

Trip Guide: John Day Fossil Beds National Monument

At first glance, you see a stunning landscape with multicolored badlands and eroded pinnacles. And you think, this looks like Utah, or maybe even another planet. But it's right here in the Pacific Northwest. The John Day River cuts trenches through prehistoric rock in this part of Central Oregon, and the result is one of the state's most incredible places to visit.

Get a little closer and you'll discover there's fossils in them thar hills. Composed of sedimentary rocks, the fossils of the John Day National Monument preserve a record of 50 million years of plant and animal life. More than 100 species of mammals have been identified in the monument's fossil beds, from rhinos and saber-toothed tigers to bats and salamanders. These archives of stone were first discovered by amateur paleontologist Thomas Condon in the 1860's. They've been protected, studied and enjoyed by millions as a national monument since 1975.

Visiting the John Day Fossil Beds



The [John Day Fossil Beds National Monument](#) consists of three distinct areas, with a sizable distance through semi-desert ranchlands between them. The three areas are unique units of geologic strata: the Clarno Unit, the Painted Hills Unit, and the Sheep Rock Unit.

You can visit the fossil beds as a day trip from [Bend](#), or spend a few days in the area by staying overnight at one of the small town inns around the monument. Visiting all

three units is difficult to do in a single day, yet all are worth your visit, so I suggest carving out time for a two or three-day trip.

Where to Go

The fossil beds units can be visited in whatever order you like. Our typical weekend itinerary for visiting the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument starts at the **Sheep Rock Unit**, where we stop by the awesome Paleontology Center and spend a few hours hiking and exploring. After an overnight stay in Mitchell or Fossil (see “where to stay” below), we spend the second day first at the **Clarno Unit**, followed by the **Painted Hills Unit**. All three units of the monument have interpretive trails, scenic overlooks for awesome photo ops, and picnic areas with restrooms.

Sheep Rock Unit



The [Sheep Rock Unit](#) is the easternmost part of the John Day Fossil Beds, a stark, rocky landscape of colorful strata and complex geology named for the wild bighorn sheep that once peppered the cliffsides. The most characteristic feature of this unit is the blue-green hued rock that is layered in a beautiful ombre pattern, the result of weathered volcanic ash. That brilliant color comes from a mineral called celadonite. Start your trip at the awesome [Thomas Condon Paleontology Center](#) that features cool fossil exhibits, interpretive programs, and audio-visual presentations on fossils, geology, and the processes of paleontology. There’s even a viewing window into the fossil laboratory, where the monument’s paleontologists are hard at work. This paleontology center also serves as the monument’s visitor’s center, so come here to chat with a knowledgeable ranger about your visit and get info on the region’s hiking trails and campgrounds.

Just across the road from Thomas Condon Paleontology Center is the **James Cant Ranch House**, which served as the monument visitor's center prior to construction of the shiny new one. This 1917 ranch house is now a museum with two surrounding interpretive trails through an historic ranch and orchard landscape. It's worth the stop for a relaxing stroll. The **River Trail** (.5 mile round-trip) is fully accessible to wheelchairs and leads down to the John Day River. The **Sheep Rock Overlook Trail** (also .5 mile) takes hikers to an overlook with a great view of the valley and the river. Both are great trails for spotting migratory birds in springtime.

Take a Hike: The [Blue Basin Overlook Trail](#) in the Sheep Rock Unit is one of the must-do hikes of Central Oregon and certainly of the John Day Fossil Beds. This loop trail (3 miles RT, 600 feet gain) starts from a parking lot about two miles north of the paleontology center on Route 19. Most folks hike the loop clockwise, climbing the dusty path through layered fossil beds to the rim of blue basin and a spectacular vista overlooking the John Day River Valley. Keep an eye out on the ground for scurrying rattlesnakes, and look up to the sky to spot circling hawks.

