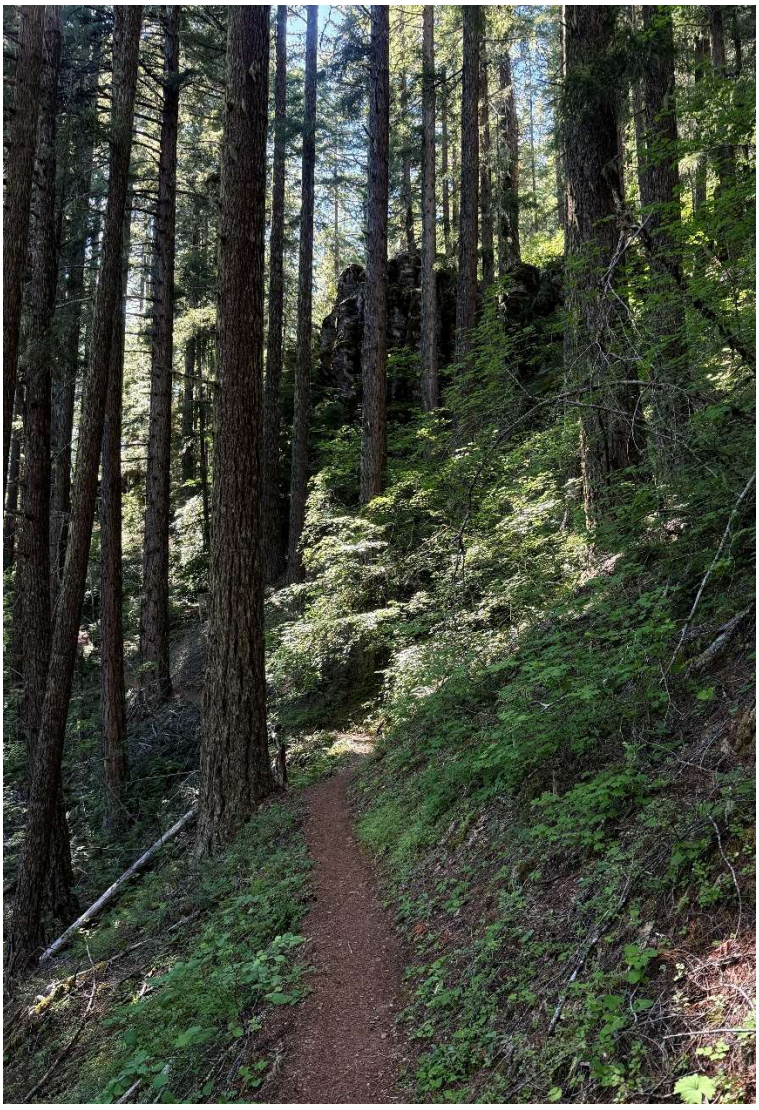
The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.07.09
Castle Rock, The McKenzie, Willamette National Forest, Oregon



It was a little past noon when I left White Branch Falls behind and steered BluMaxx towards our next destination, which was …? Hmmm. Did not have one, other than "nature" and "outdoors". Those were a bit vague, though, so I aimed for the McKenzie River Ranger Station, which was only five miles beyond my now-regular boondocking spot. Last year, the woman I bought my map from had been very helpful about such things, so I figgered I'd pick her brain again – or any brain I could find there.

Three rangers were on desk duty when I walked in. She was one of them, with an older woman, and a long-haired, 18-year-old boy who looked 16. They pretty much pushed him into action – kind of a "your turn, hot shot" nudge – and settled back to evaluate him.



The kid was a font of knowledge! I pulled out my map and mentioned how much I loved it, and he lit up. "Oh, yeah! That map is AMAZING!" he gushed and immediately leaned into it. He had been camping and hiking and exploring Willamette NF since he was a toddler and he knew it inside-out.

I told him where I had already been and said, "Show me some more cool places I should go to!" And off he went.

