

Benham Falls Trail

The Benham Falls Trail is a very picturesque hike that takes you along the often calm, meandering Deschutes River to the boisterous falls. You get the added pleasure of winding through gigantic old-growth ponderosa pines on your way. The trail to the falls is a short mile, along an easy, wide trail where you might encounter bicycles and crowds during weekends and summer days. When I visited in the winter, much of the trail was icy and slippery, so caution is necessary. The access to the trailhead on Road 9702 can also be snowy and slippery in the winter. That road is off of Highway 97, about 11 miles south of Bend, Oregon.

There are picnic benches and restrooms at the day use area past the falls. You can end your hike there and return to the trailhead for an easy two-mile walk, or continue on the trail to Dillon Falls Campground, as I did, and add another 6 miles on to your round-trip. Or if you want to car-shuttle, you can hike about 10 miles from the Benham Falls Trailhead to the Meadow Day Use Area, which can be accessed from the north.

In addition to the common ponderosa and lodgepole pines which characterize this transition zone between the Cascades and the high desert to the east, the availability of water near the river allowed a population of grand fir to do quite nicely there. They are out of their documented range.

The trailheads along this stretch of river also are put-in and take-out points for the many river craft that benefit from the calmer portions of the river in the summer months. The trail is also gentle and wide enough for bicycles. Dogs are allowed on leash in the warmer months, and off-lease in winter.



The bridge near the trailhead



Upstream and the logjam at the bridge



Weird-a ponderosa and lodgepole pine share a river stump



The ubiquitous ponderosa pine



A grand fir - a bit outside of its documented range



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The trailhead - part of the Deschutes Paddle Trail

A Side Trip

Being the amateur biogeographer that I am, I also was on the lookout for other conifers that might be in the area. Given the moisture ensnared by the river area, I thought there might be Douglas-fir or Engelmann spruce in the area. But I didn't find any. I had heard that a spot a little way south of this area might contain some sugar pine trees. This would be at the far northern range of their distribution. They are much more common in California. I headed to Pringle Butte, a rather small mountain, about 15 miles as the crow flies south of Benham Falls to see if I could find the tree. I parked my car at a forest demonstration kiosk on Burgess Road and headed up the slope. It didn't take long before I found the celebrated conifer - the sugar pine tree is the tallest in the pine genus, and the cone is the longest in the world. I suspect this is a relict location, and survives in the otherwise drier climate because of its location on the north side of the mountain, where the sun wouldn't bake the land as much.

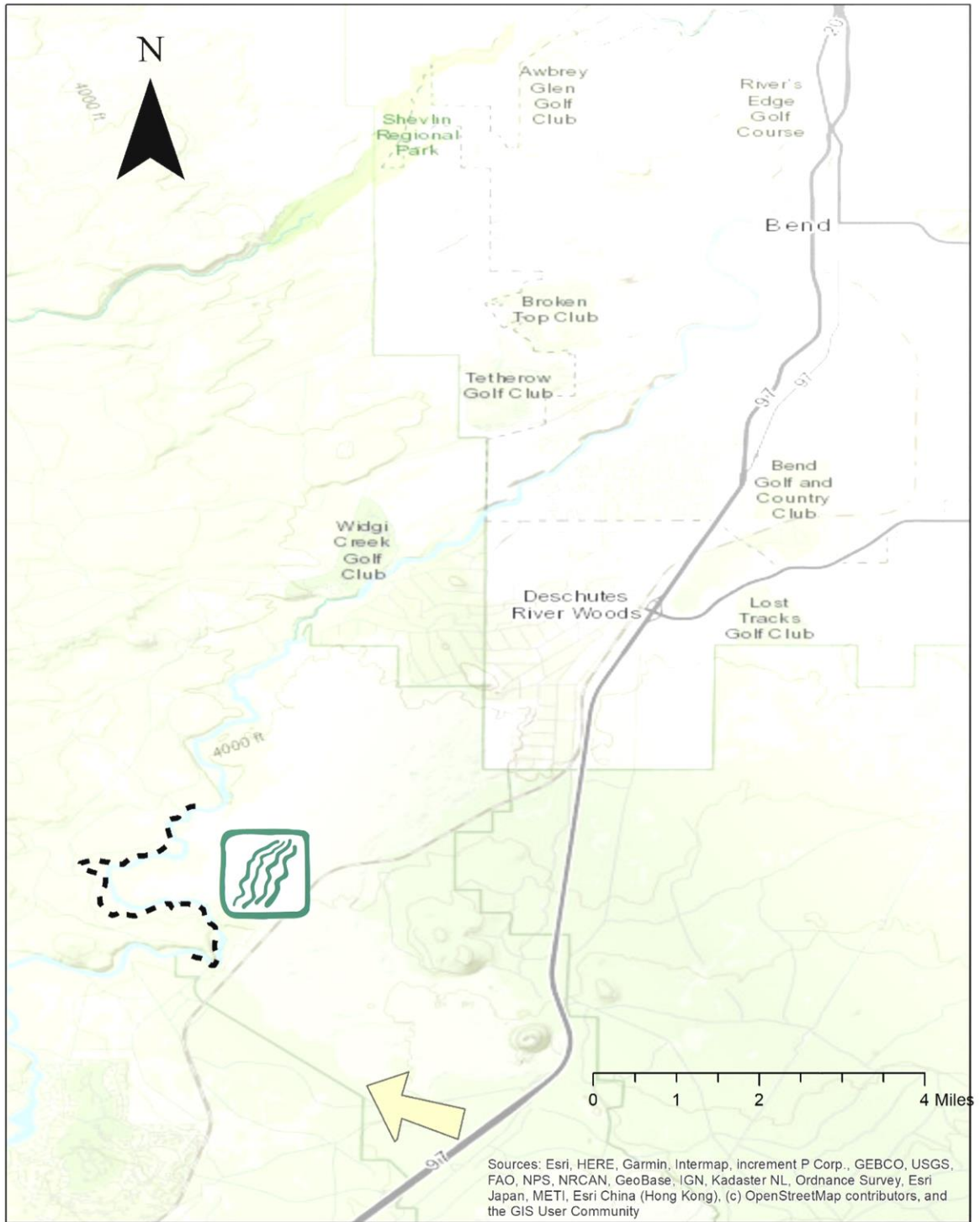


The cones typically dangle at the ends of branches



The cones can reach 20" long further south in their range, my glove is for comparison

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