

Beacon Rock

- Hike Type: Out and Back
- Distance: 1.8 miles round trip
- Elevation gain: 680 feet
- Difficulty: Moderate

Beacon Rock is one of the most prominent and distinctive geological features in the Columbia River Gorge, an 848-foot landmark that was once the core of a volcano; what remains is what was not washed away by the massive force of ice-age flooding. It is one of the tallest monoliths (singular piece of rock) in North America, along with California's El Capitan, Georgia's Stone Mountain, and Wyoming's Devils Tower.

The Beacon Rock Trail was built by Henry Biddle and Charles Johnson between 1915 and 1918. That makes it one of the oldest trails in our area. At the time, Biddle owned the rock, so he had complete latitude to blast and bridge his way to the top. Several trailside plaques commemorate his achievement. A November 2015 storm seriously damaged the trail, which was reopened in May 2016.

Beacon Rock was originally named by Lewis & Clark on the Voyage of Discovery in 1805, but in later years was more commonly known as Castle Rock. The original name was restored in 1916 by the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, at Biddle's request. Before Biddle purchased the rock and began trail construction, it had been slated for demolition; the rubble could have been used for either railroad construction or a new jetty at the mouth of the Columbia. Biddle's estate offered the rock and surrounding acreage to the state of Washington for \$1, provided it be retained as a public park, a gift Washington State Parks initially declined until the State of Oregon indicated that it would be willing to maintain a state park on the north banks of the Columbia. Washington paid the fee in 1935, and the park now comprises 4,650 acres with nearly two miles of freshwater shoreline.

Today's trail follows Biddle's original alignment, and it could hardly do anything else. After a short stroll through the woods, the trail hits the rock with a vengeance. It's not too steep, and most of the surface has been paved over the decades at one time or another. You'll walk on rock, small patches of cement paving, concrete platform bridges and wooden bridges. The surface is good for normal athletic shoes. The entire trail is a near-continuous series of switchbacks, many of them less than 20 feet long and the trail loops over itself at least twice. I counted 52 switchbacks, while one of my sons counted 54 and the other came up with 49. That says less bad about our educational system than it does good about the distracting views. The trail is completely lined by handrails and is safe for all but the tiniest walkers.

Most of the trail is up the open, west side of the rock, providing views down the river of [Angel's Rest](#) and [Cape Horn](#). With little shade or water, this part of the trail can be really hot in the summertime. Beacon Rock actually has two summits and the trail works around the south one and proceeds up the east side toward the higher, north summit. The trail is forested here, but the terrain is still rocky enough to provide great views of Hamilton Mountain and the river toward Bonneville Dam. At the summit, a few quite large stairs lead to the summit pinnacle. Here, trees block a bit of the view, but it's certainly worth seeing.

The wind is usually howling on one side of the rock and dead calm on the other side, creating a dramatic difference in the perceived temperature. You'll need a jacket most days, but you'll carry it a lot.

