

A Local's Guide to Parks in Portland

I've always struggled with living in a city. If I could have everything my way, I'd live in a cabin in the woods and never have to experience the crowds, traffic, and industrialism of cities. Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way, and my life thus far has mainly centered around Portland, Oregon. I won't get into my thoughts on the city as a whole, but I will say that the nature and parks around Portland are UNMATCHED by any other major city in the country.

I've managed to combat seasonal depression and my overall depression about living in an urban environment by spending almost all my time outside in nature. In the summer months, you can find me biking, running, or hiking after work, or even just laying on a picnic blanket in the sunshine. It's a little trickier when the sun sets at 4 pm in the winter, but even then, I'll be outside on my lunch break any time there's a break in the rain. I've compiled a list of my favorite urban and suburban nature parks, to make it a little easier for you to opt outside this winter.

I'm starting with the mother of all parks, and one of those rare places that's almost more beautiful on a rainy day. I will include a brief overview here, but my write-up quickly grew to 7-pages so I decided it needs its own post, which is coming soon!

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Forest Park

I am writing a separate post for (free) members on Forest Park, since I tried to be concise but it's already well over 4 pages long. Forest Park is truly the mother of all urban parks, and we don't realize how blessed we are to have it here in Portland.

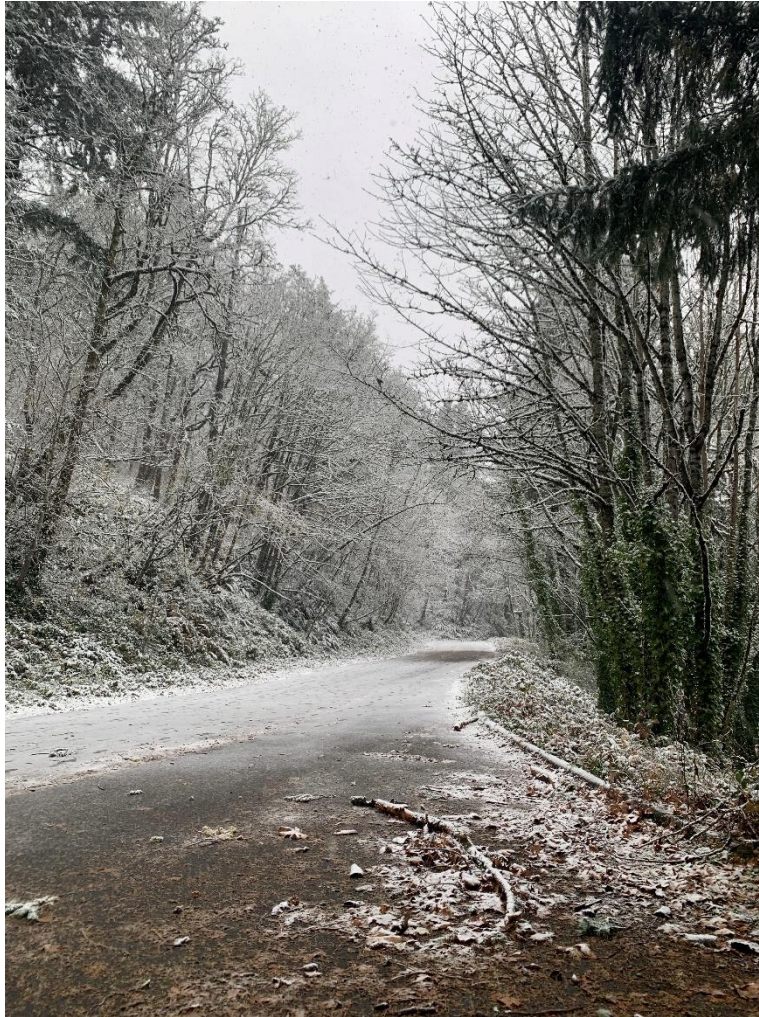
I set a goal for myself to hike or run every single mile of Forest Park this winter season, to help combat seasonal depression. This is quite a commitment, as Forest Park has over 80 miles of trails and contains 5,200 acres.



The park's two main trails are the Wildwood Trail and Leif Ericson Drive. The two run parallel to each other, but Leif Ericson ends at about 12-miles, and Wildwood continues for another 18 or so (it's over 30 miles long!). There are so many fire lanes, connector trails, and forest roads to explore here. A great gateway to Forest Park is the beginning of Leif Ericson Drive at the end of NW Thurman Street. Stop at Dragonfly Coffee House after your excursion (or go before and grab a chai latte for your chilly stroll through the woods).