A shorter hike that departs from the same parking lot is the **Island in Time Trail** (1 mile RT), a gravel path that ascends to an amphitheater carved out of the blue-green claystone. Interpretive signs point out displayed fossils along the trail.

Painted Hills Unit



Welcome to the most photogenic piles of rock in the Pacific Northwest. The [Painted Hills Unit](#) is west of Sheep Rock about nine miles northwest of Mitchell off State Route 26. The hills are more famous for its mounds of folded rock striped with vivid hues like sherbet-scarlet, orange, pink, ochre and bronze-than for the fossils embedded in them.

It's easy to be effusive about the beauty of this stark, wind-swept topography where millions of years of erosion have sculpted smooth curves into these multi-colored, low-slung hills. Several short, easy trails take you into the hills, where you can get close to the bands of color that represent distinct geologic eras. Stick to designated

trails here-don't climb or walk on the rocky hills themselves. Do take a camera, though-you'll want to take the memories of this stunning place home with you.

Photo tip: *Aim to make this your last stop of the day, as the layer cake of stunning color deepens in beauty as the hills become bathed in the golden low light of early sunset.*

The Painted Hills are beautiful throughout the year, though like the rest of the John Day Fossil Beds summers can be very hot and shade trees are few and far between. Come in spring for the amazing display of yellow and purple wildflowers backdropped by the songs of migrating songbirds. Even in winter when snow periodically swaddles the hills in a white coat, outcrops of color jut out in a dramatic fashion, a sight to behold.

Take a Hike: [Four short trails](#) lead you into different areas of the colorful hummocks that comprise Painted Hills, each departing at different points along the main road that winds through the hills unit from east to west. Trailheads are well-marked. First is the **Overlook Trail** (.5-mile RT), a flat path with sweeping vistas of the hills and the perfect choice for photographing the whole landscape.

On the other side of the road begins the **Carroll Rim Trail** (1.5-miles RT, 300 feet gain), a climb through a volcanic duff deposit to a birds-eye view of the Painted Hills. A bench awaits at the end for your rest to soak up the scenery.

The **Leaf Hill Trail** (.5-mile RT) passes through the remains of what was once a deciduous hardwood forest, 30 million years ago. Fossilized leaf exhibits explain the geologic history on this ancient forest.

The short and sweet **Painted Cove Trail** (.25-mile RT) is a must-do for the close-up examination of the rough pebbles of crimson-tinted claystone.

The newest trail at Painted Hills is **Red Hill Trail** (.25-mile RT), so new in fact that it's not marked on many maps. It's the westernmost trail in the unit and leads you to a hill with a dramatic color shift.

Clarno Unit



Set in a remote corner of the juniper and sage-dotted desert, the [Clarno Unit](#) is home to the region's oldest fossils.

It's a bit difficult to fathom as you stand here on a relentlessly sunny day, but this land was once covered by an ancient subtropical rain forest that was buried by massive volcanic mud flows around 44 million years ago. Amazing relics of that forest remain in a petrified mudslide, and this unit is unique in that it's the only place in the national monument where you can see fossils up close in the huge boulders that flank the short interpretive trails. The rocks also house fossils of extinct animals that once roamed the jungle here, including rhino-like brontotheres and four-toed horses.

Take a Hike: [Three short trails](#) at the Clarno Unit, each .5 miles round-trip, can be hiked alone or combined together for a longer hike.

The **Geologic Time Trail** has interpretive signage that takes you through the area's geologic history.

The **Trail of Fossils** gets you an up-close view of dozens of fossils—things like magnolia leaves, palms, logs, ginkgo stems, and even small seeds and nuts—embedded in rock faces and boulders. Both of these trails are backdropped by the distinctive *palisades* of the Clarno Unit - chalk white cliffs topped with dramatic stone spires.

The **Clarno Arch Trail** climbs steeply to the base of these Palisades, and the bottom of a fossilized log and an unusual stone arch are found at the trail's end.