

Outdoor Activity : Mima Mounds

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Hike through a landscape that almost appears lunar (except for the vegetation of course). Weave in and out and even over a few of the hundreds of 4- to 6-foot mounds scattered across this Thurston County prairie. How did they get here? Who or what made them? You'll most certainly be pondering these thoughts while hiking through this geologically intriguing landscape.

Most visitors to this National Natural Landmark just visit the observation deck and maybe walk the 0.5-mile paved nature loop. But to really appreciate the mysterious nature of the Mima Mounds, take to the trail that loops around this 445-acre preserve. By all means head for the observation deck first to get a look at this bizarre arrangement of "earthen hay bales." Scientists continue to debate the mounds' origins. Was it the thawing and freezing during the last ice age that caused the land to buckle? Or perhaps pocket gophers were at work, having since moved on to haunt golf courses?

Walk the paved path for 0.3 mile to find the trailhead for the prairie loop trail. Once on a soft-surface path, head into the heart of the mounds. The surrounding forest has encroached on the prairie-invasive plants too, like the dreaded Scotch broom. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources and volunteers are trying to restore the prairie to the way it appeared when Native peoples periodically set fires to them, keeping the vegetation in check.

At 0.65 mile pass an old fence line, a remnant of early farming on the mounds. At 0.75 mile come to a junction, and turn right for the loop. Soon pass another junction, a shorter loop option. Continue right, hiking the periphery of the preserve. Enjoy views of Mounts Rainier and St. Helens towering in the distance. At 2.1 miles close the loop and retrace your steps back to the trailhead. The Mima Mounds are exceptionally beautiful in April and May, when prairie flowers such as blue violet, buttercup, and camas paint them in dazzling colors.

Roundtrip 2.75 miles

Elevation Gain 10 ft

Highest Point 225 ft

User info

Dogs not allowed

Directions: From Olympia take I-5 south to exit 95. Follow Maytown Road west for 3 miles to Littlerock. At a stop sign proceed forward (west) on Littlerock Road, which soon turns left (south). Bear right here onto 128th Avenue (signed for the Capitol State Forest). In 0.7 mile come to a T intersection. Turn right onto Waddell Creek Road and drive 0.8 mile. At a sign announcing "Mima Mounds Natural Area," turn left and reach the trailhead in 0.4 mile. Privy available.