

Swale Canyon is an under-the-radar wildflower hike outside the Columbia Gorge

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The Klickitat Trail runs through Swale Canyon, with yellow desert parsley flowers blooming along Swale Creek in early spring. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

By [Jamie Hale | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

When we usually think about wildflower hikes, our minds wander to the [sweeping landscapes of the Columbia River Gorge](#), where yellow balsamroot and purple lupines bloom on hills overlooking the mighty Columbia.

As crowds [continue to flood](#) outdoor recreation areas around the Pacific Northwest, these renowned wildflower hikes have become overcrowded to the point of inaccessibility on sunny spring weekends.

Those in search of a quieter experience would do well to drive through the Columbia Gorge, crossing the river into Washington and heading up into the hills just beyond. Here, a sparser landscape brims with wildflower blooms that are no less beautiful than the crowded spots by the river.

One such place is the remote and beautiful Swale Canyon, a narrow chasm between rolling, wind-swept hills where the land comes alive with color every spring.



A footbridge leads to the Klickitat Trail along Swale Creek, from the Harms Road Trailhead near Centerville, Wash. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



The purple flowers of Columbia desert parsley bloom amid yellow desert parsley flowers along the Klickitat Trail in Swale Canyon. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



The Klickitat Trail descends into Swale Canyon, with yellow desert parsley flowers blooming along Swale Creek in early spring. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



Yellow desert parsley flowers bloom as the plant grows out of a wall of loose rocks along the Klickitat Trail in Swale Canyon. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

On Thursday, just a week into April, the canyon was alive with blooming desert parsley flowers, their yellow heads bobbing in the wind above bright green bunches of leaves. They dotted the harsh black and red stone of the volcanic landscape, where orange and yellow lichens glowed in the morning light.

Trickling Swale Creek ran alongside the trail, its rocky banks stained chalk-white with minerals. Pine trees dotted the canyon with splashes of dark green and orange, alongside bare gray cottonwoods, alders and maples that were just beginning to bud.

Squirrels had the run of the place, scampering back and forth across in the sun, as songbirds flitted through the trees and raptors circled on the wind. A pair of crows chased a hawk from their cliffside perch, their caws echoing off the canyon walls.

Notably absent from Swale Canyon were humans. Aside from myself, I counted only one pair of hikers along with a pair of cyclists on the trail through the late afternoon.



Yellow desert parsley flowers bloom alongside the Klickitat Trail in Swale Canyon. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



Swale Creek runs alongside the Klickitat Trail as it descends into Swale Canyon near Centerville, Wash. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



The Klickitat Trail descends into Swale Canyon, with yellow desert parsley flowers blooming along Swale Creek in early spring. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian



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Swale Canyon is only one part of the long-reaching Klickitat Trail, which runs 42 miles through the hills of Klickitat County to the tiny Columbia Gorge town of Lyle. The trail was built along an old railroad line, the remains of which can still be seen. In Swale Canyon, old ties and spikes can sometimes be seen beside the trail, while several small rail bridges have been converted for foot traffic.

Managed by [Washington State Parks](#) and the [Klickitat Trail Conservancy](#), the Klickitat Trail is open to hikers, cyclists and equestrians, as well as dogs on leash. And while its length and beauty might pique the interest of backpackers, camping is not allowed anywhere along the trail.

If past spring reports from other hikers are any indication, Swale Canyon is just beginning to bloom. Aside from desert parsley, the canyon is known to host poet's shooting star, yellow bells, grass widow and other wildflowers. And soon, the trees that line the canyon will be bursting with flowers and leaves.

The views aren't quite as awesome as those in the Columbia River Gorge, but if it's spring color and a beautiful natural landscape you're after, Swale Canyon holds its own against the best.



Cyclists head out on the Klickitat Trail along Swale Creek near Centerville, Wash. Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

SWALE CANYON HIKE

Distance: varies

Difficulty: moderately easy (rocky trail)

Amenities: portable toilet

Since the 42-mile Klickitat Trail runs through Swale Canyon, you can approach it from either side. This hike begins at the eastern side of the canyon, at the Harms Road Trailhead, where parking is easy and the access is clear and simple.

To reach the trailhead from downtown Lyle, turn north onto Centerville Highway from WA-14, and drive 14.7 miles to Harms Road. Turn left onto Harms Road, where just across a small bridge you'll see the trailhead and a portable toilet on the left. Park off to the side of the gravel road, wherever you're able.

From the trailhead, pass through a gate and cross a wooden bridge beside Swale Creek. The trail will gradually descend into Swale Canyon, the rolling hills soon turning into steep canyon walls. You'll need to pass through two green gates near the beginning of the hike – look for latches on the left side.

The Swale Canyon section of the Klickitat Trail is about 12 miles in all, and unless you have a car parked at either end, it's up to you to decide how far out you want to hike before turning back around.

The desert parsley flowers are abundant for about the first three or four miles, then begin to peter out deeper into the canyon, making a good point to turn around for a six to eight-mile day. About six miles down the trail, halfway into the canyon, the trail crosses a long wooden footbridge over the creek, marking a good stopping point for a lengthier 12-mile day.

However far you decide to go, simply turn around and go back the way you came to return to the trailhead on Harms Road.

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