

Sturgis Fork straddles three watersheds

BY EVELYN ROETHER

Greetings, fellow hikers! It's time to hit the high country! Leave these hot valleys behind and head for them thar hills where a cool, quiet respite awaits you. We're so fortunate to have the Siskiyou Mountains and more specifically, the Kangaroo Roadless Area, in our backyards.

Sturgis Fork Trail is one way to access these wildlands that straddle the ridge crest delineating the Applegate, Illinois, and Klamath river valleys. So hop in your four-wheel drive rig and treat yourself to a hike up the mountain and do some exploring in these beautiful wild forests. Enjoy!

Sturgis Fork #903

Difficulty: Moderate

Distance: 1.6 miles round-trip

Elevation gain: 500 feet

Access: Mid-June - late 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 at the top of the hill. Continue straight on Road 1020, paralleling Sturgis Fork Creek. Do not turn left towards Miller Lake. After 8.1 miles turn right onto the *very rugged* Road 1020/600 and commence uphill for 0.5 mile to the large trailhead parking and horse camp area on the left. (Note: A 4-WD high-clearance vehicle is necessary for the last half mile.)

Named for Albert Sturgis, a 20th century miner in the area, the Sturgis Fork Trail is mostly used as an access to the Boundary Trail #1207, which is only 0.8 mile from

the trailhead. This is also the shortest, though not easiest, trail route to the Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve from the Applegate watershed.

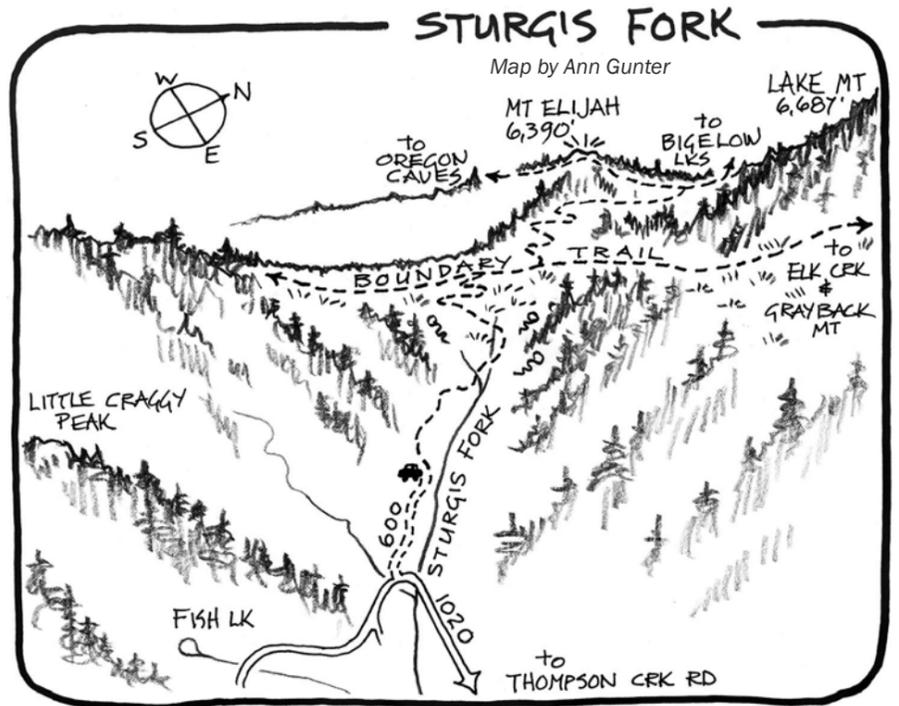
From the parking area the trail quickly ascends through stands of old growth grand fir. Under the towering trees, marshy meadows soon emerge. In June and early July expect to see Sitka valerian, poke knotweed, mountain bluebells, and yellow violets along with a sprinkling of other wetland wildflowers along the way. After crisscrossing the headwaters of Sturgis Fork Creek several times, the trail winds its way up to the ridgeline separating the Applegate and Illinois River watersheds.

At the unsigned 'T' junction on the ridge, the subtler Boundary Trail to the left (south) leads to:

- Elkhorn Prairie (about a mile)
- Horse Springs (water and camp) (about 2 miles)
- Sucker Gap (water and camp) (5.7 miles)
- The Red Buttes Wilderness, eventually, and the Pacific Crest Trail

If you instead turn right (north) on the Boundary Trail, you can get to:

- Mt. Elijah and/or Bigelow Lakes. Continue 0.3 mile then turn left (west) at the intersection and proceed 0.7 mile uphill to the junction with the Mt. Elijah Trail #1206. Turn left (south) and follow the ridgeline 0.3 mile up to Mt. Elijah. Or go right (north) to get to Bigelow Lakes, which are visible below.
- Oregon Caves National Monument. Continue past Mt. Elijah for 3.8 miles, where the trail ends at the caves.



- Sparlin Camp. Stay right at the junctions, and continue 0.8 mile along a subtle trail, through spectacular subalpine meadows, to the camp, which is at the top of the Elk Creek Trail. There is water a few hundred yards down the Elk Creek Trail at D. Healy Spring.
- Grayback Mountain. The tallest peak in Josephine County, Grayback is 4 miles past Sparlin Camp. (See map and O'Brien Creek Trail description for guidance.)
- The top of the O'Brien Creek and Grayback Mountain trails, about 5 miles past Sparlin Camp. The Grayback Mountain Trail marks the northern terminus of the Boundary Trail.

Sturgis Fork Trail is mighty fine in its own right, just a bit short for the amount of time it takes to drive there. If you continue

either way on the Boundary Trail, you're in for some spectacular mountaintop views and wildflower displays. As always, leave no trace.

To learn about more trails in our area, check out my book, *Hiking Trails of the Lower Applegate*, a trail guide describing 20 trails in the Lower Applegate area. It's available at the Williams General Store and Takubeh Natural Market in Williams, Provolt Store and Whistling Duck Farm and Store in Provolt, Rebel Heart Books in Jacksonville, Oregon Books and Games in Grants Pass, and Northwest Nature Shop and Bloomsbury Books in Ashland. Trail guides can also be purchased directly from the author at lowerapplegatetrails@gmail.com. Happy hiking!

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■ PRESCRIBED BURN

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weather forecast is watched closely until an appropriate weather window is identified. If the required volunteers and equipment are available, the controlled burn is scheduled.

Forty-eight hours before the burn, a site-specific spot weather forecast from the National Weather Service assures the burn boss that the temperature, humidity, and wind conditions will be safe. The afternoon before the burn is scheduled, Oregon Smoke Management gives approval if the winds will move the majority of the

smoke away from populated areas. On the day of the burn, weather conditions are continually measured at the project site. If all the measurements align with the prescription, a "test fire," is ignited to observe how the fire behaves.

If flame lengths and rate of spread are as predicted, the controlled burn is conducted. The burning starts from the upslope/upwind edge of the burn unit and proceeds downslope and into the wind. This allows for a slow-moving, "backing," fire to accomplish fuel consumption. After the burn is completed, "mop-up" begins: Any materials still burning are

put out using water and hand tools. This crucial step prevents the fire from getting outside of the burn unit after the burn is completed. The landowner and PBA members then check the burn unit multiple times over several days to be certain the fire is completely out and contained within control lines.

Controlled burning is an involved and complex process, vital to the health and safety of our community and forests. Sharing the knowledge and resources available within our community, we can accomplish it safely and effectively. If you are interested in being informed about



A crew manages a prescribed burn conducted by RVPBA earlier this year in the Applegate.

Photo: Alexi Lovechio.

future events, hosting a burn, or have any questions or comments, please email me.

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