

FAMILY HIKING IN OREGON'S CASCADES

Two young boys insist on marching 13 miles before making camp

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

DEEP in the woods six miles up from the Columbia River in Oregon, the people who made Eagle Creek Trail faced a conundrum. The trail needs to cross the creek at a point where there is a deep gorge, with a torrential waterfall on one side and plunging nothingness on the other.

These days, trail makers would probably build a bridge across the gorge. Back then, in 1916, they carved a tunnel in the cliff behind the waterfall. A stunning segment of the trail winds along a ledge halfway up the

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Photographs by David Falconer for The New York Times

ABOVE High Bridge, which spans a deep gorge on Eagle Creek Trail.
LEFT Lpowitz Falls is a popular stop along the trail.

cliff, right up to the spray of the waterfall, and then disappears into what looks like a cave before re-emerging in the spray on a ledge on the other side.

For my three children, ages 3, 7 and 9, these waterfalls are one of the wonders of the world — and one of the great attractions of backpacking. They have become ardent fans of overnight camping excursions into the Cascade mountains of Oregon, giving me a grand excuse to go, too.

It may seem odd to take such young children on backpack trips, but they love the excitement, the grown-up behavior and the responsibility of setting up camp. And they get tired enough that, unlike on road trips, they don't whine or squabble over who stole whose French fries.

I grew up in Oregon and, for me and my friends, backpacking in the Cascades was a rite of independence and adulthood. As teenagers, we would disappear into the mountains for up to 10 days at a time and emerge blistered, sunburned, tired and thrilled. So, naturally, I wanted to inflict similar pleasures on my own children.

Our first journeys, in the summer of 1999 when Gregory was 7 and Geoffrey just 5, were an experiment. I took the boys while leaving little Caroline at home with my wife, Sheryl. We all had visions of my having to carry the boys back, or, worse, our being stuck somewhere if I broke a leg. But our hikes on Eagle Creek Trail, in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, and Paradise Park Trail, in Mount Hood National Forest, were so successful that last July we expanded the roster and included Sheryl and Caroline, then just 2.

The boys chose the itinerary and settled on Eagle Creek Trail, which has always been one of my favorites as well. It begins at a campground within a mile of the Columbia River about an hour from downtown Portland, so it is a popular route for day-trippers and overnight campers. The trail winds through forests of Douglas fir alongside

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gle Creek (initially more like a river and eventually just a trickle) 13 miles to Wahtum Lake and a junction with Pacific Crest National Park. The trail, the legendary route that runs from Mexico to Canada.

The boys have always wanted to try their own packs, so we loaded their school packs. Both were at: Gregory had his sleeping bag, and Geoffrey carried some clothes. Caroline alternately walked and was carried by Sheryl in a frame child carrier, and I carried a 35-pound backpack with everything else.

The boys took turns leading, after stern warning about the need to avoid horseplay and a reminder that they twisted an ankle they would be to hobble out. At first, as always, there was a bit of exuberant sliding up the trail, but soon they settled down into a nice rhythm.

We've noticed that Gregory and Geoffrey, while not normally renowned in our household for their sense of responsibility, always make dramatically while backpacking. Maybe they feel they are being treated as adults, and rise to the challenge. Or maybe they're just too exhausted to be childish.

Eagle Creek Trail rises steadily, not steeply, passing a couple of pretty waterfalls where we rested. We also paused along one deep gorge where a year earlier the boys and I had seen a bald eagle, but this time only person who claimed to see it was Caroline. And I think she was fibbing, because she claimed to see it a "bad eater" in every tree.

At first there were day hikers arming all over the trail, but after a few miles they gradually thinned. We took a long rest at High Ridge, around four miles in, where the trail takes a metal footbridge across a stunning gorge, only about feet across and more than 100 feet above the creek.

With the children, we double-checked Galileo's conclusion that size, not weight, determines how quickly bodies fall, and dropped pebbles of various weights from the same height into the creek to see if heavier ones would drop more quickly. After confirming that Galileo was correct — all the rocks took the same time to fall — we moved on to the woods again.

One of my concerns in taking Sheryl along was that the trip would confirm her suspicions that I'm a negligent parent, particularly when she realized that the trail followed a cliff edge for several sections of a hundred yards each. In my defense, the trail has a cable handrail on the side where it plunges off on the side, and the boys were very good about holding on to the rail. We carried



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The author's family navigating a ledge with a handrail.

macaroni and cheese cooked on my little backpacking stove. We rested, skipped stones in the brook, looked fruitlessly for bald eagles, boasted about what great hikers we were, and gorged ourselves.