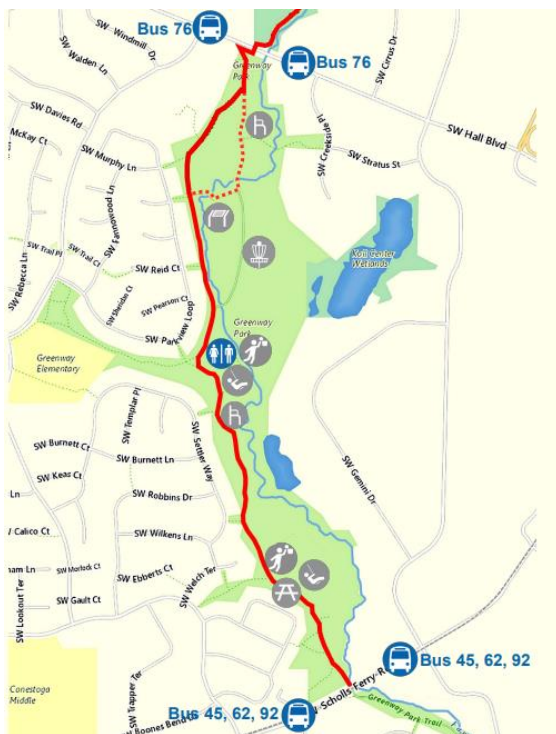
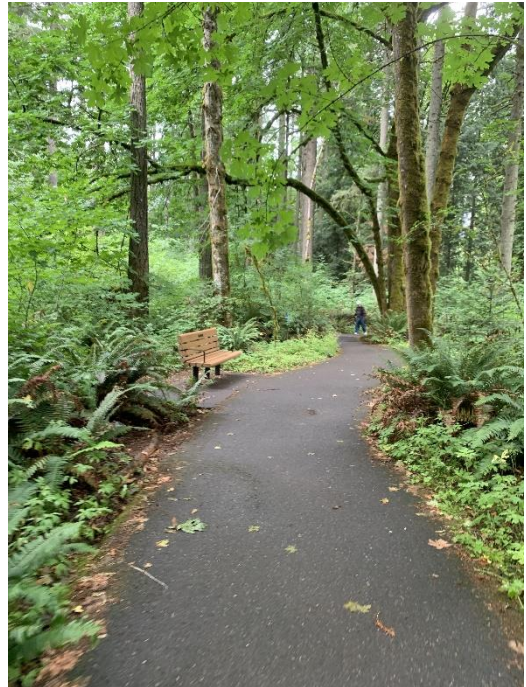
One quick note – car prowls are extremely common at all Forest Park trailheads, so don't leave anything visible at all.

And stay tuned for my longer write-up on Forest Park!



There are no dogs allowed! That is a bit of a bummer for me, but it does allow for wildlife to thrive. I've had deer jump out in front of me and just stare at me with no fear. I've seen frogs in the pond, and a woman running just ahead of me was attacked by an owl. There are signs warning of aggressive owls, and I've personally never had an issue, but keep that in mind! I've also seen signs warning of beehives and wasps, but also never had any problems. There are so many trees here that it is a good spot for a run in the rain - you'll be shielded from some of it.

There is a Nature Center here that is open on weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm, and on Saturdays from 10 am to 3 pm. I have yet to check this out, but they offer yoga classes! There are also nature programs for children, so you might see a trail blocked off for nature school or have to dodge 15 kids on a nature walk. Parking here is free and reasonably safe, and there are flush toilets and a water fountain.



Fanno Creek Greenway

The Fanno Creek trail stretches for about 10 miles from Beaverton to Tigard, and I'll go into more detail on this when I write about my favorite biking trails. There are several places to park and access the trail, but one of the most common is the Greenway park. You can park at the 99 Ranch Market parking lot, which is right next to the disc golf course, or you can park at the Denney Creek trailhead (that actually has a parking lot for the trail). It's about a mile on the trail from the Denney Creek trailhead to the disc golf course in Greenway park, but it takes you alongside the creek and many wetlands. Parking is free, but there are no bathrooms at the lots. There are several bathrooms along the trail,

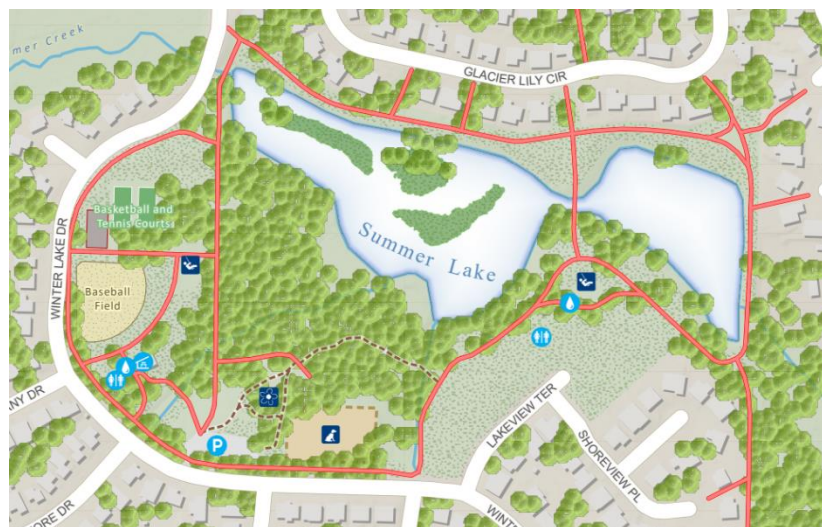
including a porta-potty at the disc golf course. Unfortunately, I haven't found water fountains here.

The Greenway Park has several playgrounds, a disc golf course, picnic areas, and extensive trails and bridges over the wetlands. Honestly, there are parts of this park that I have never been able to see due to the constant flooding. If you stick to the main path you'll usually be fine, but large sections of the park are underwater almost year round.



Summer Lake

Summer Lake is a smaller park located south of Beaverton and north of Bull Mountain. It's best for walking, as there's not a lot of real estate to go for a run unless you want to run in the neighborhoods. There are tennis/pickleball courts, playgrounds, and a dog park. Parking is free and there are bathrooms with a drinking fountain. Fishing is allowed at the lake (Oregon fishing license required).



Cooper Mountain

I used to come here often when I worked in Aloha (there's not a lot going on there, but Cooper Mountain is worth it). There are 3.5 miles of trails with some good elevation gain. This is an unusual park in that it's less woodsy and forested, and more of a prairie. Sadly, **no dogs are allowed here**.

There is a playground and nature center at the parking lot, but the nature center is only open for events and classes. Cooper Mountain is very unassuming, and you might overlook it at first, but the trails are beautiful and have great views of the Tualatin Valley.

