

Enjoy lakes and conifers on the way to Steve's Peak

BY EVELYN ROETHER

There is much to enjoy on this hike—a swimmable lake, a pleasant hike up to a ridge overlooking the peaks of the Red Buttes Wilderness, and some notable botanical wonders. When Oliver Mathews (a self-taught dendrologist with a passion for Oregon's trees) got here in 1931, he found half of Oregon's 35 conifer species within a six-mile radius of the lake.

Trail to Miller Lake and Steve's Peak

• **Difficulty:** To Miller Lake—Easy. To Steve's Peak Ridge—Moderately difficult.

• **Distance:** To Miller Lake—1.4 miles round-trip. To Steve's Peak Ridge—3.9 mile (loop).

• **Elevation gain:** To Miller Lake—390 feet. To Steve's Peak Ridge—795 feet.

• **Access:** June - October.

• **Map:** Grayback Mountain USGS quad.

Directions

Take Highway 238 to the town of Applegate. Go south on Thompson Creek Road for 11.9 miles until the pavement ends at a four-way intersection. Continue straight on Road 1020, paralleling Sturgis Fork Creek for 4.5 miles. Then go straight/left at the junction on Road 400 for 3.5 miles until it ends at the trailhead.

A high clearance 4WD vehicle is *required* due to a rugged low water crossing on Road 400, 3.8 miles from the trailhead. This crossing is impassable during high flows.

Trail description

From the parking area follow the rhododendron-lined trail as it ascends to Miller Lake. Located in a deep glacial cirque, Miller Lake is about three acres in size. Although it was modified with an earthen dam in the early 1900s to provide irrigation to the downstream Thompson Creek water users, the lake retains its natural characteristics. It is especially beautiful when the lake water is high in early summer and wildflowers are at their peak.

To continue on the loop trail up to the ridge, turn right when you reach the lake. Soon you will encounter the first of several botanical curiosities: a stand of large "weeping" Brewer's spruce. Recognizable by its droopy branches, this tree is one of the rarest spruces on the continent. It is found only in the Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains of southwest Oregon and northwest California.

Continuing uphill through magnificent stands of old-growth fir trees and wildflower-strewn meadows, keep an eye out below for the crescent shaped Upper Miller Lake. More a pond than a lake, it is surrounded



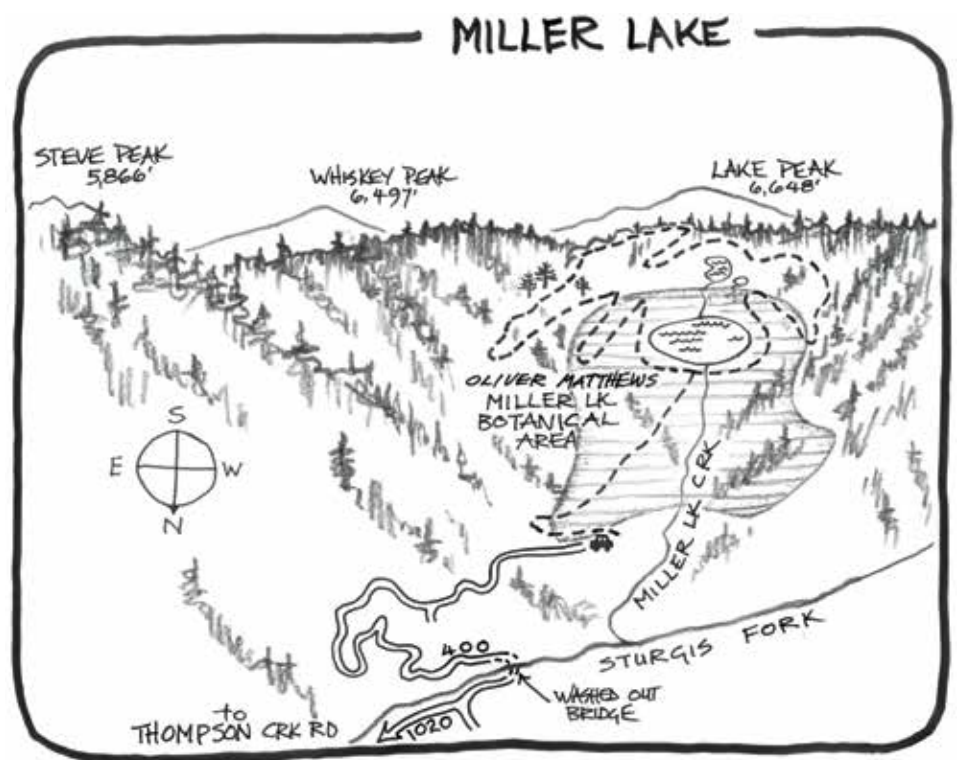
Miller Lake is about three acres in size. Photo: Evelyn Roether.

by yellow flowering sneezeweed and covered with water lilies that flower in mid July.

As the trail switchbacks up to the ridge, the vegetation changes: the understory is now comprised of two rare oak species: Sadler and oracle. The oracle oak is a rare hybridization of the interior live oak and California black oak. The Sadler oak is endemic to this ecoregion. Overhead, red fir and mountain hemlock dominate the canopy while white-flowering Sitka valerian dot the forest floor.

When you reach the Steve's Peak ridgeline, expansive views to the south put you face to face with Mount Shasta in the distance, the Red Buttes Wilderness in front of it, and in the foreground the Sturgis Fork drainage. Northward are the burnt flanks of Grayback Mountain, which at 7,048 feet is the highest peak in Josephine County. Mountain mahogany, green-leaved manzanita, sedums, orange flowering scarlet gilia, and Indian paintbrush are among the few plant species that thrive on the exposed, sun baked, and windblown peak.

The trail then descends back down into the shady, cooler forest amid clusters of arnica, fleabane, wood rose, penstemon, vanilla leaf, bleeding hearts, columbine and woodland phlox. About three-quarters of the way down, near a rock outcrop at the top of a series of switchbacks, in an off-trail basin to the east of the lake,



Map by Ann Gunter.

lies the greatest botanical wonder of the area: a stand of Baker's cypress. A super rare conifer, it's found only in northern California and southwestern Oregon, with eleven known locations. The stand at Miller Lake contains the largest Baker's cypress in the world, measuring 45 inches in diameter and growing.

Back on the trail, the final part of the loop switchbacks down through lush conifer forests, returning you to the shores of Miller Lake. Continue down to your car, returning the way you came.

Hiking Trails of the Lower Applegate, a trail guide describing 20 trails in the Lower Applegate area, is available for purchase at the Williams General Store, Takubeh Natural Market (Williams), Provolt Store, Whistling Duck Farm Store (Provolt), Rebel Heart Books (Jacksonville), Oregon Books and Games (Grants Pass), Northwest Nature Shop, and Bloomsbury Books (Ashland). Trail guides can also be purchased directly from the author at lowerapplegatetrails@gmail.com.

Evelyn Roether
Evelynkr@gmail.com



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How you doing?

Shockwaves of the COVID-19 crisis have rolled through the Applegate. People have holed up at home, schools and businesses have closed, and employees have been laid off.

To get a handle on how Applegate residents have been impacted—with the hope it can show where help is needed and how we can be better equipped to handle the next emergency—A Greater Applegate created a survey included in mailed copies of this paper.

We hope you'll fill it out and return it, either by mail or to the AGA office in Sunshine Plaza in Ruch. Better yet, complete the survey online at agreaterapplegate.org.

Thank you. We hope you're doing well—and stay well.