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Sailing on Elk
Lake, with
South Sister
looming above

SAILING IN THE MOUNTAINS

DANCING WINDS

**IN OREGON, SAILORS KNOW WHAT TO DO
WHEN THEY'RE TIRED OF SKIING**

I LIVE IN THE HIGH DESERT. From my hometown of Bend, Oregon, volcanic dirt, juniper trees, and sagebrush extend eastward as far as the eye can see. But to the west is the Cascade Range and its high-mountain lakes—pure salvation for a landlocked sailor.

Being landlocked and boatless is my sad fate these days. Lives change, and it's been four years since I cruised warm blue water in the big, oceangoing sailboats I thought would be part of my future. My love of the magic and mystery of sailing is still alive and well, however, and these days I feel lucky to be able to sail with friends in little boats on our mountain lakes.

These lakes dot the eastern edge of the Oregon Cascades like an irregular sapphire choker. A select few—Elk, Cultus, Odell, and Waldo—offer challenging sailing from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and eager local sailors ply the pristine waters every summer until the snow locks them out for the season.

You need to have a boat that doesn't draw more than a couple of feet, and you need to know (or to learn quickly) how to read gusty, variable mountain winds. Beyond that, you need to get used to bald eagles and osprey flying overhead, river otters munching crawfish on lake docks in the morning, enormous mountains looming nearby, and the disorienting feeling of sailing on water so clear you feel you are suspended between earth and sky.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATRINA HAYS » » »



IT'S BEAUTIFUL HERE.

For the early birds—those of us who get sick of skiing a little earlier than most—the local sailing season can start in early April on Lake Billy Chinook. This huge reservoir north of Bend was created by the Round Butte Dam, which blocks up the Metolius, Deschutes, and Crooked rivers. In the springtime, the water is too cold for the jet skiers and speedboats that descend upon the lake in a vast, screaming horde in June, and the pretty canyons of Billy Chinook are quiet. Those canyons also spawn the kind of sudden, smack-down winds that can blow on any of our local lakes.

We don't have trade winds. We don't have nice, predictable breezes that do what they're supposed to do and make us look good. We have mountains and canyons that make the wind dance around like a marionette on a string. We have wind that will act nice just long enough for us to throw up a big genoa, tuck the tiller under our knees, and relax. Then it will gust hard enough to flatten the boat, or it will swing 90 degrees, or it will simply disappear, leaving us gasping and laughing and shaking our heads.

This happened the first time I went out for a peaceful afternoon jaunt aboard Jack Pelham's Columbia 23. We'd been working our way up and down Elk Lake, enjoying the mountains and the summer afternoon. I had the tiller tucked under my knee and Jack was leaning back with his arms crossed comfortably behind his head, telling me a tall tale. Suddenly, a gust blew the boat practically flat. I squawked and headed up fast, feeling foolish and green, but Jack just laughed, picked himself up off the deck, and said, "Get used to it!"

Folks have been sailing these lakes for years. Elk is the most easily accessible lake from Bend—a mere 40 minutes away. The Elk Lake Yacht Club has been officially sanctioned since the 1930s, and there are about 28 slips at Elk Lake Resort, whose dockmaster, Dave Stocker, sails a Santana 20, *Edit Sweet*.

"A lot of people say Elk is like a big pond a couple of miles

long," he says. "But it's really close to town, and it's really, really pristine here."

Probably the best part of sailing on Elk Lake—other than the fact that you can put in a reasonably decent day of work, grab a quick dinner, and be sailing well before the sun goes down on a summer evening—is South Sister. South Sister is a 10,358-foot mountain that looms over the lake—broad-shouldered and massive. It's a constant presence whose red volcanic flanks are always in the corner of your eye. South Sister is simply gorgeous, a constant reminder that here you are, sailing in the *mountains*.