I ended up with so many circles and arrows and notes scribbled on my prized map. Majestic lakes, roaring rivers, wonderful waterfalls, horse pastures, bizarre rock formations, trails to mountaintops, enough to keep me active for weeks.

Some of the places were a long way away, to be saved for another day, but one in particular looked ripe for a late afternoon hike: Castle Rock.

I was not 100% sure what it was, but it was only twelve miles away, plus another five on what turned out to be a fairly rough dirt road, with "a really cool hike" at the end of the drive. Sounded good to me!

The road went straight towards a tall, imposing hill – the end one of a row of hills – then slowly wound a spiral course up higher and higher around it. Then it ended. Boom. Just ended.

What was a 12-foot-wide gravel road quickly became nothing but trees with a narrow, unmarked footpath leading away from the right corner. No wide parking area, no turnaround at all, and on about a 7% grade.

Hmm. I was glad I hadn't brought a camper or a fifth-wheel up because I would have had to back that beast back down the hill for a long, long, long way. As it was, my 20-foot Class B rig required about a seven-point turn to come about. And if my tires

overshot the edge of the road *at all*, there was nothing but a hundred feet of very steep, forested, downward embankment. The larger trees would have eventually grabbed Maxx, but then what? A tow truck?? How???

So, I was very careful (hence the seven-pointer), and settled Maxx up on the left side of the road, with tires turned into the high bank, emergency brake on, and a big rock wedged under one tire.

"OK, big guy," I said to him, "you drove me all the way up here. I guess I have to do my part now and hike to the summit." He agreed. So, I pulled out my trusty hiking stick, the Luckless Log (hewn from an aspen tree at Luckless Lake in Ontario 40 years ago), and set out.



The trail got pretty steep right off the bat, but it was so gorgeous in here. Deep shade at first, but as I ascended, the tree cover thinned and more sunlight poured through the canopy.

The trail never got wider, and it never really got rough underfoot, but it did get steeper.

I don't know how long the hike was -- it took me about 25 minutes – or how much elevation I gained, but I have to guess that it was around 1000 feet.

There were a few catch-my-breath spots, but at least so no one was around to see how winded I was.



I hike fast. I always have. I walk fast too, even if I am in no hurry at all. My stride does not know Saunter Pace. If I can get someplace in five minutes, why should I take seven? I know my companions get ticked off at me sometimes, but I can't help it. All those years as a runner, I guess…

So, the pauses allowed me a chance to survey the forest, appreciate the clean Oregon air, the amazing steepness just inches beyond the trail's edge, the occasional outcroppings of rock looming above, and the deeeelightful solitude.

And then the shade was gone and the trail broke into hot sunshine. The summit was imminent. I still never knew why this place had the name Castle Rock, but I had assumed that a sharp, stony summit had something to do with it.

That turned out to be pretty much right. When I got to the flat clearing with views to both north and south, I was wowed. Looking north, I saw a tree trunk that had clearly been cut short. The human interference seemed out of place, but it sure did allow for better view.



Looking south (above) and north (below) from the summit of Castle Rock



As nice as those were, though, the best views remained to be found. To the east, the rocks rose sharply, almost like a parapet (*Castle* Rock, yes?). I eagerly clambered up the rocky footpath and marveled at the Oregon landscape all around me.



