

On the mend

Mount St. Helens starts to green up

By MARGIE PATLAK

Special to the Journal

ON THE MORNING of May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens, the white capped specter that distantly is visible from both Seattle, Wash., and Portland, Ore., blew its top with an explosion 500 times the force of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The 1,100-degree blast devastated 200 square miles of forested land, showered the surrounding area with 540 million tons of ash as thick as 3 feet deep in some spots, and sent a torrent of mud, rock and volcanic debris down its flanks that destroyed towns as far as 20 miles from its summit.

Ten years later, Mount St. Helens still serves as a reminder to visitors of how volatile and destructive nature can be.

On its north flank lie millions of trunks of what once were 200-foot-tall trees, all pointing away from the volcano's crater, which sent the blast that flattened them. From a distance, the mountain's blanket of gray ash renders a rather lunar-looking landscape.

On closer inspection, however, tourists find the indigo and magenta spikes of lupine

and fireweed as well as green patches of huckleberry or elderberry bushes.

With replanted trees already rising 20 feet high out of the ash, and 12-inch trout swimming in streams that once ran deep in steaming mud, Mount St. Helens also reminds us of nature's amazing capacity for regeneration.

"It's important to not only see how things changed dramatically on May 18 in just a matter of moments," says Jim Quiring, assistant director of the Mount St. Helens Visitors Center, "but also to see how rapidly the landscape has changed in the past 10 years."

The newly opened Visitors Center near Castle Rock, Wash., is filled with photos and there is a movie to help newcomers with that venture, and is a good starting point. But nothing compares to immersing yourself in the drama of the Mount St. Helens landscape.

A short jaunt up from the visitors center, State Highway 504 takes you past Maple Flats, a town destroyed by the 100-degree mudflows that rushed toward residents at 70

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Washington State Tourism photo

Ten years ago, Mount St. Helens erupted with a force that attracted worldwide attention. The mountain is visible in the distance from Seattle, Wash., and Portland Ore.

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miles per hour. Visitors can enter an A-frame house buried by 5 feet of silt, mud, water and ash the consistency of cement.

Looking at the kitchen sink filled with this junk, you get a feel for how local residents were affected by the eruption. A vending machine there now sells packets of the volcano's pumice pellets, rather than the usual snacks and beverages.

If you continue driving on around and up to the northeast face of the mountain, you'll end up at Windy Ridge, where the damage from the eruption is most apparent.

Here you are surrounded by an eerie blown-down forest lined with swiss-cheese-like pumice rock (solidified lava froth) and ash. If you look closely at the surrounding hillsides, however, you can see fingers of green where plants are growing in erosion gullies.

There the running water has cut into the thick, nutrient-poor layers of ash and exposed the rich former forest soils.

In addition to such birds as the white-crowned sparrow and the mountain bluebird, butterflies and other insects can be seen flying around this once vacant site. A lucky visitor also can see elk or deer grazing.

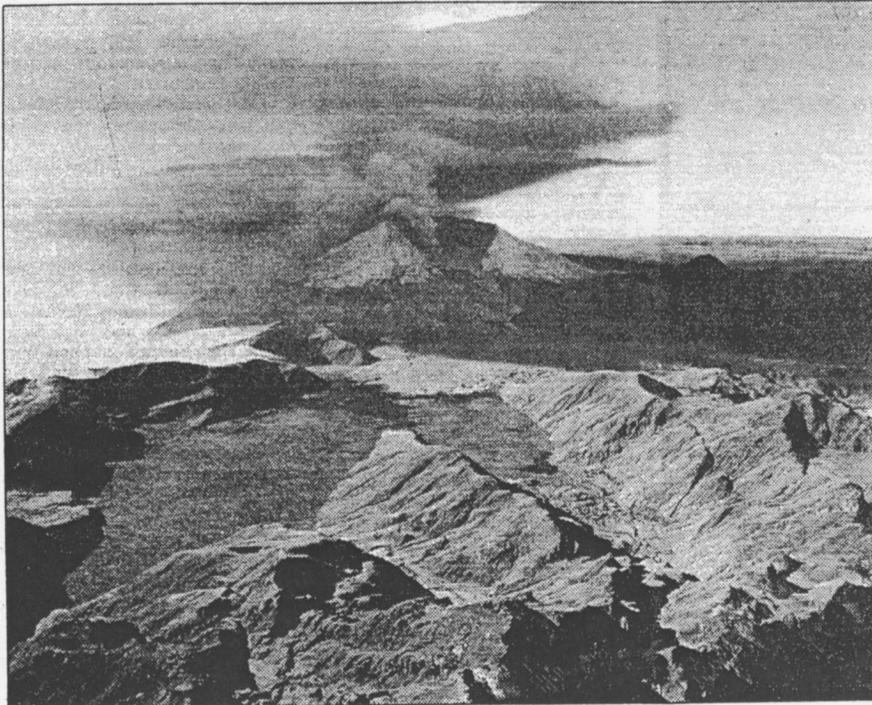
"The animals are coming back to this area, just like the trees and flowers," Quiring says.

From Windy Ridge you can get a panoramic view of Mount St. Helens' sister mountains, the snow-capped Mount Rainier, Mount Adams and Mount Hood. Indian legends depict Mount St. Helens as a woman angry with her two lovers, Mount Hood and Mount Adams.

The Native Americans in the region once were so afraid of Mount St. Helens' fiery temperament that they rarely ventured above the volcano's timberline. Spirit Lake, which you can see from Windy Ridge, was thought to be stocked with the ghosts of the most evil people that ever lived.

Those visitors who are not superstitious, however, can enjoy the great view there of Mount St. Helens' yawning crater. A continually expanding dome of lava can be seen bulging up from the bottom of this mile-long and 2,000 foot-deep amphitheater. The gentle slopes of the crater also provide an inside view of a growing mountain — many of the variously colored layers of rock and ash that were lain down over the past thousands of years can be seen in cross-section.

Enthusiasts equipped with climbing gear can scale the volcano's steep summit and glimpse the lava dome up close from the crater's rim. Only 100 people are allowed to do so each day, however, from May 15 through Oct. 31. To reserve a spot, write to the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument Visi-



This view of Mount St. Helens, taken in March 1981, shows the volcano still fuming ominously in the background, with ravaged areas from the 1980, blast extending across the foreground.

For another story on Mount St. Helens, see today's Accent section.

tor Center at 3029 Spirit Lake Highway, Castle Rock, Wash. 98611.

For last-minute-planners, 40 unreserved spaces are assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis starting at 6 p.m. each evening at Jack's Restaurant and Store located on State Highway 503, 23 miles east of Woodland, Wash.

For about \$50 a person, more sedentary individuals can see an inside view of the volcano from any of the several small planes that fly over the crater regularly.

To put the eruption of Mount St. Helens in historical perspective, visitors are urged to visit Ape Cave on the south side of the volcano. This 2½-mile long cave was formed from lava that spewed out of Mount St. Helens' mouth 1,900 years ago. Warm clothing, a flashlight and a lamp (which you can rent) are needed to explore this cave.

A drive around Mount St. Helens takes about eight hours to complete and hiking trails and picnicking areas can be found at several spots along the way. Bus tours of the volcano leave from Portland and Seattle daily.

Lodging can be found in such nearby towns as Castle Rock, Cougar, Kelso, Packwood, Morton and Randle. There also are a number of state and private campgrounds in the vicinity, including Seaquest State Park, which is right across from the visitors center and filled with towering fir trees.