It's definitely one of the least crowded parks on my list and feels very peaceful. Parking is free, but there is a gate that closes the lot at dusk. There are bathrooms at the nature house by the lot.



Tigard/Sherwood

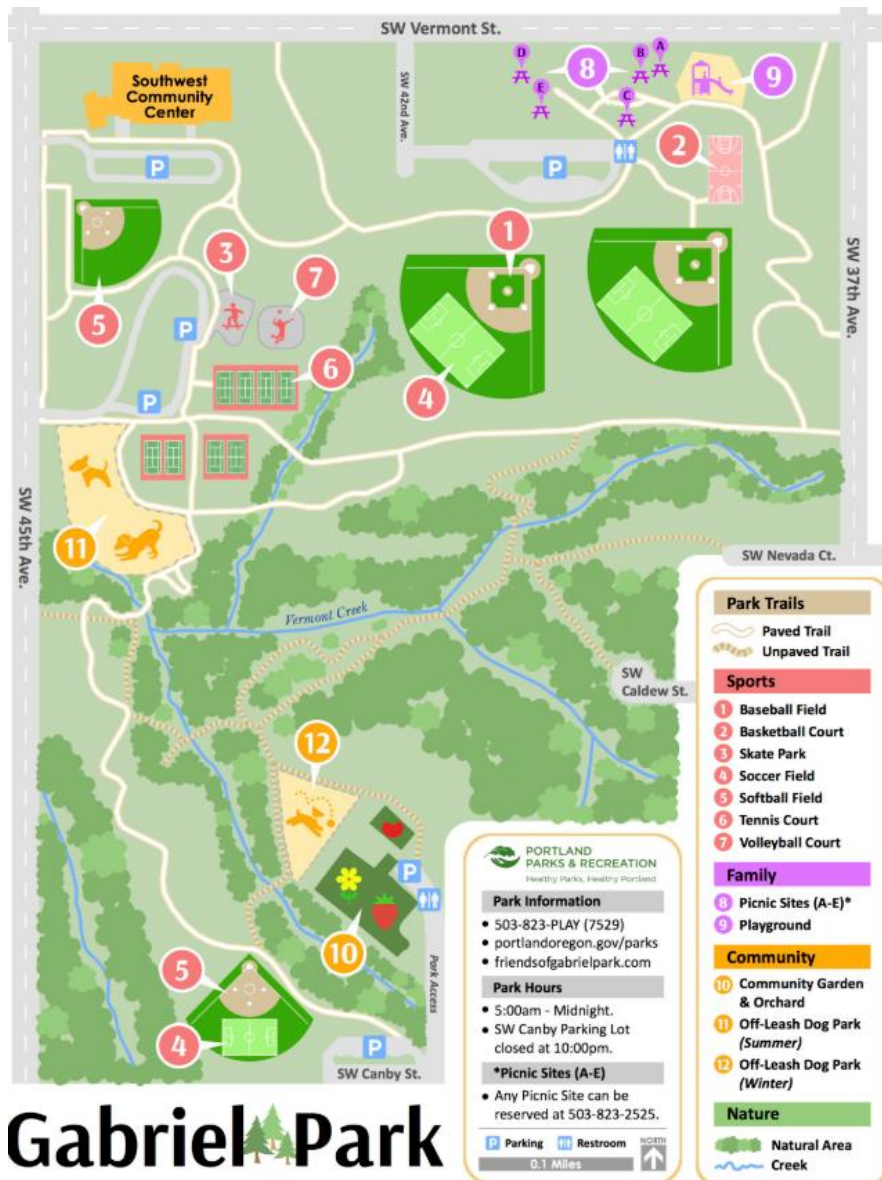
Gabriel Park

A hidden gem! You'd be surprised how many Portlanders don't know about the Garden Home/Hillsdale area. Gabriel Park has everything you could ever want in a suburban park: an inclusive playground, sports fields, two dog parks, a community garden, a skate park, tennis and pickleball courts, and miles of trails running through the woods. I come here

mainly to go for walks on the paved path, but a running loop could easily be created utilizing both the paved paths and unpaved paths through the woods.

Parking here is free, and there are flush toilets and drinking fountains.

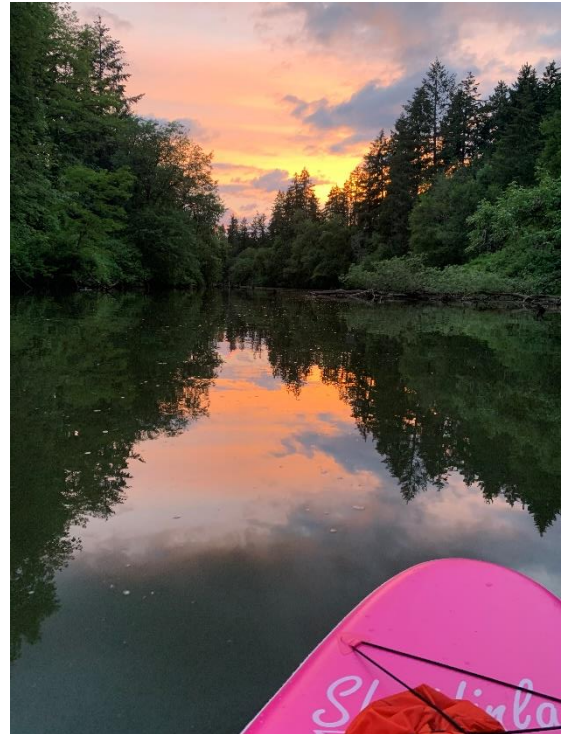
If you've never been to this area of Portland before, you're in for a treat. Multnomah Village, Hillsdale, and Garden Home are all close by. I'd recommend Fat City Café, Gigi's Café, Spielman Bagels, Barbur World Foods, and the Multnomah Village food carts. Check out the Old Bole Troll at the Nordic Center for a fun surprise!



