



The Best of

Frenchman Coulee

Selected Climbs of

Frenchman Coulee

by
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Introduction

This is a select guide to the best rock climbs of Frenchman Coulee, Washington State. It is not intended to compete with the excellent, comprehensive book *Frenchman Coulee* by Marlene Ford and Jim Yoder, the authoritative guide to the Coulee. The objective herein is to provide an easy read for climbers new to the area, perhaps from out of state or out of country. Some entire Frenchman Coulee walls have been omitted because they do not, in my opinion, offer routes of high enough quality. Also, the many fine routes of the Clearview Crag area were nixed because they are relatively remote and spread across a broad area, surrounded by a sea of choss. Examples include *Shanked*, Lucky Gibson's new 5.10C stemming problem, and *Serenity*, a 3-star 5.10A.

Although commonly referred to as a desert, Frenchman Coulee actually supports more verdant *steppe* environments. As such, a rich and diverse mix of perennial grasses, semi-woody shrubs and flowering perennial broadleaf plants grow in the wind swept rocky soils of this dramatic place. Here the growing season is as short as in any alpine area. By June the parched ground is baked hard and most of the plants have gone to seed. Summer heat then couples with winter cold, creating periods of extended dormancy between the rains of spring. Interspersed with these perennials and shrubs is a cryptogamic soil crust composed of lichens and mosses. This crust is particularly evident on top of the mesa separating Frenchman Coulee and Echo Basin. Because the crust is so fragile, impromptu trails are discouraged. If you must travel off trail, try to hop on stone.



The bones of Frenchman Coulee are volcanic basalt that was deposited by enormous, multiple lava flows. When ice dams holding back ancient Lake Missoula (hundreds of miles to the northeast) were breached, floodwaters poured across the land and scoured out the great coulees of eastern Washington. Climbing at Frenchman is primarily on the top two basalt layers, the most recent of the ancient lava flows. Only the uppermost layer displays the distinctive *columnar jointing* that produces the imposing pillars which are the hallmark of climbing on the Sunshine Wall and the Middle East Wall. Nearly all Frenchman crack routes will be found on this upper layer, although fine bolted climbs exist on column faces as well. Below this is the *lower entablature* layer. It is characterized by a dense, interlocking network of chaotic joints. Thus, climbing holds on this layer can be



almost any shape but tend to be rounded, side pulls, pinches or anything but straightforward rails, at least on the more difficult climbs. Near the top of this layer, the rock displays air pockets - "vesicles" - not unlike the finger pockets of limestone climbing areas. Because cracks, when they exist at all, are chossy, almost all climbs on the lower walls are sport climbs.

Much of the climbing in Frenchman Coulee isn't in Frenchman Coulee; it's actually in Echo Basin. Other than the Feathers, Middle East Wall and its satellite sport walls below, all crags featured in this guide are in Echo Basin. To get to Echo Basin, take the Near Trail from the main parking area southwest to the mesa top. From there, the trail bifurcates. Either choice will take you to Echo Basin. The right branch drops you into the Near End of Sunshine Wall where the first route you will see on your right will be *Ride 'em Cowboy*. The left branch continues along the top of the mesa. The trail will then branch twice to the left (metal signs) for Gully #2 (drops down just west of *Tilted Pillars*) and for Gully #3 (drops down just west of Tomato Wall). (Please refer to maps)

Choss Dawgs



Seasonal climbing: The south facing walls of Echo Basin are sun baked most of the year. While this is desirable in early spring and autumn, midsummer temperatures at the Sunshine wall will feel hellishly torrid. It is during these hot summer months that many climbers move over to the dark side. **The shaded walls are:** *Middle East Wall, Sanctuary, Postal Wall, Dungeon, Feathers north side* and the following walls not featured in this guide: *Zig Zag Wall, Green Wall, Onidevadekim, Junk Yard, Ball's Wall* and *Fugs Wall*. Additionally, you can climb on the *Powerhouse Wall* until mid-morning when direct sun will chase you somewhere else. The *Riverview Columns* face east and offer shade after about 1 p.m.

Other Concerns

Parking permits: You will need to purchase a \$12 parking permit issued by the Department of Fish and Wildlife to use the Feathers or Agathla (main) parking areas (there is a third small parking area way down the main road on the right side past the Middle East Wall). As many of us know from first-hand experience, parking without a permit results in a fine of about \$75. Permits can be purchased at most sporting goods stores – the type selling guns and tackle, not rope and chalk.

