

Restoring Silver Star's Luster

Project aims to block illegal motorized use on endangered trail

BY SUSAN SAUL

In 1902, the Yacolt Burn, the largest forest fire in Washington's history, blackened 238,000 acres and killed 35 people before fall rains snuffed it out. That fire paved the way for today's wildflower-carpeted meadows on Silver Star Mountain in the southwest corner of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

Forests quickly grew back at the lower elevations, but the thin soils on the mountaintop and exposure to high winds through the Columbia River Gorge have created an alpine-like microclimate and slowed the advance of new forests up the slopes.

Today, hikers revel in miles of ridge-top meadows and expansive views. At 4,390 feet, Silver Star is the highest point between Mount St. Helens and the Columbia River Gorge, and the peak dominates Vancouver's eastern skyline. Silver Star earned its name from the star-shaped appearance of five ridges radiating from the central summit. Five great trails follow those ridges to the summit.

On a clear day, the view includes the high Cascades from Mount Rainier south to the North Sister, east through the Gorge to the wheat fields of eastern Oregon, west to Saddle Mountain in Oregon's Coast Range, and down below to the silver ribbon of the Columbia River, the skyscrapers of downtown Portland and ever-expanding development in Vancouver.

Some of these trails are former roads, constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s to provide fire control and lookout tower access. Repeated fires in the Yacolt Burn between 1902 and 1929 made it



Roger Anderson points out a tree damaged by a 4-wheel-drive vehicle on Silver Star Trail in the southwest Cascades.

the focus of a lot of fire prevention and conservation work. Today, hikers can see snags felled by the CCC crews and terraced hillsides where they tried to speed up reforestation.

The Forest Service closed the Silver Star area to motorized use in the 1989 Forest Travel Plan to protect the unique and fragile meadows from increasing vehicle damage and to protect non-motorized recreation uses. In 1990, the Forest Service designated the 10,350-acre Silver Star Scenic Area and a 1993 decision converted approximately 8.5 miles of old roads to trails.

The temptation of old roads and the difficulty of enforcing the motorized closure have resulted in substantial unauthorized motorized use over the years. All Forest Service efforts to block access have been thwarted; signs are destroyed, barricades are winched away, steel cables are cut. Joyriders in small jeeps and perched on quads are not content to stick to the old roads. They leave tracks across the slopes, cut cookies in the meadows, crush wildflowers and damage archaeological sites. The abuse has become more flagrant in the last few years as Forest Service budgets and enforcement

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personnel numbers have shrunk.

As a result, the Silver Star network was identified as one of 10 threatened trails in WTA's 2003 Endangered Trails report.

Last winter, representatives of the Washington Trails Association, Chinook Trail Association, U.S. Forest Service and Washington's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) held a series of meetings about Silver Star. The DNR is a key player because many of the old roads originate on state forest lands. The Forest Service came up with a plan to embed a total of 500 boulders at 10 access points to block vehicle access, and the other partners endorsed this option. The boulders would be oriented and sloped so a chain or strap could not be placed around them. DNR would close and reinforce existing gates and the trail tread would be narrowed where possible to block jeep and quad access.

CTA and WTA submitted a grant proposal for more than \$59,000 to the South Gifford Pinchot Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) for funding to implement the plan. Congress gives counties payment in lieu of taxes on federal lands to make up for the loss of revenue from declining Forest Service timber sales. The counties are required to spend between 15 and 20 percent of their payments on projects benefiting the national forest. The RACs review the projects and make recommendations to the Forest Service.

Impressed by the public-private partnership, the RAC recommended the Silver Star motorized use barriers project for funding in 2004. This is the first time WTA has received a RAC grant.

Next year, WTA and CTA volunteers will do site restoration once the boulders are in place and they will continue to provide trail maintenance so hikers can enjoy Silver Star's dazzling wildflower displays and stunning views unmarred by vehicle tracks.



Hikers take a break near vandalized barriers and vehicle ruts on the way to the summit of Silver Star Mountain.

Seeing Silver Star

Getting There

From I-5, take exit 14 and follow the signs to State Route 502 and follow for about 5 miles. At the town of Battle Ground, turn north on SR 503, then east on Rock Creek Road, which turns into Northeast Lucia Falls Road, to the intersection with Sunset Falls Road just east of Moulton Falls County Park. Take Sunset Falls Road for 7.6 miles to Sunset Campground. Turn right into the campground, cross the East Fork Lewis River and follow Forest Service Road 41 for 3.4 miles to the junction with Road 4109. The junction is poorly marked but it is at a wide spot on Road 41. Turn

right and go 4.2 miles to the Silver Star Trailhead.

Elevations:

Silver Star Trail 180 trailhead: 3,200 feet
Silver Star summit: 4,390 feet.

Distance:

5 miles round trip to Silver Star summit on Silver Star Trail 180. For a loop, take 1.25-mile Ed's Trail 180A on the hike up and return on Trail 180. Ed's Trail passes through a natural stone arch.

Best time to visit:

Mid-June to mid-July is peak wildflower time.