

D. L. Anderson

P h o t o g r a p h y

Dry Falls

Directions

Travel north from Ephrata on SR-283 to Soap Lake. In Soap Lake turn north onto SR-17 and follow it 17 miles to Sun Lakes State Park.

The Trail

True to its name, water no longer flows over the falls. However, 10,000 years ago this was the site of the largest waterfall the planet has ever seen. At 400 feet high and over $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles wide, it was more than 10 times the size of the present day Niagara Falls (165 feet high and 1 mile wide). The source of this water was Glacier Lake Missoula, an enormous lake covering more than 300,000 square miles of northwest Montana and was formed when ice age glaciers dammed the Clark Fork River. As the lake grew larger, so did the pressure on the ice dam until it could no longer hold, releasing a volume of water comparable to that of Lake Ontario and a flow estimated to be greater than all the rivers of the world combined over the Idaho Panhandle, Eastern Washington, and Northern Oregon landscape.

As the torrent of floodwaters approached the area, it was more than 300 feet deep and racing along at 65 miles per hour. The original cliff creating the falls was located near the town of Soap Lake, but the tremendous hydraulic forces ate away at the cliff and the falls retreated 17 miles to its present location, a process known as "headward erosion".

Remarkably, this was not a single isolated event, but may have occurred as many as 100 times at intervals of between 50 to 100 years. These floods, now known as the Missoula Floods, are responsible for much of the geology of Eastern Washington and the Columbia River Gorge. Grand Coulee, the Channeled Scablands, and Palouse Falls in Washington and the hanging valleys creating the waterfalls in the Columbia River Gorge can all trace their origin to this incredible geological event.

It should be noted that prior to the turn of the century the geology of the Eastern Washington was not fully understood. In the 1920's a single geologist, J. Harlan Bretz, first proposed the idea of the Missoula Floods and was soundly criticized for his ideas. Undeterred, Bretz continued his research and compiled a mountain of evidence supporting his flood theory. Finally, after more than 40 years, his evidence combined with modern geologic methods was accepted, and the Missoula Floods are now widely believed to be the single most dominant event in shaping the eastern Washington landscape.

The Dry Falls overlook, located $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles past the entrance to Sun Lakes State Park, provides the best view of the ancient falls and plunge pool. A trail from the overlook leads down to the base of the cliffs where it connects to a small network of trails that explore the many small lakes that now occupy the old flood plain. To explore the plunge pool by car, travel back to the park where a park road makes a short loop through the area. Sagebrush and rabbit brush dominates the landscape, however in the spring the sunflower like balsamroot, purple lupines, bluebells, penstemons, and phlox bring a splash of color to dry desert.

Photographing the Natural Pacific Northwest

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Sunrise and sunset provide the best light for photographing this wide open landscape. For photographing Dry Falls a wide angle lens is essential. A polarizing filter and graduated neutral density filter are also useful.

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