

Breitenbush Hot Springs

Nestled in the northern tip of the Willamette National Forest, about sixty miles east of Salem, Breitenbush Hot Springs is one of the oldest recreational areas in Oregon. At an elevation of 2,225 feet, over thirty ancient geothermal springs, rich with minerals and temperatures ranging from 68 to 198 degrees Fahrenheit, bubble up from pools near the edge of the Breitenbush River, a tributary of the North Santiam. For hundreds of years, Kalapuya, Wasco, and Molalla people used the springs for medicinal and spiritual purposes.

John Minto, a Willamette Valley farmer who was pioneering a route over the Cascades, named the river and the hot springs, reportedly after an encounter with a hunter named Lewis Breitenbuscher who was camped near the springs.

Over the decades, a succession of owners promoted the health benefits of the thermal waters. In 1862, John Hollingsworth guided people to the camp by mule train. Fifteen years later, Claude and Hattie Mansfield homesteaded a quarter section of the Upper Breitenbush, which included most of the springs. When their son Lorenzo contracted polio, he spent much of his childhood soaking in a mineral pool that his father built for him in hopes it would cure him.

In 1897, Mark Skiff Jr. acquired water rights to the lower three springs and built cabins nearby. Known as Skiff's Camp, the cabins became a popular summer resort in 1913. Following a flood and fire, the Lower Hot Springs became accessible only by a trail or by fording the Breitenbush River.

Hattie and Fred Bruckman purchased the Upper Hot Springs in 1904, with Hattie remaining there for nearly fifty years. Their son, Merle Bruckman, built and managed the Breitenbush Lodge beginning in 1927. During that time, the camp supported a post office, gas station, and dance pavilion. Visitors traveled long distances to breathe the vapors from the dissolved minerals and the calcium, potassium, sodium, and magnesium in the springs. When Merle Bruckman retired in 1950, the resort fell into disrepair. It changed hands several times and finally was abandoned.

In 1977, Alex Beamer bought the upper springs and began restoration efforts that included creating a year-round community focused on preserving the natural landscape. From road number 050, visitors can see the lower springs, the remains of tiled pools, and a remnant of a steam room. Green and white garden hoses deliver hot and cold water to the algae-lined tubs. In the river is an old bathtub with hot water running out of the rusted bottom into the cold Breitenbush River. The Forest Service manages the lower springs and is exploring ways to improve the area.

The geothermal water at Breitenbush has been harnessed to heat and produce electricity for several buildings, including the community fire station. Twenty miles of trails have been reclaimed, attracting over 12,000 visitors a year. The Breitenbush Hot Springs Resort and Conference Center operates as a retreat and conference center.

Written by [Michele Field](#)

Further Reading:

Griffin, Dennis G. "Prehistoric Utilization of Thermal Springs in the Pacific Northwest." M.A. Thesis, Oregon State University, 1985.

Rakestraw, Lawrence and Mary Rakestraw. *History of The Willamette National Forest*. Eugene, Ore.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1991.

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