Cook Park

This is my happy place. I discovered it when searching for a place to kayak. There is a boat launch to the Tualatin River that offers rentals in the summer. This is my absolute favorite place to paddleboard. Some people swim, but the water is not clean enough in my opinion. There are also drownings here on occasion, usually in early spring when the water is still fast and cold. There are multiple places to park, and no parking fee required. Most parking lots are close to either flush toilets or porta-potties, and there are several drinking fountains.

In addition to paddleboarding, Cook Park is my access point to a great running trail. The Tualatin River trail follows the river and you can choose your own adventure: run west to the end of the trail by Jurgens Park, or east to either Tualatin Community Park or Durham City Park. Tualatin Community Park also has a great boat launch, a dog park, and a playground. Durham City Park is pretty small and mostly consists of a dog park. I like to make a weird loop out of all three parks, which ends up at about 5 miles.



Cook Park itself is great for more than just running and river activities. There are two sand volleyball courts next to the soccer fields. There's also multiple baseball diamonds and a basketball court. They recently added an inclusive playground, similar to the one at Gabriel Park. There is also a brand new trail connecting the butterfly garden with the wetlands on the east side of the park. You can rent pavilions with barbecues, and there are occasional concerts in the largest pavilion by the

playground. Cook Park hosts the Tigard Balloon Festival every summer, which I'd personally skip. They close the entire park to pedestrians and cars, block off trails, and charge an admission fee for amusement park style rides and balloons at 5 am that usually can't even fly due to unpredictable weather conditions.

Tualatin River Wildlife Refuge

I'm a little salty about this one, because **not only does it outlaw dogs, but it also outlaws running!**

So basically, no fun is allowed here. I'm partially joking, because it is beautiful and I've really enjoyed walking here. It is right off Pacific Highway between Tigard and Sherwood, so road noise can be a little distracting. The majority of the park is closed from October to April to allow for migratory waterfowl. However, there is a 1-mile long trail open year-round, and you can view the wetlands from this trail. There's a great nature center at the parking lot, open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 am to 4 pm. This park is best known for birdwatching, which isn't really my thing, but I have seen nutria here and evidence of beaver activity. Parking is free here and there are bathrooms and drinking fountains at the nature center.



Stella Olsen

I have a lot of thoughts on Sherwood, Oregon. To some, it might be suburban, gated-community hell. To others, it might be an idyllic white-picket-fence paradise. I lived here for a year and while I ultimately decided it's not for me, I loved walking and running along the Cedar Creek at Stella Olsen Memorial Park. There is an amphitheater where I accidentally stumbled upon a live jazz concert, and bridges over wetlands that freeze in winter storms, where I yelled at some kids to get off the thin ice before I had to rescue them. The park is walking distance from Symposium Coffee, one of my favorite cafes in a cozy, historic house. Parking is free at Stella Olson, and there are bathrooms and drinking fountains.

Unfortunately I could not find a map for this small park, but the city of Sherwood is planning on expanding the Cedar Creek Trail that passes through this park. As of 2024, you can start at the intersection of Meinecke and Pacific Highway, follow the trail to the parking lot off SW Washington Street, and then cross the street to access Stella Olsen Memorial Park.

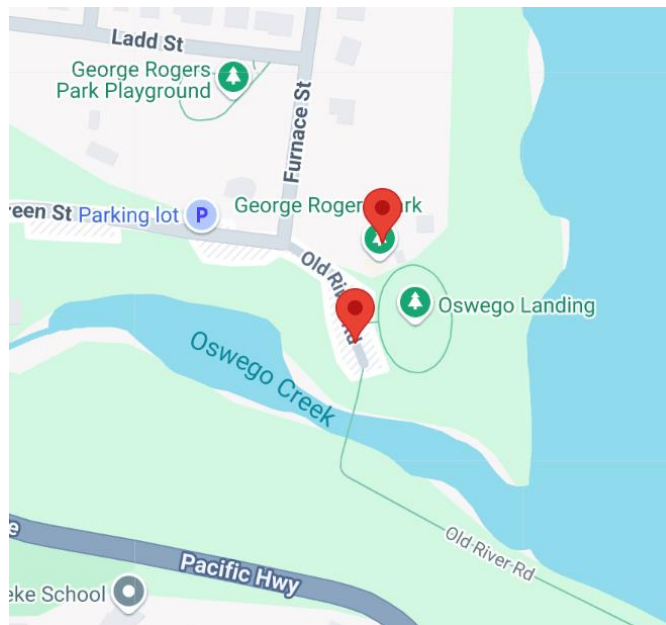


Lake Oswego

George Rogers

Speaking of gated communities, let's talk about Lake Oswego. George Rogers Park is home to a historic furnace. I know most people have waited their entire lives to come across a historic furnace, and are willing to travel far and wide to see one. Well, you're in luck, because the Oregon Iron Company Furnace is located right here in charming Lake Oswego, right by the unfortunately named Orient Apartments on Chow Mein Lane (I am sadly not kidding here).

No map for George Rogers either, so here's a Google maps screengrab.



