

# Tieton Canyon: The hinge between forest and desert

By [GREG JOHNSTON](#)

P-I REPORTER

NACHES -- At first glance, it's the history of a million years that makes Tieton Canyon so captivating.

It was about that long ago when the mantle for the canyon's dramatic landscape was laid down, issuing forth from a volcano near the crest of the Cascades and oozing almost 50 miles to where now spreads the city of Yakima.

Geologists say it was the longest known andesite magma flow on Earth, and today it is manifested in many impressive shapes of basalt: vertical towers, horizontal ribs, twisted columns, wavy forms and pillow shapes.

These provide aeries for golden eagles, spires for rock climbers, prime habitat for bighorn sheep, a scenic setting for hikers and campers and a dramatic backdrop for stunning spring wildflower displays. You now are assured of experiencing much of it in its natural state, unfettered by development, thanks to a four-year effort to preserve and add 10,000 acres of private land to the state's Oak Creek Wildlife Area.

"You can really see the Earth's bones out here," says Betsy Bloomfield, the Yakima-based program manager for The Nature Conservancy, who, with Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist Ken Bevis, spearheaded the campaign.

"This is the most interesting place on the planet, I think. We're right on the border between the Great Basin deserts and the forest lands of the eastern Cascades. We go from forest to the desert right here at this hinge point."

The Tieton Canyon and the river that flows through it are well known to Northwest whitewater enthusiasts. They flock here every September when flows are increased from a dam upstream at Rimrock Lake for irrigation, creating miles of excellent rapids for kayaking and rafting.

Five campgrounds hug the river's shore, all popular in



zoom

PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

Betsy Bloomfield, The Nature Conservancy's Yakima-based project manager, packs her Pomeranian, Gryphon, along the Tieton Nature Trail, which runs through the basalt-walled Tieton River Canyon.



zoom

PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

Arrowleaf balsamroots beam like little suns along the rim of Tieton Canyon.

summer. The approximately 56,000-acre wildlife area is critical winter habitat for about 5,000 elk and hundreds of mule deer -- and local hunters know it well, too.

Beyond that, however, the charms of Tieton Canyon are not well known around Washington.

"It's sort of a well-kept secret," says Bloomfield.

Adds Bevis: "The hunters have known about Oak Creek for a long time, but it hasn't gotten considerable recreational notice from the west side, I think because there's so much good stuff on the way over here."

But there's plenty of good hiking to be found in the canyon, too. There are only two designated trails on the Tieton, both intriguing and one of which had been threatened with development. But this is big, open, blue-sky country where you may wander at will, among the rock columns to lava-tube caves, up onto high wildflower benches above the basalt, into side canyons and right up to the rim for sweeping views of the landscape.

"One of the neat things about Eastern Washington is, you don't need a trail. You just kind of amble," says Bevis.

This is curious country to amble, too, because of its specific niche among the terrain folds along the eastern Cascades. This is the northernmost extent of the Oregon white oak forests that stretch along the east slopes from here to Northern California. They intermingle with the typical eastside Ponderosa pine forests and stands of Douglas fir, which is far more common west of the range. It is also the edge of the desert -- you can find prickly pear cactus here.

"We have 2,000 feet of vertical relief with a lot of aspects and habitat types, which results in startling diversity," Bevis says.


That means not only are there many botanical curiosities to appreciate, but lots of critters to look at. The spring wildflowers are brilliant: yellow balsamroot, purple grass widows, blue lupines, pink and white phlox and others. The birding is terrific; if you want to see the majestic golden eagle in Washington, this is the place.

"It's actually a stronghold of golden eagles," says Bloomfield. "There are six nest sites. They are here in force."

It's also a hot spot for woodpeckers, including species not seen in Western Washington, such as whiteheaded, acorn and Lewis'.

In spring, using binoculars, you often can spot elk and bighorn sheep herds on the canyon slopes. Deer are here as well, along with bear, mountain lion and three federally protected species -- the upper Columbia steelhead, bull trout and spotted owl.



 PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

The grass widow is among the colorful wildflowers currently blooming in the Tieton Canyon.

So Bloomfield and Bevis freaked out when "For Sale" signs started sprouting along land in the bottom of the canyon -- adjacent to the wildlife area -- that traditionally had been open to public ambling.