Camping: Primitive camping (no water or tables; 2 chemical toilets) is allowed in the area south of the Feathers to the main climber's parking lot. Open fires are not allowed from May 15 to October 15. When fires are allowed, fuel must be obtained elsewhere and burned in existing fire pits.

More fun stuff: Swimming: The Old Vantage Road ends in a boat launch at the Columbia River. While barefoot wading is not recommended (broken glass), a swim after a hot day of climbing is refreshing.

Mountain biking: Old jeep trails snake through both valleys and provide a fun, if bumpy, diversion to the vertical basalt. The main road in Echo Valley takes you past all the principal climbing walls, past the plunge pool at the head of the valley and along Fugs Wall before turning south. Just past Echo Valley, the road ends in a series of interesting sand dunes.

Wildflowers: This arid steppe country displays wave after wave of species of brilliant wildflowers beginning in late February with the Sagebrush Buttercup, Shooting Star, Prairie Star Flower, Yellow Bell and others. As the season progresses, the buckwheats and daisies begin their show. A large number of different species of buckwheats are found in this area, all stunning in bloom. Another well-represented genus is *Penstemon*, the beardtongues. Rock and Crested penstemons can be found on the floor of the valleys.

Jessica cross training in Echo Valley

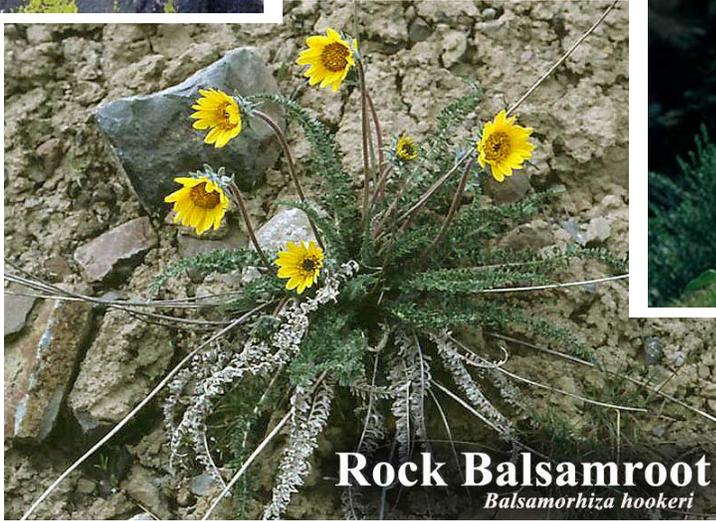
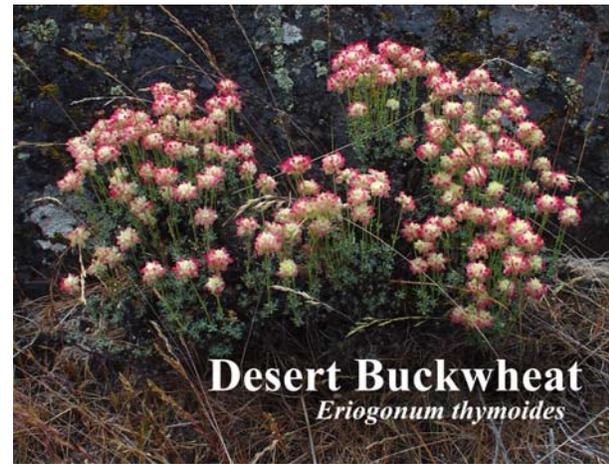
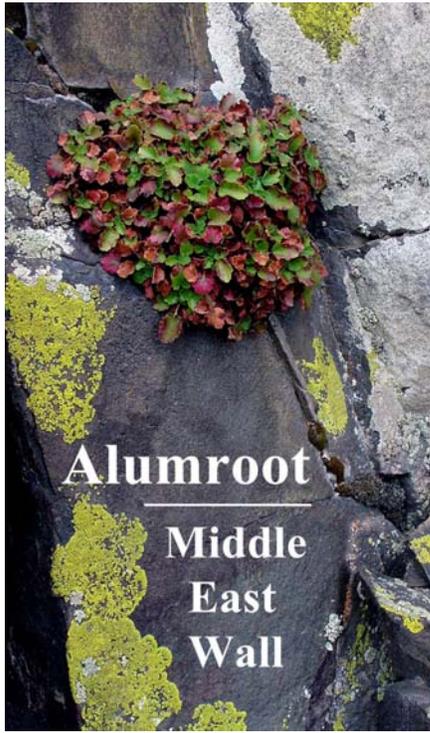