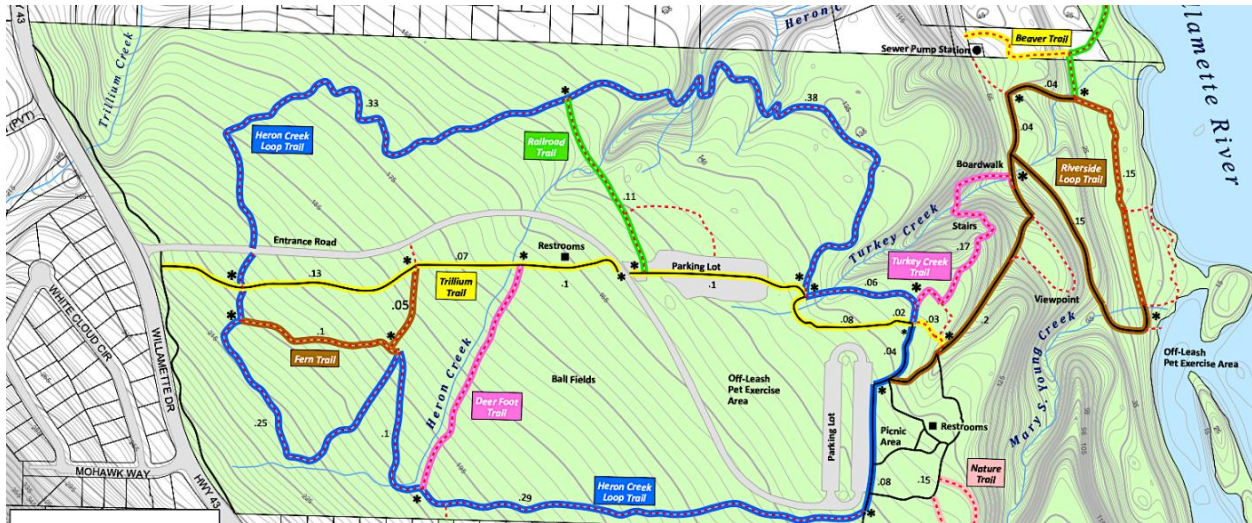
If furnaces aren't your thing, George Rogers Park is a popular boating and paddleboarding location. The park is on the banks of the Willamette River and Oswego Creek, which feeds into the actual Lake Oswego. Side note - Lake Oswego residents restricted access to the lake up until very recently. I can't wait to paddleboard there next summer and spread my degenerate germs all over their precious lake! Snark aside, George Rogers park is the starting point of Old River Road, which begins as a paved footpath, then turns into an actual

road that is still in use. If you continue down Willamette Drive (OR-43), you'll eventually reach Mary S. Young park. George Rogers has a large free parking lot, sports fields, flush toilets, and a water fountain. There's a beautiful picnic spot on the banks of the river that's full of teenagers on sunny summer days.

Mary S Young

Mary S. Young Park is George Roger's more rugged younger sister in West Linn. There is a large off-leash dog park, sports fields, and miles of trails. There's river access and beaches where you can keep your dog off leash and let them swim. The last time I visited, I tried to

access the horseshoe shaped Cedar Island Park, but unfortunately the bridge had been removed. I'm not sure if this is seasonal, or if the Island is private property. Parking here is free, and there are bathrooms at the parking lot. Most of the trails are unpaved and there's some sneaky elevation gain. Overall it's a great place to run and you might even see the West Linn cross country team practicing here.



