Immigrant Road.

The portion of the trail east of Canyon Creek was noted in many of the pioneers' diaries as some of the roughest parts of the trail. There are excellent ruts in this area about 100 yards to the south.

From here on, look for occasional bluebirds and meadowlarks. Watch for white and blue camas.

MILE 23.4

Canyon Creek was a popular camping area on the Oregon Trail, especially after surviving a rough 12-mile stretch with no water. Just up the road is Canyon Creek Station, which was a stage station in the 1860s.

MILE 23.8

The Oregon Trail crosses from the left. There are excellent ruts for hiking to the north of the road.

MILE 37.4

The trail descends into the valley along Bowns Creek and follows the creek for a short distance just as the county road does today. Look at some of the intriguing rock outcroppings.

MILE 37.6

You'll find a rock with pioneers' names on it off to the right.

MILE 41.0

An old rock stage station is visible in the field to the north of the road. It was built in 1878. Take a photo from the road. You'll find some shade here, too.

MILE 41.1

The Mayfield area was homesteaded and a small community was developed. Old buildings remain.

MILE 46.7

You'll see some good views of the valley to the west where the Oregon Trail route is located. I saw a few dead rattlesnakes or gopher snakes on the road.

MILE 51.4

Turn right on the road to Bonneville Point and head for the historical interpretive area overlooking Boise Valley.

Here's where the pioneers got their first view of the Boise River Valley.

This is a good spot to spend some time hiking, having a picnic and reading interpretive signs.

Plan for more time here on the drive.

Hike along the ruts in the area, which are marked by concrete posts.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

HOW TO EXPLORE THE OREGON TRAIL

Before you go

There are no services along the gravel roads that follow the Oregon Trail, so gas up in Mountain Home.

Make sure your car is running properly and the tires can handle the abuse of rocky gravel roads.

Take plenty of drinking water and snacks.

Make the drive early in the morning on hot days.

Keep an accurate odometer reading to follow the mileage in the downloaded guidebook.

Download a guide

Follow the link on this story at IdahoStatesman.com to download part three of the "Oregon Trail Back Country Byway" book.

For a PDF of the full guide from Three Island Crossing to Bonneville Point, go to the Idaho Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association website, www.IdahoOCTA.org.

A new print version is expected later this summer and will be available at the Natural Resources Center, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Boise, and at the BLM Boise District office, 3948 Development Ave.

There's an old version of the "Oregon Trail Scenic Byway" booklet available for free at these places, but the route is not recommended.

Read more: <http://www.idahostatesman.com/2010/05/27/1207819/nuts-about-ruts.html#ixzz0pKuOxuzx>