I hadn't been sure how far we would get, and there was a campsite at the seven-and-a-half-mile point where I had been prepared to stay. There are rough campsites — typically a circle of stones for a fire and a flat area to sleep — every mile or two along the trail, and my wife was looking at them with increasing admiration as we trudged on.

BUT Gregory and Geoffrey were adamant: we would go on. They were so scornful at the idea of stopping, while there was still light in the sky and life in our legs, that no one dared contradict them.

After about eight miles, the Eagle Creek Trail gets rougher, narrower and steeper, and there is far less traffic. But the boys plowed along relentlessly, measuring their manhood in mileage, and just as it was getting dark we arrived at the 13-mile mark and Wahtum Lake — a lovely little lake surrounded by fir trees and fed by melting snow.

On every previous visit, I had found it deserted, but this was a Saturday in July and each of the half-dozen campsites around it was full

and-broccoli rice, made by adding boiling water), and the boys rushed around gathering firewood and nurturing a campfire.

Caroline, at this point, announced that she wanted to go home. The boys roared with laughter, bragged some more about their fortitude, and asked whether Sir Lancelot would have been able to walk 13 miles in a day (we were in a King Arthur phase). As we ate and watched the flames flicker, we decided that Sir Lancelot might have been able to do it, but not Sir Kaye.

After a bit of bear-proofing (putting the pot in the lake to soak and washing the bowls so that there would be no smell of food to attract animals), we collapsed and slept.

In the morning, the boys had recovered and insisted on taking a longer route back — 15 miles in all. It was a course we had hiked a year earlier, and they wanted to show Sheryl the talus — a field of rocks and boulders — and the steepness of the alternative route. This involved taking Pacific Crest Trail for three miles to the Indian Springs campground, and then plunging down Indian Springs Trail another two miles to Eagle Creek Trail.

Indian Springs Trail is, indeed, absurdly steep, but it is perhaps less suicidal to take it down than up. So we followed the boys on this longer route, beginning at dawn and ending

ed Caroline through those areas, and rather to my surprise my wife did nothing. In any case, so long as a driver is careful, there is no substantial risk.

Shortly after the tunnel behind the hills, we stopped for lunch on some benches beside the creek. The boys had broken our meals, and so we had

dozen campsites around it was full. We finally made do with a patch of flat ground and set to work making camp. I was not carrying a tent, so we put down a tarpaulin and our sleeping bags. Since the sky was a bit threatening, I jury-rigged a plastic sheet lean-to to ward off any rain. Then we started on dinner (cheese-

route, beginning at dawn and ending up exhausted back at the car just as it was getting dark. They were about as tired — and as proud — as they had ever been.

In the car, in the few minutes before they fell asleep, they decided that even Sir Lancelot would have had a tough time hiking so far. ■

A family on foot through the Cascades

Eagle Creek Trail is one of the oldest and best-known hiking trails in Oregon. It begins near the town of Cascade Locks; take Exit 41 for the Eagle Creek campground on I-84 while headed east from Portland.

A parking permit called the Northwest Forest Pass, \$5 a day or \$30 a year, is necessary. It can be purchased at the Multnomah Falls Lodge, just off I-84 at Exit 31 while going east about 10 miles west of the campground, or by calling (800) 270-7504 or visiting www.naturenw.org.

A handout with a map of the trail is available at the Forest Service information center within the lodge. The trail is well marked, but it can be