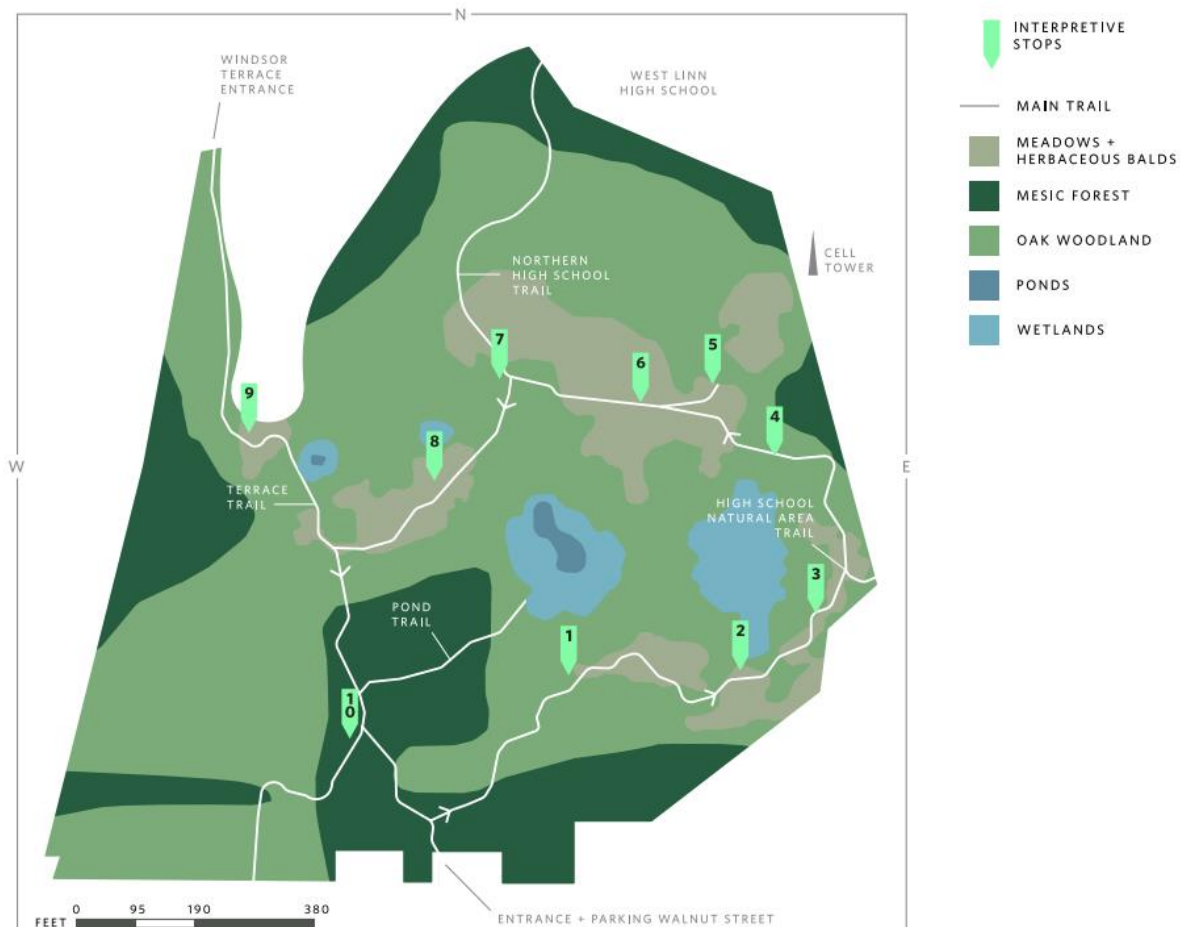
Camassia Natural Area

A super-secret spot in West Linn that you've probably driven past without even realizing! I saw this on the map and thought I'd check it out this past spring. Driving up to the park, I was convinced I was in the wrong place because the parking is just in a neighborhood cul-de-sac. It kind of feels like you're trespassing in someone's backyard, but this preserve has been open to the public since 2021. Dogs are sadly not allowed, because there are fragile wildflower fields. The preserve is named for the common camas flower, which blooms here in the spring. It's usually only a small window to see them and timing varies based on the weather.



This is a smaller park and there's only about 2 miles of trails. Weirdly, you can access West Linn High School from this park. And even weirder, the park is basically on a cliff overlooking US-205, one of the largest highways in Oregon. Once you have been here, you'll never be able to drive on 205 again without spotting the cliff and knowing there's a hidden meadow up there!

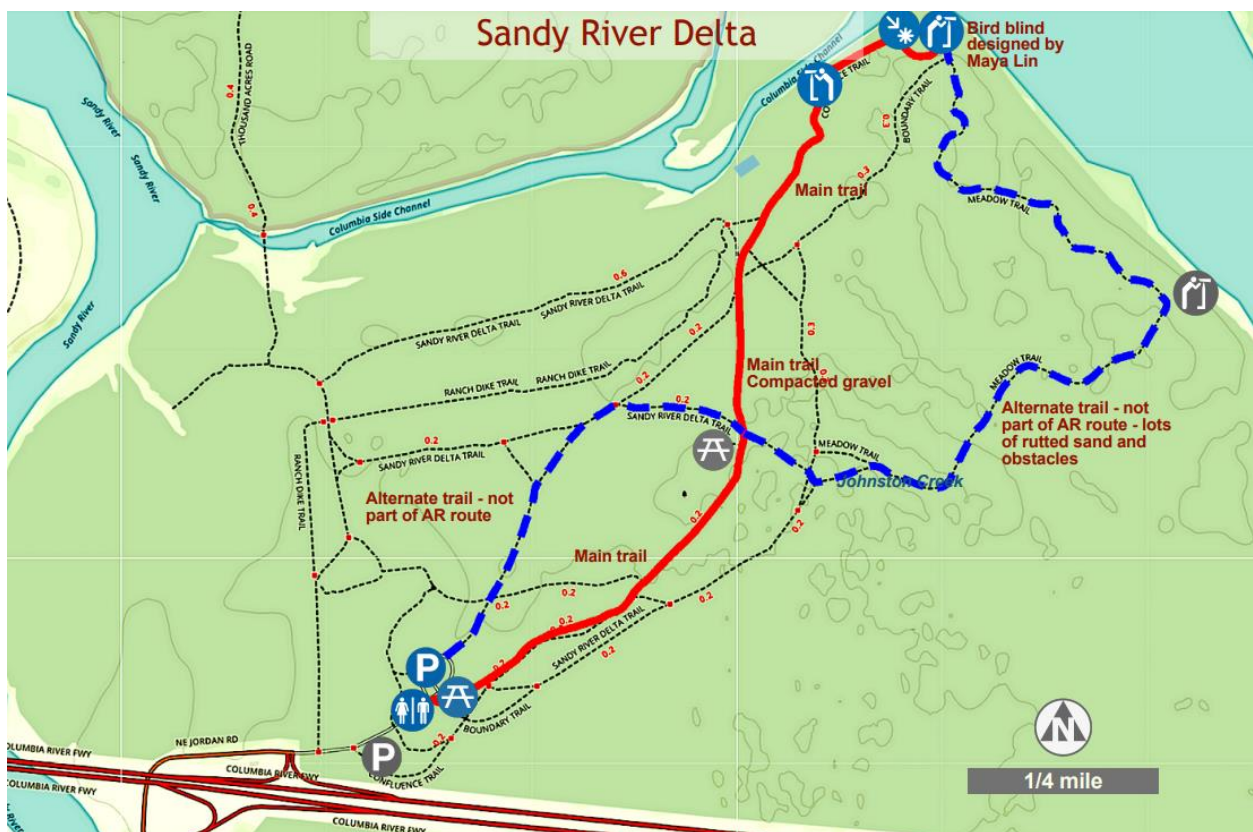
This park is best for a leisurely stroll, and there's limited parking with no restrooms or water available.



