

PRISTINE WILDERNESS

The Bull run watershed has been mostly untouched and protected since 1892

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The Bull Run River runs through a pristine forested area, protected from intrusion by unauthorized people, making it one of the world's cleanest sources of surface water that continues to replenish the Bull Run Reservoir.

Imagine driving into a secluded area of the Mount Hood National Forest northeast of Sandy.

Although now accessed by only a few paved roads to reduce erosion, most of the area has remained virtually the same as it was when the covered wagons crossed the Cascades into Oregon Territory.

The area is so pristine that the water emanating from this watershed is one of the purest ground-water sources in the world.

Sandy residents could be drinking this water in less than three years.

Aside from the bus and paved road, authorized visitors begin to feel like the West-seeking pioneers upon entering this restricted-access forest land.

Except for managers and supervised visitors, no one has been allowed inside this expanse of national forest since President Benjamin Harrison declared it a reserve in 1892.

No camping, no hiking, no bike riding, no motorized vehicles, no hunting or trapping.

Looking to the left and right, one can see nature's balance portrayed on a fern-covered, pine-needle stage.

Old-growth trees – seedlings when Columbus touched the southeastern U.S. shores – stand as sentinels, attesting to the longevity of nature's cycles.

Those cycles confirm nature's ability over the centuries to recover from several fires – a major fire devastating hundreds of square miles of this entire forest occurred in 1492.

Three deer crossing the road in front of the bus excite these metro residents on a day-long tour of the Bull Run Watershed.

One of the “tourists” sees an eagle soaring overhead, hinting that the 147-square-mile watershed management unit is also a wildlife refuge.

A shy, young black bear scampers off into the darkness behind the undergrowth near the road, reminding us this place is as wild as it was centuries before people staked claim to the town of Sandy.

Bus riders chat quietly about the sly bobcat seen briefly last week by Portland Water Bureau personnel.

Meanwhile, seldom-seen cougars keep a low profile in their protective habitat.

Beyond the understory of native vegetation and the nurse logs of the old-growth forest, light appears through occasional openings in the forest canopy, exposing steep, stony talus slopes with little vegetation.

The road continues uphill, snaking its way through the forest, sending osprey and red-tailed hawks to their high perches. The natural scene thrills visitors when they hear the sound of water rushing through stony streambeds and falling over short cliffs into icy-clear pools, where otter frolic on sunny days.

All on the tour anticipate visiting the log cabins near 270-foot-deep Bull Run Lake, at 3,000 feet elevation. Bull Run reminds everyone of Lost Lake – with Mount Hood peeking over a ridge and reflecting across the clear, quiet water.

These homes of yesteryear are reminders that people had to live near their work (1915-1917) as long as it took to build a small dam and raise the water level.

Apparently, these workers brought cutthroat trout in buckets from the Sandy River and stocked the lake. That single stocking has evolved into a unique strain of wild, protected cutthroat, which provide food for bald eagles.

The two cabins, built of notched logs with small thin pieces of wood wedged in the cracks between logs, cause an air of nostalgia to overcome the group when it is revealed water began flowing to Portland in 1895 from this landslide-created lake.

Portland water Bureau Education Program Manager Myla Thomas explains the need for a dam and increased storage wasn't needed until 1915.

In the beginning (1895), she says, the normal flow of the river was all the water that sparsely-populated Portland needed. Soon, the population increased along with the demand for water.

No other sign of civilization is seen within miles of this unspoiled Garden of Eden, which has defended its right for six generations of westward migration to remain undeveloped, unused and untouched.

Especially pleasing near the lake is the way the purest water seeps from the hillside, drips from evergreen moss and falls into the headwaters of the alluring Bull Run River.

“This is a clear and clean river,” Thomas said. “It has beautiful spots where water falls into gorgeous pools.”

Some disturbance of the natural environment can be seen on the trip downhill. Remnants of small patches of controversial logging, mainly in the 1960s through the 1980s, expose an unnatural second-growth forest where trees are of similar species, age and size.

On the way down, the bus passes the 200-foot-tall Dam No. 1, built in the 1920s, which holds back 10 billion gallons of water.

Also awesome, according to most visitors, is the smaller earthen Dam No. 2, of 1960 vintage, which holds back almost 7 billion gallons.

At the end of the tour day, Thomas explains to the visitors how the supply-demand cycle works with water from a watershed.

“In the summertime,” she says, “we get much less flow in the river and the population demands more than twice as much water as winter.

“At the time we have the least water, people need the most – which creates the need for storage in reservoirs such as Bull Run.”

Sandy’s tie-in to Bull Run water in approximately 2012 will certainly supplement the current source, which comes to the city in a single pipe. Bull Run will provide a consistent year-round source of high-quality water.

Anyone who wants to join an eight-hour, 24-person tour of the Bull Run Watershed should contact Thomas next June or July. Tours usually end in late October.