

TRAIL FACTOR Run Report #4 11/16/2008

Eagle Creek/Eagle-Benson/Benson Way/Ruckel Creek/Gorge Trail

Today was a really great TRAIL FACTOR run. It started pretty sweet with 5 TRAIL FACTOR runners attending. Those enjoying the trail today included Mallory, Rob, Jessi, Rick and Shawn (me). Our plan today was to run Eagle Creek trail. We wanted to take advantage of the early morning so that we could enjoy a nice gradually climbing trail that offered spectacular views.

Eagle Creek is an amazing location within the Columbia River Gorge. It happens to be one of the most popular hikes in the gorge and it was especially busy on this day. The reason for all of the commotion was simply due to many individuals taking in the sights of the last lingering salmon running up-stream to spawn. If you haven't witnessed it, you should definitely partake. It's one of those many wonders that really allow you to connect with nature and appreciate all that life has to offer.

We had two proposed routes for this trip. One was a 12 or 15 mile out and back on Eagle Creek Trail, which took you to two different locations. The first turnaround would take you to Tunnel Falls, which is a runtastic spot with an amazing waterfall to run behind. The other turnaround was a bit further up at the Eagle Creek/Eagle-Tanner trail junction. The cool thing about this last turnaround is your ability to add lots more mileage and plenty of extra climbing.

The second route was a bit more complicated. It was an 18 mile loop that included 5 miles on Eagle Creek trail, a 3 mile climb on Eagle-Benson trail, 3.1 miles on Benson Way trail and finally a decent for 5.8 miles down Ruckel Creek trail that connects to the Gorge trail for the final stretch of running to the car.

Mallory, Rob and Jessi chose the 12 mile option on Eagle Creek. It's an out and back that runs right alongside Eagle Creek and literally cuts through rock on the edges of the cliffs banking the creek. They had never been to Tunnel falls and really wanted to experience the rush of running behind a waterfall. They had also planned on an easier run for this day and didn't want to run more than two hours. This trail is especially nice for keeping the runs easier. It's a gradual climb and also technical, which keeps your pace slower. You can certainly run faster, but then it turns into one of those TRAIL FACTOR ankle breaker trails, which can also be a lot of fun.

According to Jessi, they had a terrific run and took in all the magnificence of Tunnel Falls. I asked them if they had gone down to Punch Bowl Falls, which is also on the trail, but Jessi said that instead of cooling off their legs by taking a 60 ft cliff jump plunge into Punch Bowl, they opted for soaking their legs in the creek by the parking lot.

Punch Bowl Falls is another super benefit of running Eagle Creek for those wishing for a summer time cool off spot. It has a waterfall that cascades into a huge pool called the Punch Bowl. I've never tried, but I hear there are several great cliffs to jump off that range from 50-80ft in height. Maybe next time I'll hit up the 80 footer.

Since Jessi, Mallory and Robs plans included a shorter route, they left early from the trail. Rick and I were on a longer loop that turned out to be quite the challenge. It was the first time I had experienced this loop. It was old news for Rick, but he had never actually run the loop before.

The plan was 18 miles of trail that would take us up to the top of the ridge just above Eagle Creek. The elevation began just above 100ft and climbed up above 4,000 ft. I was excited to try this new loop, but I was also a bit worried. I was experimenting with some new foods in my diet and wasn't sure I had taken in enough calories prior to the run.

The run started on the Eagle Creek trail and follows that path for about 5 miles. Soon enough we hit our turn-off, which was Eagle-Benson trail. Rick had descended this trail, but never climbed it. It would take us up 2,500 ft in about 3 miles on a trail that was very narrow with sketchy footing in some sections. We hit the turnoff trail in just under an hour and this is where things got ugly for me.

Since I was experimenting with eating less processed and cooked foods, my system shut down about ¼ of the way up the hill realized that it didn't have enough calories to sustain climbing efficiently. Luckily, I had an awesome partner that was very patient with me while I stopped and contemplated vomiting on myself. This made the climb go by much more slowly and it took us a bit over an hour to climb the 3 miles. We concluded that that wasn't too bad considering the circumstances, but I knew that had I been feeling better we could have climbed much faster.

The climb had snaked its way up the hill and offered some really spectacular views of the Gorge. Once you summit the climb, the trail flattens out and travels through dense forest. The trail up there is very soft, but can get confusing sometimes due to low traffic. Higher trafficked trails are much easier to spot.

By this time we were finally running again at a good clip and making up some time. As we were clipping along, we hear someone shout, "Runners." We stopped and there we saw heading up a different trail was another group of runners doing a power hike. This was very unusual for me. I never see runners on the upper trails in the Gorge. Usually you only see hikers.

Stacey Bunton was part of this group. She is a stellar runner and race director. We stopped and chatted for a bit and congratulated her on her recent performance running the Spartathlon. This is a 243km run in Greece. Check it out at

<http://www.spartathlon.gr/main.html>. Also, Stacey is the race director for the Hagg Lake 50k, which is a fast local 50k to try out. Check out the race site at <http://www.haggmud.com/>.

After our little chat it was back to running. We still had a huge descent to run. It was going to be about 5.8 miles of descending 3,500+ ft. It's not a straight descent, so some sections were extremely steep. The trail was also covered with tons of leaves which made the rocks disappear and offered unsure footing in some sections. I think I fell on my butt about 3 times.

It took what seemed like forever to get down Ruckel Creek trail, but we finally made it. Once you get to the bottom, the trail dumps you out onto a road. You stay on this road for about ¼ mile before intersecting Gorge Trail #400.

It's one more steep little climb to the finish and we were pretty tired so we hiked a bit of it. I think for those of you who know what it feels like to be on your feet for over 3 ½ hours can understand why we hiked this short hill. It feels like liquid acid in your legs. You immediately go anaerobic. Ouch.

We finally made it to the end of our run. It had taken us 4 hours to travel 18 miles. Slowest 18 miles I have done in a while, but my malnourished body and the terrain were to blame. I have to thank Rick for being so patient with me on the first and only big climb of the day. I learned a great lesson on nutrition when eating raw natural foods. Eat more before your run. Pretty simple, I know, but somehow I neglected to do the necessary amount of eating. Next time I'll just eat everything in my fridge to avoid getting TRAIL FACTORED.

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