

Spring hike: Catherine Creek Arch Loop

Catch the wildflowers before they disappear for the season

Story & photos by Tracy Beard

Catherine Creek Arch Loop is one of Washington's top places to see abundant spring and summer wildflowers. Whether you are looking for a short stroll or a vigorous hike, this region has something for everyone. Although you can hike the area any time of year, I recommend visiting in the springtime. The flowers begin to bloom each year in late February and finish sometime in June, depending on the weather. Each month in the spring brings a new landscape for artists to paint, photographers to capture and visitors to enjoy.

An Easy Walk

In the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, Catherine Creek Arch Loop is located on the north side of Columbia River just

east of Bingen, Washington. It is approximately two hours from Longview. Getting to Catherine Creek Arch Loop is easy (*see driving directions, below*). If you are looking for a leisurely walk, hike on the paved lower loop on the south side of the road. This path features several signs with information about the various flowers, the history and the topography of the area. There are also numerous spots where you can stop and admire spectacular views of Mt. Hood. There were several places where you could sit down and take in the views of the river or enjoy a snack. I did this particular hike with my daughter Brittney.

More of a Challenge

On the north side of the road is a sign with an extensive map located past the gate next to the parking lot. It displays the various loops on the hillside. The paths on this side are dirt, and many are very rocky and more challenging. I hiked the Arch Loop, which heads east across a log bridge and up the hill on Catherine Creek Trail on a different day. It loops up and around and comes back down on Tracy Hill Trail.

The Columbia River and Mt. Hood views are even more phenomenal from this side. The incline is not too difficult, but the rocks can be tough on the feet. It was an exceptionally sunny day, and the grassy meadows were filled with yellow, purple and pink flowers. The blue waters of the Columbia River sparkled in the sunshine. During my hike, I visited other hikers



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Driving Directions From I-5, take I-84 east to Exit 64; cross the Col. River via Hood River Bridge. Turn right on WA-14. Go 5.8 miles to Old Hwy 8, parking lot is 1.5 miles up on Hwy 8. Or for a more scenic drive, travel east on WA-14 rather than the Oregon side. Take I-5 Exit 2, go east 54 miles on WA-14 to old Hwy 8 (about 5 miles past Bingen); parking lot is 1.5 miles up on Hwy 8.

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FOR
ARCHIVAL
PURPOSES

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who traversed the trail in the opposite direction. They said it was easier to make the Arch Loop hike in reverse. They went up the Tracy Trail and down the Catherine Creek Trail, something I will try next time.

The Wild Flower History

The Catherine Creek area is prone to harsh weather. The summer heat can reach above 100 degrees, and winter nights can go below freezing. Every plant species has different water and sunlight needs; some thrive in the grassy areas, some by the creek and others under the trees.

In the early 1900s the landscape was an explosion of vibrant color with bold yellow balsamroot (a member of the sunflower family,) fiery red paintbrush and cool blue lupine. Locals referred to the area as Sunflower Hill because of all the balsamroot. Over the years, continuous cattle grazing eliminated many of the seeds.



In 1987 the cattle were removed when the U.S. Forest Service acquired the Catherine Creek area. Volunteers and forest service employees spent years building trails, and in 1998 they were finally completed. The new paths and lack of cattle have allowed the wildflowers to regenerate. Seeds are transported throughout the gorge via the winds and the feet of local critters.

Setting the Stage

The opening act at Catherine Creek takes place in March when yellow bells, Columbia desert parsley, gold stars and grass widow cover the area. In April, blue-eyed Mary, yellow balsamroot, blue Columbia Gorge lupine and white plecritis take the stage. In May, yellow Oregon sunshine, pink bitter root, red paintbrush and blue and white bicolored cluster lilies appear. When the deep-purple meadow larkspur, red and yellow blanket flower



and the blue and purple bachelor buttons appear, we have reached the “denouement,” or final act of the season, and we must wait through another cold winter to see this spectacular show again.

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Tracy Beard writes about luxury and adventure travel, traditional and trendy fine dining and libations for regional, national and international magazines. She is in her seventh year as CRR’s “Out & About” columnist. She recently returned to Longview after living for several years in Vancouver, Wash.



By Tracy Beard

PROVISIONS

ALONG THE TRAIL

High Tea

Serve with fruit, tiny cakes and pastries and cookies.

Chicken Salad Sandwiches

- 8 mini croissants or 8 brioche buns
- 8 leaves of red or green lettuce
- 3 cups rotisserie chicken – chopped
- 1/4 cup almonds – toasted and chopped
- 1/2 cup seedless red grapes – cut into quarters
- 1/3 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/3 cup mayonnaise
- Salt and pepper to taste



You can add chopped celery if you like. Whip the heavy cream until thick. Mix in the mayonnaise. Add chopped chicken, almonds, and red grapes—season with salt. Place 1/2 cup of the mixture onto the mini croissants or brioche buns with one lettuce leaf.



Turkey Cranberry and Gruyere Sandwiches

- 8 slices of whole-grain bread
- 4 thick slices of turkey breast
- 4 slices of gruyere cheese
- 4 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 4 tablespoons cranberry sauce
- 1 cup spinach

Mix the mayonnaise and the cranberry sauce. Cover four slices with the mayo spread. Layer the sandwich with turkey, gruyere and spinach. Top with the other bread and cut sandwiches on an angle.

Cucumber Mojitos

- 1 lime
- 2.5 ounces silver rum
- 5 mint sprigs
- 1 ounce mint simple syrup
- 1/4 cucumber – peeled (optional) and sliced
- 2 ounces Sprite
- Ice

Make the mint simple syrup. Boil 1/2 cup water with 1/2 cup sugar until dissolved. Add 3 sprigs of mint and let steep while cooling. Remove mint. Muddle the lime in the glass. Add the rum, mint simple syrup and Sprite. Stir. Add ice, cucumber and mint sprigs.



Cucumber Cream Cheese Sandwiches

- 8 slices white bread
- 8 ounces cream cheese – softened
- 1 large cucumber – peeled and thinly sliced with a mandolin
- Salt to taste

Spread 2 ounces of cream cheese on each of the four pieces of bread. Layer the cucumbers on the bread. Salt lightly. Place the other bread on top. Press gently. Slice off the crust of each sandwich. Cut each sandwich on the diagonal.