East Side

Sandy River Delta

My fiancé's favorite place to take his dogs is the Sandy River Delta. You will either need to **pay a \$5 day pass or display a valid NW Forest Pass or America the Beautiful Pass**. Oregon and Washington State passes are not accepted. The park is located just east of Troutdale Airport, and across 84 from the Lewis and Clark Recreation Site. There are pit toilets in the parking lot.



A quick note on that - floating the Sandy River is a popular summer activity, and the Lewis and Clark Recreation Site is the best place to end your float. There are life vests available to use and several beaches along the river. Be careful of the current and use your best judgement on whether floating is safe! Late summer is the best time in my opinion. Floating will take longer than you'd expect, so make sure to allow yourself plenty of time before sunset. You will likely encounter a rowdier "party" crowd here, so keep your

expectations in check - it won't necessarily be a peaceful solitary float through untouched natural wonders.

Now back to the Sandy River Delta... it is also called the Thousand Acre Dog Park, because it is literally 1,500 acres of off leash dogs having the time of their lives. When I envision doggie heaven, it looks a lot like the Sandy River Delta. Expect to be around hundreds of off

leash dogs here! There are several trails through the wetlands and your dog can swim in the Sandy River and Columbia Side Channel (the Confluence Trail has a bird blind and requires dogs to be on leash). Even if you don't have a dog, I highly recommend taking a walk here, enjoying nature, and watching the dogs play.



Mount Tabor

I vehemently despise the east side of Portland, but I make an exception for Mount Tabor. Yes, it's probably the sketchiest park on my list, but it's worth it. A fun fact about me, is that I've been to the actual Mount Tabor in Israel! I'm not sure why a godless city like Portland named its largest extinct volcano after a Biblical location, but I'm not complaining.

Mount Tabor is sneakily huge. It looks small on a map, but there is so much to explore. Parking can be a little confusing, but if you don't mind walking up a ton of stairs, you can basically park anywhere around the park and get access to it. Parking is free, but **DO NOT LEAVE VALUABLES IN YOUR CAR**. Also, I'd recommend that women not walk here alone

at night (not trying to be sexist, but I've had some spooky experiences). During the daytime and in a group, the park feels very safe. The park is popular amongst longboarders and cyclists and is closed to cars every Wednesday.

There are several reservoirs at Mount Tabor, built in the early 1900s and still in use today. One of the sons of the designer of Central Park in New York City was involved in designing this park (and is a big part of why Forest Park exists too). It is a volcanic cinder cone and is best known for its views of the city. There are several flights of stairs commonly used by runners, and if you'd prefer a more gentle slope, there are many trails and roads winding around the mountain to reach the summit. The area by the reservoirs is the most popular spot to watch the sunset.



During the summer, the park hosts an Adult Soapbox Derby, which is one of the best events in Portland I've attended! On Wednesday nights during the summer, there are "rave" style dance parties by the reservoir. People bring light up hula hoops and there's a live DJ. Personally, I avoid these nights because I am not comfortable with the open drug use and general vibe. On other nights, you'll probably still see/smell some marijuana use (we are in Portland after all), but people are nice and it's overall a positive and family friendly

environment. My fiancé and I were offered mushrooms once by a strange man, which we politely declined, and later wondered why we look like the psychedelic mushroom consuming type.



Washington State

Lacamas Lake

Here's a bonus park up north in Washington state! When there is no traffic, it's about 30 minutes of driving from Portland to Camas Washington. You may remember the Camassia Nature Preserve I mentioned earlier? Well Camas is named after the same flower, and there are stunning wildflower fields hidden in the hills by Lacamas Lake. The fields are gaining popularity due to social media, but still fairly secret and known mostly by locals.



This area actually has 3 lakes very close to each other - Round Lake and Lacamas Lake are connected, and Fallen Leaf State Park is just feet away. There are hiking and running trails around every lake and the neighboring forests.

The Camas lily fields are east of Round Lake, and there are trails leading to

Woodburn and Lower Falls. The best place to park to access these trails is off NE Everett St at the junction of Lacamas and Round Lake. There's a walking trail all the way around Round Lake that crosses a dam. Kayaking and paddleboarding in Round Lake is extremely popular and so much fun. Both Round and Lacamas Lake are stocked with rainbow trout, and there's a native population of Yellow Perch (Washington fishing license required - a bummer for Oregonian fishermen).

Lacamas Lake is far bigger. You can park at Heritage Park, or by the Lacamas Lake Lodge. Parking at all locations fills up very quickly so you might need to drive around for a bit. It is free to park and there are many bathrooms. Motorized boats are allowed on Lacamas Lake. There is a beautiful biking and pedestrian trail called the Lacamas Lake Heritage Trail that you can access from Heritage Park. It is closed to all motor vehicles and traces the south



