

Watershed Park: A Gem of Nature in the City

submitted by Patty Suskin, Diabetes Coordinator

What: Watershed Park in Olympia, 153 acres of trails, mature forest and pristine sections of Moxlie Creek right in the middle of town

Where: The main trailhead parking lot is on Henderson Boulevard, south of Interstate 5. There are other trailheads at Eastside Street and 22nd Avenue.

To do: Watershed Park is perfect for a quick hike during a rain break -- or even during a rainstorm. There is a 1.4-mile loop trail, and spur trails let hikers get in and out of the park -- and to different neighborhoods -- in an hour or so. The trails have some steep climbs, so this is a great spot to keep your hiking muscles in shape -- and stay strong for winter sports. The fall and winter scenery is amazing, too, with rotting leaves underfoot, huge sprays of ferns on tree trunks and moss draping tree branches. The whole park shows that forest life doesn't end when it gets cold and rainy. Hikers quickly realize that much of South Sound looked like the park before human development. Hikers can get glimpses of squirrels, raccoons and blacktail deer. The sound of running water -- whether it is dripping from the huge trees, burbling from 28 springs or running through Moxlie Creek -- is never far away.

To see: Watch for the giant maple and cedar trees as the trail descends from the traffic ruckus on Henderson Boulevard into the silence of the forest. Many of the huge tree trunks are coated with moss and ferns. Look for trees growing out of old cedar stumps or logs. One cedar stump still has the springboard cuts that some long-ago logger notched into the tree. Boardwalks and bridges cross over the many marshes, springs and creeks in the park. Moxlie Creek, which flows from the park, underneath downtown Olympia and into Budd Inlet, has runs of salmon, and lucky visitors might see spawning fish. At one point on the trail, a giant cedar and big maple tree grow out of the same spot. Their trunks meld into one another, and their roots intertwine right at the edge of the trail. At another spot, an oval hole is at the base of a small cedar tree.

Hike details: This trail can be steep, and it has stairs at some parts. The city of Olympia has installed excellent trail markers and some interpretive signs. This trail is not suitable for those who use wheelchairs. Benches are at some scenic spots, and it's worth taking a lunch on this hike. Be sure to study the map signs at the trailheads before descending into the park. It would be great if the city of Olympia provided simple paper maps at the trailheads. The Loop Trail is 1.4 miles. The hike from the main park trailhead on Henderson Boulevard to the 22nd Avenue trailhead is about 0.7 mile. The hike from the main trailhead to Eastside Street is about 0.6 mile.

Equipment: Good hiking shoes, sunglasses, cameras, binoculars, rain gear -- this place is a damp, mossy rain forest -- water and food. There are no water fountains here!

Parking: There is parking at the Henderson Boulevard trailhead.

Directions: Take Exit #105 off I-5 follow to Port of Olympia to Henderson Boulevard. Go on the round-about and take a left onto Henderson. Look carefully for the parking area on your left. There also are entrances on Eastside Street and 22nd Avenue.

Restrooms: There is a portable toilet at the main Henderson Avenue parking lot.

Safety: Keep a close eye on children, as many dense thickets and gooey swamps lurk just off the trail. Signs ask hikers to stay on the trail at all times. Steep slopes -- with no guardrails -- border some sections of the trail. Watch for tree roots in some parts of the trail.

History: Wells in this area provided Olympia's drinking water from the late 1800s to the early part of the 1950s. It's possible to spot some of the old water works. In 1955, the property was to be sold and logged, but citizens worked to keep the area pristine. A sign near the main trailhead on Henderson Boulevard introduces hikers to local conservationists who fought to preserve the park.

Rules: No camping, fishing, alcohol or firearms allowed. Dogs must be on leashes, and plastic bags for pet waste are available at the trailhead. Running, cycling and jogging are not allowed on the trail.

More information: Call Olympia Parks, Arts and Recreation Department at 360-753-8380 or go to www.ci.olympia.wa.us. Or <http://olympiawa.gov/community/parks/parks-and-trails/watershed-park.aspx>