

Climbing into a rocky wonderland

By Susan Wood

CASTELLA â€“ Views, views and more views best describes the Castle Dome Trail, a hiking route tucked behind the Castle Crags Campground.



Mount Shasta
on Nov. 7 from
the Castle
Crags trail.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

This is Day 2 of our girls camping weekend anchored indoors in Redding.

Just like I remembered, this 5½ mile round-trip trail has everything going for it. The four of us climbed 2,200 feet through an amazing forest filled with birch, dogwood and Oregon ash trees. It crosses the Pacific Crest Trail before launching into a steep incline to a jagged, spire-laced ridge that provides some of the best views Northern California has to offer. To the north, thereâ€™s Mount Shasta. Lassen Peak peeks out of the horizon line to the southeast. In between, the sheer drops from the crags bring drama and majesty to the entire hike.

The Castle Crags were created in much the same manner as Shasta and other peaks of the Cascade Range. Volcanic activity millions of years ago along with wind, ice and rain helped to perfect the 6,000-foot granite formations above Interstate 5 south of the city of Mount Shasta.

This is one hike where cameras get as much action as water bottles. As the views open up near the ridge, I pondered how a ridge that is subject to such elements could support exposed, small trees growing from the crevices with no obvious soil to grip. The trees along the trail provided yet another plus for hiking in the offseason – foliage in colors ranging from yellow to pink.

The trail crosses Kettlebelly Ridge, part of the Oregon Toll Road used by early settlers.

At the top of the ridge, the whole world opens up and the main feature of the Castle Crags – Castle Dome, juts out of the landscape. At first glance, some would say it rivals Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. It has no cables to help a brave soul, but even the most experienced rock climber wouldn't dare go to the top without some sort of technical help like a rope, harness and protection.

State park workers strung a cable across the lookout at the end of the trail, near the base of the dome. But it's not going to stop anyone from tumbling off the sheer drop off. A fall there would be unforgiving and dramatic.

A safe, flat spot 180 degrees and steps away provides for a magnificent lunch spot with views of the spires, the dome, nearby peaks and Dunsmuir below. It may appear civilization is a world away, but the occasional sound of vehicles rushing on I-5 and train whistles reminds me otherwise.

It seemed difficult to capture the grandeur through a camera lens, but up and down the trail Darla showed how tempting it is to frame the beauty – which led to Kae and Pam getting

out their cameras.

Our standard call of "pretty" could be heard all along the way.

Castle Crags State Park takes in 70,000 visitors a year. It features 28 miles of hiking trails, 76 developed campsites and six environmental sites at the campground off the Castella exist on I-5. In mid-October, the state park closes half the campground.

But just this week, the Castle Crags crew rejoiced at having fulfilled its 2-year-old order for seven interpretative signs dotting the region and going up the trail. The signs declare the unique flora, fauna, history, geology, hydrology and wildlife that can be found in Castle Crags. Even the seldom-seen fisher mammal, which resembles a cross between a weasel and fox, lives here.

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