

Hiking Badger Mountain

In the five years since it was established, this preserve has become a boon for Tri-Cities hikers

For a case study on what dedicated grass-roots activism combined with a supportive local government partner can deliver for the community, take a hike on Badger Mountain.

A Preserve Is Born

This wild landscape, where you can find fragile wild onions, native cactus and mariposa lilies growing amidst a variety of bunchgrasses, could just as easily have become back yards like so many of the other hills and ridges in the area.

With the sprawling Tri-Cities beginning to creep up the flanks of the most prominent natural landmark in the area, the Friends of Badger Mountain formed, with a goal to preserve as much of the mountain as possible. The Friends set out on an ambitious regional fundraising campaign and, working through the Trust for Public Land, helped Benton County to secure a 650-acre tract now known as Badger Mountain Centennial Preserve, so named to commemorate the county's one-hundred-year anniversary in 2005.

A Subtle, Diverse Landscape

A newcomer might look at Badger Mountain and see little more than a big, barren rock thrusting its way up and out of the city, but its character is more nuanced and interesting than that. Rising over 1,000 feet above the surrounding river terrace, the mountain is part of a ridgeline anchored on an east-west axis that gives it dramatically different north and south faces. Microclimates are easily discernible on the relatively small mountain, and hikers will pass through no fewer than four distinct eco-zones on a ninety-minute hike.

The broad south face of Badger Mountain is sun-splashed and windswept. Its thin soils struggle to support sparse grasses and low-growing shrubs across a rocky landscape broken occasionally by deeply-incised ravines that are the refuge for most of the Preserve's

resident coyote population. The south face is also the "quiet side" of the mountain. With its back to the city, Badger looks out over orchards and wheat fields with the muted hues of the Horse Heaven Hills sweeping across the horizon.

As one would expect, the north face of Badger Mountain is cooler, more shaded and generally sheltered from the prevailing winds. Its terrain is more jumbled, with hills, twisting canyons and small cliffs. With its deeper soils and better moisture retention, the north side of the mountain is more accommodating to thick grasslands and old-growth stands of sagebrush. In contrast to the more agrarian vistas from the south side, this part of the mountain casts its gaze over the bustle of the fourth-largest metropolitan area in Washington, with views of the cities, the Columbia River and the Hanford Reach National Monument in the distance.

The ridgelines and summit area mark abrupt transition zones between the north and south faces. The dual-peaked summit is populated by three large communications tower farms and offers panoramic views in all directions. On clear days, Mounts Hood, Adams, Rainier and Stuart can be seen to the south and west, while the Blue Mountains command the eastern horizon.

As the sun climbs higher and the days grow long and warm, Badger Mountain's plants and animals are rejuvenated. First, the mountain is renewed, as a verdant sea of bunchgrasses sweeps away winter's golden blanket. A parade



Badger Mountain and bluebells.
Photos by John Clement.

Adam Fyall

Adam works in the Benton County Commissioners' Office.



of wildflowers follows. First, a rosy veil of phlox visible for several miles cloaks the north face. By May, the balsamroot have stolen the show with their large, yellow sunflowers. In the heat of summer, a more subtle patchwork of color emerges, with the dominant orange globemallow often appearing like small prairie fires in the breeze. Finally, in September, the rabbitbrush blooms in a flush of bright yellow cottonballs, especially in the northwest corner of the preserve.

Badger Mountain's wildlife can be reclusive, but the patient eye will be rewarded. Spring is the domain of the threatened Townsend's ground squirrels on the lower flanks of the mountain; later in the season, jackrabbits and reptiles are more noticeable. Birders who visit the various elevations and environs of the preserve will be treated to a variety of avifauna every bit the equal of the ecology, with numerous songbirds, upland game, sagebrush-dependent species and raptors vying for attention throughout the migration and nesting seasons.

Hiking the Preserve

Over its first half-decade, the community's embrace and use of Badger Mountain Centennial Preserve has been nothing short of remarkable. Three distinct trails originating from two trailheads provide access onto the mountain and a variety of physical and environmental experiences for the visitor. At those two trailheads, the Friends of Badger Mountain maintain counters that logged more than 100,000 visits in 2010.

The Canyon Trail, dedicated in 2005, carries about 80 percent of the traffic into the preserve from the base to the summit. This hiker-only trail originates in an adjacent city park on the north side of the mountain and climbs 800 vertical feet to the summit in 1.2 miles. The trail snakes upward through a ravine and then out onto the face at about the halfway mark, and offers several viewpoints and rest areas along the way.

The Skyline Trail was developed in two phases beginning in 2006 and provides a 3-mile point-to-point hike over more varied terrain. This trail begins on the west ridge, then takes most of the elevation gain over the first mile of the hike on the north side. It then crosses over for a flatter and distinctly different experience along the south face before reaching the summit area and dropping down the east ridge. The Skyline Trail is multiple-use, available for hikers, cyclists and equestrians. It is particularly popular with the mountain biking community.

The mile-long Sagebrush Trail, completed in 2010, connects the Canyon and Skyline Trails, creating a 3-mile loop. This multi-use trail winds through the old-growth sagebrush in the eastern part of the preserve before dropping onto a bunchgrass prairie below.

Nurturing the Preserve

The most remarkable thing about the Badger Mountain Preserve isn't the heavy patronage or the fragile landscape that was saved for future generations. Rather, it is the personal investments that those patrons have made and the spirit of cooperation among the agencies and the user groups that has led Badger Mountain to become the premiere hiking destination in the Tri-Cities area.

As with many local governments, Benton County has limited budget and staff resources available for maintenance and improvements within the preserve. This is where the community has stepped in.

Corporate partners like REI have provided grants for trail materials, signage and tools. Local organizations such as cycling and equestrian clubs have been key players with trail building and maintenance. Finally, none of this would be possible without the organizational leadership provided by the Friends of Badger Mountain, the park's de facto steward. In partnership with Washington Trails Association and under the guidance of trailmaster Jim Langdon, the Friends of Badger Mountain have planned, engineered and constructed all of the trails on the mountain. WTA's expertise and ability to marshal statewide resources was instrumental to the success of these trail-building efforts, and the original 2005 work party for the Canyon Trail was at that time the largest to date for WTA with over 80 volunteers.

Badger Mountain's Bright Future

With an excellent team of partners in place and a strong and supportive outdoors constituency, Badger Mountain should enjoy a long and happy life. At least one more main trail is envisioned, and various other amenities and habitat restoration efforts are in the works. If you find yourself in the Tri-Cities and you'd like to stretch your legs for few hours, visit the Badger Mountain Centennial Preserve. You'll experience both the beauty of the open space and a prime example of the kind of asset a community can give itself when it musters its collective will. ♦



Large work parties and friendly terrain allowed WTA and Friends of Badger Mountain to construct a trail system on Badger Mountain in fairly short order. Photo by WTA.

Hike It»

The Canyon Trail

Total Miles: 2.4 miles
Elevation Gain: 800 feet