

Beacon Rock 1804 and Beacon Rock, today

Popular climb makes fun, historic outing

Story, photos and recipes by Tracy Beard

I awoke to brilliant rays of light streaming through my bedroom blinds. Inspired by the glistening glow, I rolled out of bed to greet the day earlier than usual. Determined to soak up the glorious weather, unusual for the Pacific Northwest this time of year, I decided to spend the morning outside hiking Beacon Rock.

I loaded my CamelBak™ with water, grabbed a jacket, and packed a light lunch before heading south on I-205 and then east on WA-14. After a 50-minute drive, approximately 37 miles from my home in Vancouver, Washington, I parked my car, hung my Discovery Pass on the rearview mirror, and ventured out to the base of the rock. Following the markers guiding me toward the trail, I read several posted signs along the way.

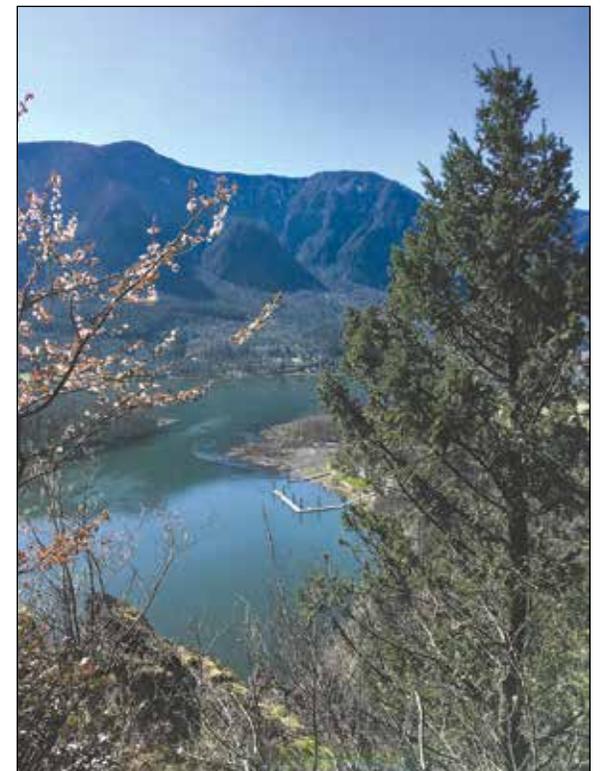
The remains of a small volcano that once graced the landscape, Beacon Rock is essentially the solid core left after years of abuse from the elements. As the Columbia River roared through the gorge age after age, it ate away at the outer wall of the volcano, leaving the 848-foot-high basalt plug. This stoic landmark climbs upward from a lush green forest. As I contemplated my ascent, my thoughts reflected on others that have climbed this rock before me.

On May 14, 1804, Captain Meriwether Lewis and Lieutenant William Clark left with 31 others on the Corps of Discovery Expedition commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson. This Expedition was one of the first exploratory missions to the Pacific Ocean. The main purpose of the Expedition was to find a direct water route to the Pacific Ocean, and more than 200 years before me, on October 31, 1805, these early expeditioners arrived at the very rock I began to climb.

William Clark repeatedly made references in his notes regarding this landmark, calling it “Beaten Rock.” However, when Clark returned in the spring of 1806 he referred to the place as “Beacon Rock,” and no one knows why he changed the name. In 1915 Henry J. Biddle purchased Beacon Rock for one dollar hoping to preserve it and the nearby surroundings for his children, grandchildren, and future generations to enjoy. Henry spent the next three years building a trail to the top. The numerous bridges and handrails were put into place creating a safe and easier ascent to the summit.

Pressing forward I appreciated the painstaking labor that Mr. Biddle endured to construct a trail with plentiful switchbacks making the route less steep for others to hike. The entire trail is between 1.6 and 1.8 miles up and back with a little over 600 feet in elevation gain.

Meandering through the lower portion of the trail, I stopped and dared to look up to sneak a peek at the rock’s crown. The sunshine lit the treetops morphing the deep green pine needles into a blaze of bright yellow that shone against the face of the rock. As I worked my way upward, I left the forest and the resounding song of local birds in trade for vast views of the Columbia River and the echo of train cars roaring down the track on the far side of the River.



The trail rises up on the south side of the rock offering spectacular views of the snow-dusted mountains on the Oregon side of the Columbia River. Some perspectives afford pure easterly views where inlets cut into the landscape while others present a westerly outlook where the rapid current is evident on the water’s surface.

Before reaching the summit, the trail redirects to the back or north side of the rock before wrapping around up to the top. This section of the trail is shaded by trees, and the rumble of nearby cars permeates the air.