Sailing Elk is a bit challenging. The wind comes mostly from the west. Mostly. Of course, there's that lovely place past Sunset Beach where the wind reliably disappears. And on the south end of the lake

the wind often goes haywire for no apparent reason. And there are those rocks, which you mostly miss if your boat doesn't draw much. But sailing on Elk is just plain fun. There is a sense of history—the little private cabins tucked along the shore speak of peaceful summers when generations of kids learned to sail Sunfish. There is a real community here. Dave Stocker says he has people clamoring for slips at the dock, but they rarely turn over. It's not uncommon for conversation to get tossed from boat to boat, up and down the dock. Many bottles of wine have been shared dockside after afternoons of sailing.

WE HAVE MOUNTAINS AND CANYONS THAT MAKE THE WIND DANCE AROUND LIKE A MARIONETTE ON A STRING

Periodically over the years, Elk has hosted regattas, but right now the racing scene has ebbed and the afternoon/evening cruising scene is dominant. Dave points out, "We've all gotten older and more affluent, and now we all have 20- to 25-foot boats. Maybe we're more relaxed now."

Aaron Lish, 34, is part of the beach-cat scene. He taught himself to sail in Central Oregon six years ago and now has a Hobie Escape. "You know, Central Oregon is actually a pretty good place to learn to sail," he told me one afternoon. We had gone out to Elk to sail his little yellow cat and had the whole lake to ourselves. "I figure, if you want to sail, then sail," Aaron said, squinting up at the telltales. "Don't be held back by the fact that your area isn't known for its sailing. If you can sail in these tricky winds, you can sail anywhere."

A bit south on the Cascade Lakes Highway is Cultus Lake. Cultus has much better wind and is a good deal larger than Elk Lake, but Cultus is very popular with people who believe boats

should make a lot of noise and go very fast, so the lake can get crowded and a little scary. Of course, when the wind is really blowing, most of the wakeboarders and waterskiers stay ashore, and then Cultus belongs to the sailors. Right next to Cultus Lake is 6,759-foot Cultus Mountain, and the wind from the mountain will periodically go a little nuts and whip around 180 degrees, but that makes for more fun.

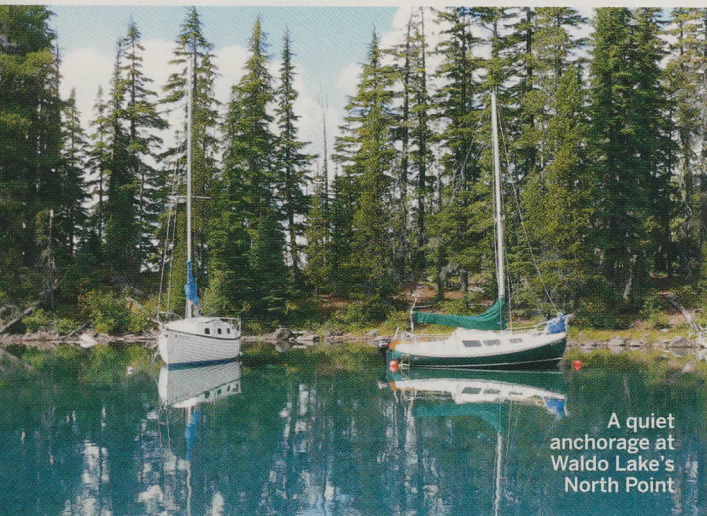
A hot tip for folks with really small sailboats is to haul over to Little Cultus Lake, just the other side of Cultus Mountain. There is a speed limit on this little lake, which inhibits powerboaters, and it's never very crowded, which is especially nice during the high season.

After June and July have passed, it's time to move south to visit the higher lakes. You want to wait, because until early August the mosquitoes are awful at the higher elevations.