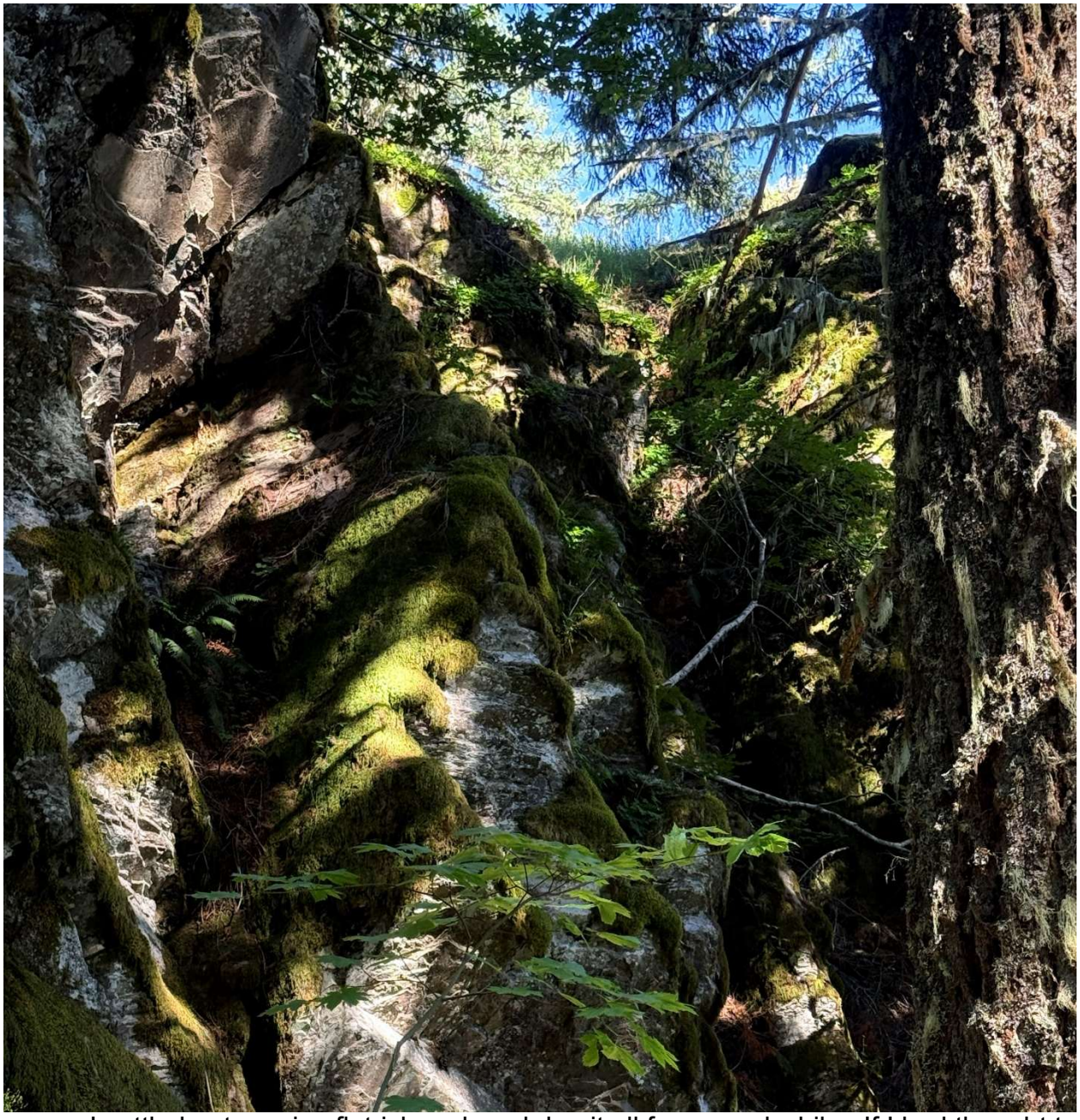
Looking east from the summit of Castle Rock



Looking west to the Sisters Mountains from the summit of Castle Rock



A lone Pacific Madrone tree at the summit of Castle Rock



I settled onto a nice flat-ish rock and dug it all for a good while. If I had thought to bring a cold malt libation with me, this would've been the perfect time to quaff it. It would have given me a time frame too: stay and have a beer. When it's gone, I start my descent.

But I had not thought to bring one. Maybe next time.

The hike down was just as beautiful, and ittook about the same amount of time. My upbound hiking gait is much faster than my downbound gait.

BluMaxx was waiting right where I left him.


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