When standing on the peak, visitors are 850 feet above sea level. The sign at the top reminds today’s expeditioners that long ago recurrent floods ripped through the gorge bringing a deluge of mud and ice hundreds of feet high raging down the river at 60 miles per hour. As I stood at the top reveling in the warmth of a superb spring day, I wondered if Lewis and Clark were mesmerized by the same beauty that was before me. In the quiet stillness, I was greeted by one of the locals, a well-fed squirrel. He, or she, seemed quite comfortable in the midst of the current explorers and came close begging for a treat.

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The work of freelance writer and photographer Tracy Beard has been published in many regional, national, and international magazines. Her stories focus on luxury and adventure travel, outdoor activities, spas, fine dining, and traditional and trendy libations. She attended culinary school in San Francisco, and owned a catering company, adding to her enjoyment and authoritative understanding of food. Formerly of Longview, she now lives in Vancouver, Wash.

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There isn't much room to relax at the peak, although other visitors were seated enjoying lunch or a snack. I chose to begin my descent. My thoughts brought me to what Lewis and Clark must have eaten on the first day they spied Beacon Rock. Their journey began in St. Louis on May 14, 1804, and ended on September 23, 1806, making for a very long trip.

President Jefferson commissioned them to learn about the waterway, but he was also interested in the economic usefulness of each region along the way. Historians say Jefferson wanted to know what plants and animals thrived in the areas they traversed. Traveling for over two years with a large number of expeditioners required a great deal of food each day, and Lewis and Clark had to plan ahead for when food was scarce and wild game was in short supply.

According to Tori Avey, a historical food writer, "The early expeditioners loaded their keelboat with almost 7 tons of dry goods including flour, salt,

coffee, pork, meal, corn, sugar, beans, and lard. About 93 pounds of portable soup, a concoction that was boiled until gelatinous and then left to dry until hard, was also brought along." Clark wrote, "We eat an immensity of meat; it requires 4 deer, or an elk and a deer, or one buffaloe (sic) to supply us plentifully 24 hours." When meat was abundant, one man could consume 9 pounds of meat in a day.

Today's backpacking, hiking, and camping food looks a bit different than what the 1804 expeditioners ate. On a crisp spring day, one of my favorite lunches to pack is sweet and spicy cornbread and hot minestrone soup. Although mine is made at home (*recipes below*) and transported in a thermos to keep it hot, it certainly warms me from the inside out when navigating the trails on a chilly day in the Pacific Northwest.

To learn more about Lewis and Clark's adventures read *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, edited by Bernard DeVoto. Michael Perry's "Dispatch from the Discovery Trail," is also featured each month in CRR. See page 5.

PROVISIONS ALONG THE TRAIL



Tracy's Sweet & Spicy Cornbread

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
2/3 cup granulated sugar
½ cup yellow cornmeal
1 Tbsp. baking powder
½ tsp. salt
1 ¼ cups milk
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
1/3 cup vegetable oil
3 Tbsp. butter, melted
1/4 tsp. chili flakes

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8x8 glass pan.

Combine flour, sugar, corn meal, baking powder, chili flakes, and salt in a medium bowl. Combine milk, eggs, vegetable oil, and butter in a small bowl. Mix well. Add wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir until just blended. Pour into greased pan.

Bake for 30 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Tracy's Spring Minestrone Soup

Kosher salt
10 cups chicken broth
8 cloves whole garlic smashed, plus 3 cloves chopped
¾ pound cheese tortellini
Extra-virgin olive oil
8 fresh sage leaves
Needles from 1 fresh rosemary sprig
2 medium carrots, finely chopped
1 zucchini, finely chopped
20 fresh green beans, tipped and tailed, cut in half
1 onion, finely chopped
¾ pound bulk pork sausage
1 can (28 oz) plum tomatoes, drained and chopped
2 cans (28 oz each) cannellini beans, drained
½ bunch fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped
1 bay leaf
Juice of ½ lemon
Ground black pepper
¼ cup grated Parmesan

Boil salted water. Combine the broth and the smashed garlic cloves in a big saucepan and simmer for 15 minutes, then remove garlic with a slotted spoon.

Cook tortellini for 3 minutes, drain and set aside. (It should be underdone.)

Pour ¼ cup olive oil in another big saucepan. Add the sage and rosemary and warm the oil for 3 to 4 minutes to infuse the oil. Discard the herbs. Add the carrots, onion, and the chopped garlic and cook for 3 minutes. Add the zucchini and green beans and cook 1 more minute.

Put cooked vegetables on a plate. Add a drizzle of oil to the pan and cook the sausage. Break into pieces and cook until brown. Return vegetables to the pan, add drained tomatoes, and cook for 5 minutes. Add the beans, parsley, bay leaf, lemon juice, broth, and pepper. Bring to a simmer and cook for 15 minutes. Stir in tortellini and discard bay leaf. Top each serving with grated Parmesan and serve.