

Eagle Creek

When I was a college student in Portland, this was my favorite hike. It might be the most spectacular hikes in the Gorge (and hence its popular). There are more thrilling waterfalls, cascades, etc., per mile than anywhere else. Having said that, you have to hike 3.5 miles before it gets good, and perhaps 6.5 miles (each way) to most of the neat stuff. (A good turning around spot is a glade by the stream about 1/2 mile after Tunnel Falls, or 6.5 miles from the trailhead). Hence, it is perhaps too ambitious to fit in between the morning and evening session unless you get out the door the minute the morning session is over, and are willing to hike at a good place. Also, since much of the trail has a steep drop along one side, it is not appropriate for small children or pets. For pictures, see: <http://www.intangibility.com/inw/Hikes/Eagle-Creek.html>

Access: There is no Westbound exit at Eagle Creek – exit at Bonneville Dam and backtrack on I-84 to exit # 41.

Below is an excerpt for Portland Hikes by Bernstein and Jackson.

This impressive trail, passing numerous major waterfalls in 3 1/2 to six miles, is the major thoroughfare into the Columbia Wilderness. The Eagle Creek Trail deserves its status as the Columbia Gorge's most popular pathway, although solitude seekers might do well to avoid it on summer weekends. Also, the route is inscribed into vertical rock faces in many places, especially the first mile, with sheer dropoffs over the trail edge. Although some pitches are augmented with cable handholds, the path is not for the faint hearted or small children.

Mile one also passes several seep areas where water drips out of the overhanging rock and rains on the trail. Such spots often take the form of enchanted grottoes lined with maidenhair fern.

The first mile from the trailhead rises gradually from creek level to 200 feet above the water. This gentle upgrade is the trail's steepest. From the end of mile one until mile seven, the route follows a nearly level contour. Vegetation includes lichen draped Douglas-fir, Western Hemlock and Western red cedar, mostly under twenty-four inches in diameter. Look also for Bigleaf maple, with Oregon white oak on the drier slopes. Shrubs include scrub alder, vine maple, thimbleberry and Oregon grape. The showiest of the many flowers in the profuse and varied herbaceous understory are tiger lily and columbine.

After a mile, the canyon walls grow somewhat less steep. At mile 1 1/2, the route passes a short side trail down to the Metlako Falls overlook. At mile 1 3/4, a longer side trail leads to Lower Punchbowl Falls. Punchbowl Falls shows up at mile two, with no side trail. The falls aren't very high but afford a worthy trek as rushing water forces its way down a wavy, moss lined chute into a collecting pool.

Above Punchbowl Falls, the gorge steepens again as the path crosses two side creeks spanned by wooden bridges. The second bridge, at mile 2 1/2, peers down the narrow, rocky cleft of Fern Creek. Past Fern Creek, the Eagle Creek canyon slopes down to a narrow slit, with perpendicular walls rising fifty feet above the water. The slit is sinuous at first, then becomes an arrow straight crevice culminating at High Bridge. Look for Loowit Falls horsetailing in from a side creek.

High Bridge, at mile 3 1/2, makes a fine highlight. Spanning 150 feet above the creek, it peers northward into the aforementioned knife slit gorge. To the south, the canyon forms a steepwalled grotto.

From High Bridge, it is a short, uphill trek to Tenas Camp and yet another waterfall. A half-mile beyond, the trail re-crosses Eagle Creek, continuing on the east bank past more waterfalls, two more camps and the Wilderness boundary, to Tunnel Falls at mile six. The elevation at Tunnel Falls is only 1200 feet, which calculates to a laughably easy rise of one 150 feet per mile from the trailhead.

Tunnel Falls boasts one of the more unusual examples of trail construction. The 1915 builders of this path actually bored a tunnel into the rock halfway up the falls, passing behind it and out the other side.

Bill's Comment: the trail goes 7 more miles, but I would stop at a beautiful spot beside the stream about 1/2 mile past Tunnel Falls.