

Seminary Hill Natural Area Hiking Loop

Story & photos by Tracy Beard

Seminary Hill lies just east of Centralia, Washington. Less than two miles outside of the city center, outdoor lovers can quickly immerse themselves in an inviting parcel of Pacific Northwest forest.

Seminary Hill boasts a series of trails that loop around and pass the reservoir built in the 80's by Friends of Seminary Hill. The main path leading to the tank is the Kiser Trail. The map is not to scale, so keep an eye out for the plaques placed at intersections on the ground along the Kiser Trail. These markers will help you keep your bearings. If you meander through each of the independent loops, your trek will be approximately 4.5 miles long. Due to the design of the trail layout, you can make your adventure as long or short as you wish.

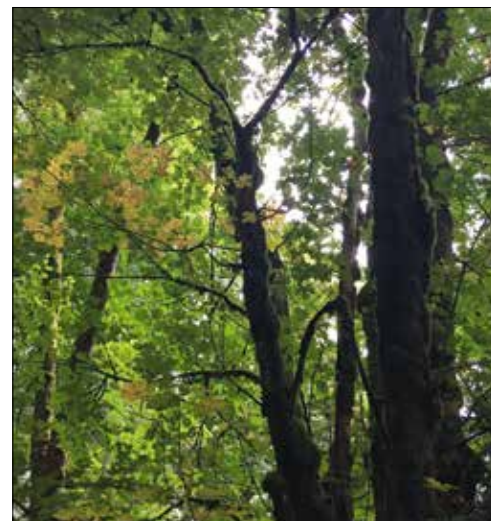
My daughter Brittney and I left early in the morning to get a jump on the summer heat. We parked the car and headed out the main trail that quickly ascended once we reached the forest. The well-trodden paths are comprised of solid dirt with intermittent railroad ties or boards to prevent runoff during the rainy season. Most of the boards are covered with asphalt shingles to help prevent slipping.

Wildlife sightings were limited to a small number of banana slugs and one snail, but different plants and trees permeated the hillside known as Seminary Hill Natural Area. Bigleaf maple trees towered over the forest

floor. An eclectic array of green leaves blocked out vast portions of the blue sky. Still, pockets of pineapple-, currant- and coffee-colored leaves quivered in the breeze tenuously clutching and massive maple branches revealing to us that autumn was just around the corner.



A PATCH OF PARADISE



From top: Maidenhair fern, sword fern, lady fern, Queen Anne's Lace; Dwarf rose or wood rose

Western red cedars peppered the forest. Despite the name, this tree is not a real cedar but a member of the cypress family. The wood is generally used to make siding, decks and soundboards for guitars. Walking along, we spotted the common snowberry with its white berries. This plant is related to honeysuckle. We found these little beauties intermingling with the salal and English ivy. The snowberry, commonly used by Native Americans as a medicine and a soap, makes a delicious snack for grizzly bears, bighorn sheep and the white-tailed deer. They are poisonous to humans. The common snowberry is often planted in yards for ornamental purposes but also prevents soil erosion.

Hidden under the trees, we spied a few dwarf roses, also known as wood roses. These delicate plants accent the primarily green forest with tiny red, pink, lavender or purple flowers. Nestled nearby was the redwood inside-out flower, also known as redwood ivy. This flowering plant exhibits heart-shaped leaves and is native to the West Coast.

Although pine needles did not cushion the path, a variety of ferns carpeted the forest floor: western swordfern, common lady fern and, my favorite, the western maidenhair fern. The western swordfern grows in large clumps that resemble the top of a palm tree. The fronds that start as light green and mature into a dark green can grow to be six feet tall.



This fern loves full shade and the Pacific Northwest's moist soil. The common lady fern is used for ornamental purposes and found in housing landscapes as well as the forest. The stem and fronds of this species are poisonous if eaten raw. I love the dainty western maidenhair fern. It grows in a circular fan shape and varies from light to medium green. It reminds me of a delicate crown and can grow to between 6 and 43 inches tall.

cont page 15

from page 14

Drive to Seminary Hill and watch the forest transition from summer to fall. Look for the plants I've described, search for the color changes and revel in the peace that this little patch of paradise has to offer.

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Seminary Hill: If You Go

This small piece of paradise is easy to reach. From I-5 North take exit 81 toward WA-507N/ Mellen Street/City Center. Continue onto Ellsbury Street and make a right on Alder Street. Turn left onto South Tower Avenue and then right onto East Locust Street. The parking lot is on the right at the intersection of East Locust and Barner Drive. The trailhead begins on the west side of the parking lot. Be sure to pick up a map at the gate. Parking is free and no pass is necessary.



PROVISIONS ALONG THE TRAIL

By Tracy Beard • See related story, page 14

Picnic fare for a hike, or that "intimate" tailgate party you might have this non-football season ... !



Ultimate Dogs

- 8 hot dog buns
- 8 of your favorite hot dogs or bratwurst
- 8 slices of your favorite cheese

Place your hot dogs on the barbecue and cook until almost done. Put cheese on the dogs and close the lid until the cheese melts. Toast your buns on the grill. Place BBQ sauce on the bun, add the cheesy dog and top with caramelized onion jam.

Caramelized onion jam

- 1 lb bacon – chopped
- 3 onions – thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 2 cloves garlic – chopped
- Pinch of red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- ¾ cup of water

Place chopped bacon in a large frying pan. Cook until medium crisp. Remove from the pan and place onto a paper towel. Discard ½ of the bacon fat.

Add olive oil to the bacon fat in the pan. Sautee the onions on low to medium until caramelized, approximately 30 minutes. Add water as necessary to keep onions from burning. Add garlic and brown sugar, stir and add more water if needed. Cook 5 more minutes. Add balsamic vinegar, red pepper flakes, salt, pepper and bacon. Stir to mix well. Add a spoonful or two to the top of your hotdog. Onion bacon jam keeps in the refrigerator for two weeks.

Watermelon Feta Salad

- 4 C. cubed seedless watermelon
- 4 ounces crumbled feta
- 2 Tbl. mint (chiffonade, ie finely shredded or torn)
- 1 cup balsamic vinegar
- 2 Tbl. good extra virgin olive oil
- Black pepper to taste

Cook balsamic vinegar in a saucepan until reduced to a syrupy consistency.

Divide the watermelon onto four plates. Top each dish with one ounce of feta. Drizzle with olive oil and reduced balsamic. Sprinkle each serving with mint and black pepper.



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Vancouver, Wash. resident Tracy Beard writes about luxury and adventure travel, traditional and trendy fine dining and libations for regional, national and international magazines and is a regular "Out & About" contributor to CRR.