Catherine Creek

Easy (3 short hikes)
3.4 miles round trip
600 feet elevation gain
Open all year
Use: hikers, bicycles
Map: Lyle (USGS)

The first of these three easy hikes follows a paved loop past views of the Columbia Gorge from the Dalles to Hood River. A second hike climbs through Catherine Creek's park-like valley to a natural rock arch. The third walk explores a nearby hillside where mysterious pits in a rockslide are believed to honor the spirits of Indian dead.

Because the trails are so short, it's easy to do them all in a day. If you love wildflowers, you might time your visit to catch the peak displays: grass widows in mid March, blue camas in mid April, and yellow balsamroot in early May.

Start by driving Interstate 84 to Hood River Bridge exit 64. Pay the 75-cent toll to cross the river. Then turn right onto Washington Highway 14 for 5.8 miles. Just before milepost 71 turn left onto paved "Old Hwy. No. 8" around Rowland Lake. After 0.9 mile, when the road climbs a hill, look for a "Road Closed" sign on a spur to the left. This is the trailhead to the Indian pits. To find the trailhead for the first two hikes, continue 0.5 mile along the county road to a large "Catherine Creek" sign on the right. Park at a long gravel pullout on the left by a green gate (GPS location N45°42.629' W121°21.724').

Catherine Creek's natural rock arch. Above: Bitterroot blooms in May.
The first of the three short hikes is a paved, wheelchair-accessible loop that begins on the right, beside the large “Catherine Creek” sign. This wide path turns a dry grassland overlooking the white-capped Columbia River. Scattered ponderosa pines and black oaks provide a bit of shade. Look for Columbia ground squirrels in the fields and cottontail rabbits by the blackberry thickets. If you keep right at all trail junctions, you’ll pass a viewpoint to the west (across the river to Hood River cherry orchards and the top half of Mt. Hood), and a viewpoint to the east (upstream past Memaloose Island to The Dalles), before returning to your car.

For the second hike, walk 50 yards back along the paved county road to a green gate on the far side. An abandoned ranch road begins here that explores Catherine Creek’s upper canyon. Keep right on the road as it crosses a barren bedrock flat to lush terrain along the creek. After 0.5 mile go right at a fork and cross the creek. Next the route passes an old corral and stable at the feet of the rock arch—actually a splinter of rimrock on the canyon wall. Then continue up the old road. Just before a powerline you’ll reach a meadow where blue lupine blooms in May. This makes a good turnaround point.

Note that the Catherine Creek valley has shrubby clumps of both poison oak and real oak, so pay attention to the difference. The lobed leaves of poison oak are always in clusters of three while real oak has single leaves. At times poison oak can also be identified by white berries or shiny leaves.

For the third short hike (to the Indian pits), return to your car, drive 0.5 mile back west along county Road 1230, and park at the spur on the right marked “Road Closed.” Parking is limited here. Walk up the steepish left branch of the spur road for 0.3 mile to a viewpoint where you can see across a huge lava landslide to Rowland Lake. If you look carefully, you’ll notice odd walls and pits in the rockslide. To inspect them, continue 100 yards to the end of the road and rock-hop down the rocky slope. The 5- to 15-foot-wide pits are sometimes clustered in groups of 20 or more within meandering rock walls.

Northwest Indians often built small rock-rimmed meditation sites in places where spirits were thought to be powerful, including many mountain peaks. Young men would fast in such locations in the hopes of receiving a spirit vision to guide their adult life. Are the pits here vision quest sites? Perhaps, since they overlook the Columbia River’s Memaloose Island. Memaloose means “dead” in the language of the Chinook Indians who once lived here, and the island was an important burial site and spiritual center for that powerful rivergoing tribe.