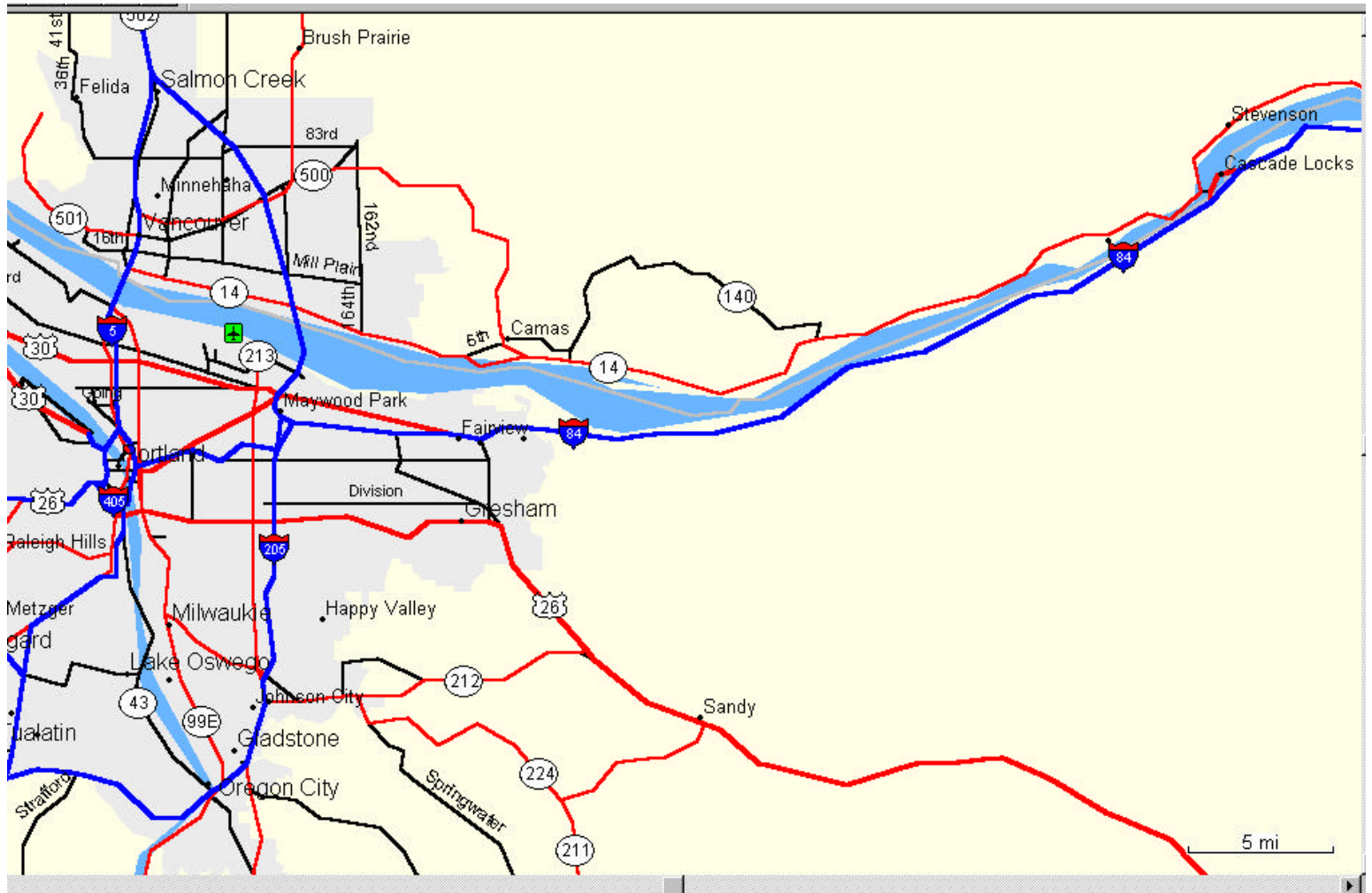
tricky finding Indian Springs Trail even with a map if one intends to take that route back. From the spot where Pacific Crest Trail crosses the Indian Springs campground, take one of half a dozen paths down past the spring. The trails converge within 100 feet and become Indian Springs Trail.

The lower part of Eagle Creek Trail, up to about the six-mile mark and Tunnel Falls, usually can be hiked year round. One bonus of the winter season, from November through April, is that the trail is deserted; partly because of the winter rains, backpacking is very much a summer sport in Oregon.

Backpacking with kids doesn't require any special equipment, other than sleeping bags. I carry a little backpacking stove that uses white gasoline and buy dried foods at the supermarket. Any outdoor store will sell iodine-based tablets to purify stream water, and hikers should also take warm clothes and at least a plastic sheet to ward off Oregon's predilection for raining on a parade.

For a longer hike, about 50 miles, one can extend the journey by beginning on Eagle Creek Trail and continuing south on Pacific Crest Trail to Timberline Lodge, on the slopes of Mount Hood. It is a gorgeous route.

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Finding the trailhead is easy: a quick dash off the I-84 freeway at exit 41, near the charming town of Cascade Locks. In fact, many travelers get off at this exit to check out the Bonneville Dam Fish ladder and power plant.