Plum Creek Timber Co. had owned about 10,000 acres in a checkerboard pattern among state and federal lands on the southeast corner of the wildlife area. It put up for sale parcels in the canyon bottoms that were not productive timberlands, but prime real estate -- including the trailhead and access site for one of the maintained trails, Bear Canyon.



 PAUL JOSEPH BROWN / P-I

"I came in here and saw the signs and said, 'What!' That kicked into motion this whole thing," says Bevis.

Bloomfield and the non-profit Nature Conservancy led the way, buying outright one section from Plum Creek and acquiring grants to purchase the rest, totaling about 10,000 acres. The result is consolidated public ownership of pretty much the entire wedge of land between the confluence of the Naches and Tieton rivers.

A 300-year-old ponderosa pine is a favorite of Betsy Bloomfield of The Nature Conservancy. "This tree has survived fire, lightning, grazing and logging."

"This was meant to be," says Bloomfield. "We had to save it. Now, four years later, we're standing on public land."

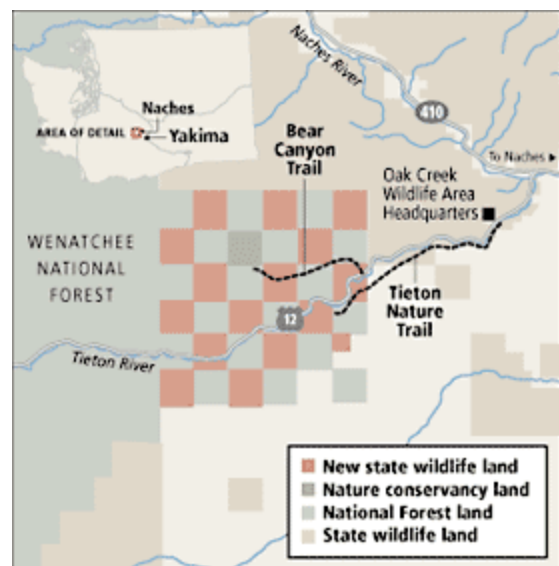
The two trails in the canyon will give you a good sense for what was saved.

The Bear Canyon Trail, now entirely public, begins along U.S. Route 12 about 6.5 miles west of the junction with state Route 410 and climbs between columnar basalt cliffs where eagles nest, punctuated by displays of balsamroot and phlox, and stands of oak, pine and quaking aspen. It reaches a Forest Service road in about three miles.

Bloomfield says those with a topographic map and compass skills can scramble the south shoulder of the canyon from the trailhead and follow along the tops of the columnar cliffs, descending into Bear Canyon and the trail after a few miles to loop back to the trailhead.

The other maintained trail is called the Tieton River Nature Trail, and it starts across Route 12 from the Oak Creek Wildlife Area headquarters, about three miles west of the junction with state Route 410. Here you really can witness the dramatic formations of the Tieton lava flow, as well as wildflowers, birds and the river. It follows the canyon upstream for about six miles and is said to be a fine mountain-bike ride.

Not far from this trailhead is a rock-climbing area known as the Royal Columns.



Like anywhere in the arid lands east of the Cascades, you also need to watch out for ticks and rattlesnakes. Ticks live in the grass and brush, so check your clothing after you move through such areas. Rattlesnakes usually will give you ample warning, but be especially cautious while scrambling among rocks and near water.

Don't let them scare you away. The Tieton is worth visiting, and worth saving.

"This project has been the high point of my career," says Bevis.

### **Tieton links**

☒ The Nature Conservancy of Washington offers a visitor's guide to Tieton Canyon at [nature.org/washington](http://nature.org/washington).

☒ Information on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area can be found at the Department of Fish and Wildlife site, [wdfw.wa.gov](http://wdfw.wa.gov).

☒ Details on campgrounds along the Tieton River can be found at the Wenatchee National Forest site, [www.fs.fed.us/r6/wenatchee/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/wenatchee/)

[recreation/camping](http://www.seattlepi.com/getaways/314822_tieton10.html).

[http://www.seattlepi.com/getaways/314822\\_tieton10.html](http://www.seattlepi.com/getaways/314822_tieton10.html)