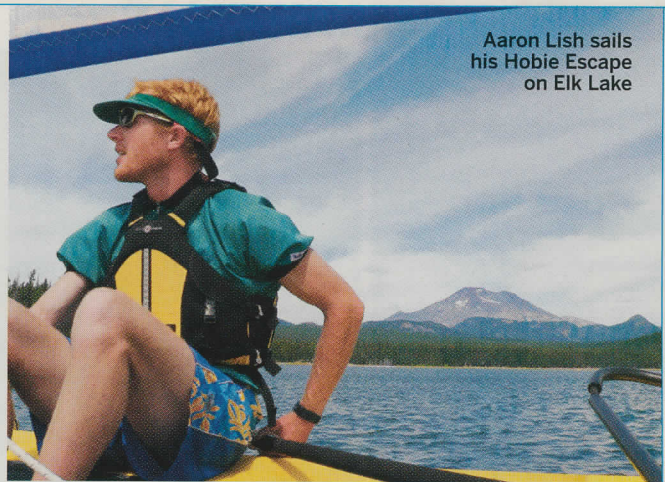
Odell Lake is a nice place to sail and has wonderful, reliable afternoon winds, but again there are speedboats. Nearby Crescent Lake is also popular, but is even more crowded, especially during high season. These are pretty mountain lakes, but my heart—and that of most every other local sailor—belongs to Waldo Lake.

Waldo Lake is our crown jewel. It is staggeringly beautiful, with jaw-dropping bright-blue water framed by dense green forests and high peaks that seem like a painted backdrop. Waldo Lake's water is famous for its astounding clarity. Because there is no permanent inlet or creek to bring nutrients into the lake, there is almost no plant life. When the water is calm, you can look over a gunwale and see 100 feet to the bottom. Because of this clarity every color in the spectrum of light but blue is absorbed by it; this is what gives Waldo its remarkable indigo color.

The lake is about 10 miles long, situated so that a consistent westerly breeze (one that does not mess around, thank you very much) blows most of the time. It is also off-limits to speedboats. The shoreline is very rocky, but there is a launch point at the North Waldo boat ramp.



A quiet anchorage at Waldo Lake's North Point



Aaron Lish sails his Hobie Escape on Elk Lake

Gunkholing on Waldo Lake is simply delightful. There are myriad little coves to tuck into, and the view anywhere on the lake is spectacular. On one recent overnight solo sail aboard Scott and Melody Peterson's Catalina 25, I was treated to the sight, late at night, of the glittering stars in the black sky reflected perfectly in the bowl of the still lake. A pair of great horned owls called back and forth, their hoots accenting, but not breaking, the quiet magic of the night. In the morning, I woke to a heavy swirling gray mist that transported me to a vision from Arthurian legend. The distinctive small, rocky islands of the lake appeared and disappeared in the mist, and I sat and rocked in the boat, sipping coffee and feeling blessed.

Sadly, because it is so very special, Waldo Lake has become a place that is in danger of being loved too much. Chris Gardner, a passionate local sailor and attorney, has been part of the ongoing fight to keep sailboats on the lake. "It's odd to be in the position of being called a motorhead," he told me.

Chris has been hauling his Catalina 25, *Lhung-Ta*, up to Waldo for 16 years. He calls the lake a "beautiful, sacred place" and has worked with the Forest Service to implement use laws for Waldo that will allow small outboards to continue to be used. "It's a dilemma. Waldo is incredibly special, and I would hate to see use pressure get to the point where it affects the lake in any way, but I think that it's totally inappropriate to throw sailboats off the lake," he said.

One regulation, put in place about three years ago, is that boats are now allowed to be kept at Waldo for a total of 14 days a year. This has effectively limited its use by sailors, as the lake is a long haul from any major town. One older sailor growled at me that it "wasn't hardly worth going to Waldo anymore, because it's too damn much work to get there to just have to leave again right away."

IT'S STILL WORTH IT, I THINK.

By October, local sailors have hauled out their boats, made repairs, and are ready for the deep snow to sock in those beautiful lakes. We'll be back, though. Sailors have a deep-seated need to ride wind, wherever they find it. ▲

Landlocked writer **Katrina Hays** is thinking about buying her own small boat to sail the lakes of Central Oregon.