



*From rock climbing to tower-top  
camping to river fishing,  
Northwest wildlands  
are prime for  
active endeavors*

# Sporting Adventures

*Smith Rock State Park*

## LOFTY ASPIRATIONS

BY PETER STEKEL

WHEN THE COOL of autumn settles into Oregon's Smith Rock State Park, it becomes a mecca for rock climbers. Sounds from clinking carabiners and other climbing hardware ring throughout the busy bivouac camp on the canyon rim. Old acquaintances are restored and new friendships begun. The small town of Terrebonne, where climbers go to resupply equipment and gorge on Mexican food, reverberates with the lilt of foreign languages.

For those who live in the Pacific Northwest and don't travel the climbing circuit, Smith Rock offers an ideal climbing milieu. Only 150 miles from Portland, it makes a great weekend and remains climbable when coastal weather turns damp. The many cracks and faces present innumerable challenges for any ability level. Finally,

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and some say most importantly, the views are beautiful and expansive.

Twenty years ago this area was little-known except to a cadre of locals. The best winter climbing was in California's Joshua Tree National Monument. But "JT" can be a cold and windy place, so when word got out about Smith Rock, its popularity intensified. Responding to the increased use, Oregon State Parks worked with climbers and instituted fair and reasonable regulations.

You don't think about this when you're on the rock, however. That's one of the best things about climbing: focus. Tiny rock crystals reflect the sun. Minute bumps and saucer-shaped depressions become essential finger- and footholds. Trust and testing your limits also are a part of the sport. It's you and your belayer taking care of each other. When I'm climbing I don't think about anything except where my hands and feet are and where they're going to be.

Because it had been a year since I'd been to Smith Rock, I made my way to Cinnamon Slab—a beginner's climb to practice hugging the rock. From the top, the Slab also offers bucolic views of picnicking families and fishermen whipping their rods through the air.

At the bottom of the Slab I saw Mick, an Australian I once climbed with in Yosemite. He was waiting around, sizing up potential climbing partners. We shook hands, and he asked, "Give it a go?" I nodded and asked about any route closures. "The usual," he replied, pointing with his chin to the west. "The falcons are still hanging out on the cliffs so the rangers have asked us to keep away."

Beside us is a Timberline Mountain Guides, Inc., class. Because it's an effective way for people to learn about personal limits and risk management, climbing has become a popular teaching tool for adults and youth-at-risk. Instructor Peter Keane is telling the students not to reach too high for handholds but to approach the climb piece by piece. Move up an inch, slow and steady, he says, handling what you're able to do as you learn to do more.

"Climbing!" I shout to Mick, and begin to creep slowly to the top of the first pitch. My arms are tired from the bad habit of pulling myself up when they should be used for balance, letting the legs do all the work. Climbing should be just like walking, except on a highly inclined surface. Rock shoes with incredibly "sticky" rubber soles help glue your feet to the rock like flypaper.

Climbers have a reputation for being daredevils, but that isn't really the case; they are careful and methodical. It's because everything a climber does, every move made, embodies a well-calculated risk. Even tied to a belayer—the person who will tether and monitor your rope to keep you from falling—you climb on your own, finding your own way, aided only by your own eyes.

After my initial success, I got cocky, thinking I could do more than gravity would allow. Planting

my feet firmly on the rock, I reached for a large ledge millimeters beyond my grasp. Straining, I leaned into the rock and felt my feet slide out from under me. It happened so fast that instead of shouting "Falling," all I could muster was, "Uhhmhhff," as my body bumped into the slab. Above, Mick called, "No worries, I've got you."

In the campground that evening I walk to the rim overlooking Crooked River. The wind howls though the canyon where it brushes against brown rock walls, turned on edge like cuneiform tablets. At the end of the day climbing helps remind you how much there is to live for.

## Northwest Forests

# MOUNTAIN HIGHS

BY VALERIE FAHEY



**FIRE WATCHTOWERS  
OFFER CAMPERS  
SECLUSION AND  
SOLITUDE.**

IT'S A ROOM with a 360-degree view, a 6,686-foot-high solarium with spectacular vistas across the treetops of California into Nevada. As a lavender fog curls round the pine trees below and embraces the night, a cricket quartet tunes up nearby.

For a few days, Robb's Hut—a lookout high above a sea of lodgepole pine, whitebark fir, and hemlock near Lake Tahoe in Northern California's Eldorado National Forest—is our hotel. It's one of scores of semiretired U.S. Forest Service fire towers and wilderness cabins now available for public use at rates as low as \$15 a night.

Accommodations can be had nationwide, but many of the most scenic are found along Oregon and Washington's Coast and Cascades ranges and in the Northern Rockies. There are 31 lookouts in the Forest Service's Oregon/Washington region (10 national forests) and 75 lookouts in its Idaho/Montana region (13 national forests). At present, Robb's Hut is the only one in Northern California, but several more are being refurbished.

Constructed in the early 1900s as watchtowers for wildfires or as deep-woods shelters for patrolling rangers, lookouts have become largely obsolete because of high-tech fire-spotting airplanes and infrared satellite photography.

In their new role as public lodging, these uncomplicated quarters offer visitors a rare wilder-