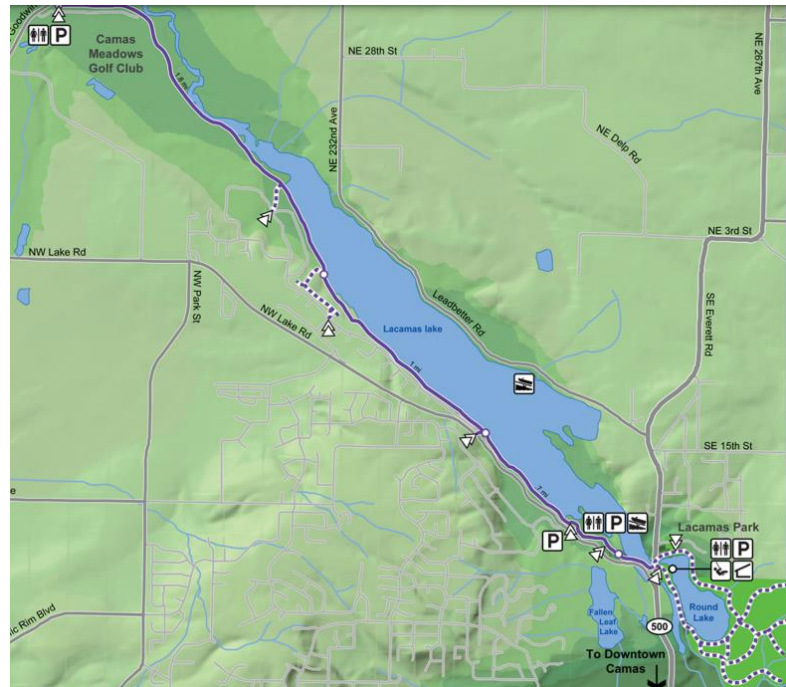
end of Lacamas Lake. It's truly stunning and a fantastic place to run without worrying about road crossings. The trail is about 3.5 miles each way, so 7 miles round trip. A woman recently encountered a black bear here, but that is incredibly unusual.

Fallen Leaf Lake is the often-forgotten about neighbor of the larger

lakes, and it could be a good place to park if the popular lots are full. No fishing is allowed here, but the lake is open for non-motorized watercraft. There is a picnic shelter and nature trails winding around the lake.

In high school, I'd stop at Top Burger in Camas after hiking around Lacamas Lake. The recent reviews aren't great, but it's a nostalgic drive-in diner with cheap food. It's across the street from another forested park with playground equipment and places to sit and eat.

One final note, for all three lakes here (and all bodies of water in the PNW), please be mindful of toxic algae blooms. Look at recent lake advisories before swimming or taking your dog near the water.



Fast Facts

First of all, thank you for reading! I didn't expect to write so much, but there's so many great parks in Portland, that I actually had to cut down on a lot of material. If you have any further questions, please reach out and I'll do my best to answer! I wish you lots of happy urban exploring!

The parks on my list below that have water access for boating are: Cook Park, George Rogers, and Lacamas Lake. The Sandy River Delta, Summer Lake, and Mary S Young Park have bodies of water, but no boating access. Always recreate on the water at your own discretion - check for toxic algae, be mindful of current and cold water, and always wear a life vest.

Forest Park:

- Located in NW Portland, all the way to the Bethany area
- Follows the 30-mile long Wildwood Trail, with many connecting trails, forest roads, and fire lanes
- **Be very careful of car prowlers at all trailheads**
- Best for hiking and trail running, but cyclists are allowed on Leif Erikson Drive

Beaverton

Tualatin Hills Nature Park:

- Located in Beaverton close to the Nike campus
- **No dogs allowed**
- About 4-5 miles of wooded trails, with several bridges and boardwalks
- Known for aggressive owls

Fanno Creek Greenway:

- Located between Beaverton and Tigard
- Part of a 10-mile Fanno Creek Trail
- Disc golf course, playgrounds, and paved trails for biking, running, or walking

Summer Lake:

- A small park located between Beaverton and Tigard
- Best for fishing (seasonal), walking, or picnicking

Cooper Mountain:

- Located near Aloha
- **No dogs allowed**
- About 3 miles of moderately steep trails through a prairie with great views of Tualatin Valley

Tigard/Sherwood

Gabriel Park:

- Located in Garden Home
- About 3 miles of wooded trails, an inclusive playground, two dog parks, tennis courts, a skate park, and a community garden
- Best for walking and shorter runs, or picnicking

Cook Park:

- Located in Tigard
- Tualatin River Trail connects Cook Park with the Tualatin Community Park
- Great spots to launch a kayak or paddleboard
- Playgrounds, sand volleyball courts, dog parks, and nature trails

Tualatin River Wildlife Refuge:

- Located off Pacific Highway between Tigard and Sherwood
- **No dogs allowed, no running or jogging allowed**
- Most of the park is closed in the winter, but a 1-mile trail is open year-round
- Best for birdwatching

Stella Olsen Memorial Park:

- Located in Sherwood
- Some great running trails start here, and there's beautiful picnic areas

Lake Oswego

George Rogers:

- Located in Lake Oswego
- Kayak, paddleboard, and motorboat access to the Willamette River
- Great running trails and beautiful picnic area by the river
- Very close to Mary S. Young park, and would be a great run to connect the two

Mary S. Young:

- Located in West Linn
- A huge off-leash dog park, and off-leash beaches on the Willamette River
- About 5 miles of running trails, mostly unpaved

Camassia Natural Area:

- Located in West Linn
- **No dogs allowed**
- A tiny, privately owned park with stunning wildflower fields

Eastside

Sandy River Delta:

- Located in Troutdale
- A 1,500 acre off leash dog park with access to the Sandy and Columbia Rivers
- Best for walking and exercising your dog
- **Parking is \$5 for a day pass**, or requires a NW Forest Pass or America the Beautiful Pass

Mount Tabor:

- Located in northeast Portland
- Be vigilant about personal safety here at night, and **do not leave valuables in your car**
- Popular amongst skateboarders, cyclists, runners, picnickers, and occasional ravers
- A great spot to watch the sunset - there's fantastic views by the reservoir

Washington State

Lacamas Lake:

- Located in Camas, Washington
- Amazing running trails around 3 nearby lakes
- Paddleboard, kayak, and motorboat access, as well as fishing
- Nature trails leading to wildflower fields and waterfalls