Although identical to the casual observers, the top of the mesa is a different biotic community than the floors of Frenchman Coulee and Echo Basin. The harsh, rocky soil of the mesa top, termed a lithosol, is extremely fast draining and holds little organic matter. Thus, the mesa denizens are xeric species adapted to extremely bitter conditions and the two habitats have few species in common. Even mesa sagebrush is not the everyday Tall Sagebrush but another highly adapted species, Rock Sagebrush, that is better suited



Sagebrush Buttercup
Ranunculus glaberrimus

to the spartan conditions. Another contrast exists between the two species of balsamroot inhabiting the area. Blooming in April on the valley floor is the common Arrow-leafed Balsamroot, a vigorous perennial with large, grey-green leaves. Its analog on the mesa top is the weak-growing Rock Balsamroot, a small sunflower with delicate, fern-like leaves. Other mesa plants displaying interesting adaptations include Desert Buckwheat, one of many *Eriogonum* species growing here, with tiny, leathery leaves that prevent desiccation. Also the saxifrage, Alumroot, that can grow almost anywhere, including cracks.



Birds: The greater Frenchman Coulee area is home to many migratory and non-migratory bird species. In addition to the steppe and cliff habitats, the high water table near the off ramp of Exit 143 features some small ponds adjacent to Silica Road. In the spring, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Tricolored Blackbirds, Red-winged Blackbirds, Marsh Wrens and Marsh Hawks inhabit the pond area. Snipes, curlews, stilts, and avocets occasionally visit as well. In the Coulee and mesa proper, Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, Bald & Golden eagles, Sparrow Hawks, and Prairie Falcon are sometimes seen. Barn and Great Horned owls nest in the columns. Other birds nesting in the columns include Cliff Swallows, Violet-green Swallows, and the ubiquitous pigeon (Rock Dove), the column dweller that will be cooing sweetly at you while your fingers grease out of a crack and your last piece of protection is fifteen feet below. Other species that might possibly visit the area are Sage Sparrows, Black-throated Sparrows, Rock Wrens, Say's Phoebe, and Canyon Wrens. Common desert birds like Turkey Vultures, Magpies, and Ravens are in attendance as well.

Climbers and the Environment: Despite its rugged appearance, Frenchman Coulee is a fragile environment needing each visitor's help if it is to escape the curse of being loved to death. On the mesa, you'll see "Don't Bust the Crust" signs, asking climbers to remain on the established trails--please respect them. The Frenchman Coulee Climbers' Coalition (FCCC), as part of the Access Fund's Adopt-A-Crag Day event, holds a clean-up day every October. The event typically meets in main parking lot. Work includes trail maintenance, graffiti paint-over, and garbage removal. Kevin Dwight is the president of FCCC and our Access Fund representative is Andy Fitz. Raptors nest in the columns of the Middle East Wall during the spring-- please study the kiosk at the main climber's parking lot for updates about which walls are closed due to nesting. The Coulee is administered by the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Access Fund works with the agency to keep Frenchman open to climbing. This is no easy task. Concert goers, ATVers, dirt bikers, hunters, target shooters, and maybe a few climbers, have all contributed in the destruction of the chain link fences keeping vehicles out of the little valley, construction of illegal fire pit, creation of unnecessary trails, and the introduction of bagfuls of litter. All of this exacerbates relations with DFW. Climbers can foster good relations and ensure our continued use of the area if during every visit each of us leaves the area a little better (or a little cleaner) than we found it.

Dogs and the sun: People like to bring dogs to climbing areas, a custom that I (and my dogs) endorse. Honestly, Frenchman Coulee is a lousy place for canines. The rocks are sharp and fall from above without warning, the access gullies are steep and sketchy, and most importantly, it is usually too hot and dry. My big, fluffy Bernese pants in February at the Sunshine Wall. At the risk of insulting the sensibilities of responsible dog owners: Remember to bring water, lots of it, for your dog. And since there is precious little shade in Echo Valley, consider bringing an umbrella for your pup to hide under.

Hiding from the sun at
Riverview Park
in early March



WARNING!

ROCK CLIMBING IS INHERENTLY A HAZARDOUS SPORT. ANY ROUTE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS GUIDE IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE DUE TO THE NATURE OF THE ROCK. USE THIS INFORMATION AT YOUR OWN RISK AND DO NOT RELY ON IT FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY. NO WARRANTIES, EXPRESS, IMPLIED OR OF ANY KIND ARE INTENDED IN THIS WORK.