

# Washington

## CHEHALIS WESTERN TRAIL

It's an early fall afternoon just outside of Olympia, Wash., and you've set out on the 20.5-mile Chehalis Western Trail. One minute, you're gliding through low-lying clouds and mist. The next, the sky opens to a deep October blue. Chipmunks skitter across your path. Sword ferns lance up from the trailside like bushy horsetails, and Douglas-fir and hemlock "whoosh" in the wind. It's autumn in the Pacific Northwest, so you're anticipating sprinkles and chilly daytime temperatures. But you should also expect your senses to simmer as you twist and seesaw through the foothills of southern Washington.

The Chehalis Western Trail carves into forests of Douglas-fir, western red cedars and spruce.

Barely four miles from Washington's capital, the paved Chehalis Western Trail (pronounced "Sha-hay-less") stretches from Woodard Bay south through Lacey toward the imposing crown of Mt. Rainier. You can pick up the pathway at a number of places, but for a full-day, out-and-back excursion, consider starting from the northern trailhead at Woodard Bay.

Though now a conservation area, Woodard Bay was once the delivery point for logs harvested from the Bald Hills to mills along Puget Sound. The Chehalis Western Railroad hauled timber along the line from 1926 through the mid-1980s. You can still see remnants of that operation in some of the pilings and a wharf that remain in the bay. The conservation area is closed seasonally during certain nesting seasons. But when open, the waterfront is only about a five-minute walk on a foot trail (no bicycles) from the northern trailhead and parking area.

From Woodard Bay, you thread south through evergreen forests before the trailside opens up into rural farmland and grasslands. After about four miles—signposts mark every half-mile—you'll reach the more residential and urban outskirts of Olympia and Lacey, including a bustling medical park around the Providence St. Peter Hospital.

Thurston County Parks & Recreation, which manages the Chehalis Western Trail, recently acquired these first 5.3 miles from Woodard Bay to Martin Way in Lacey (also known as the Woodard Bay Trail). At present, there is a small break in the corridor here. The county has a project under way, called "Bridging the Gap," to build three major bridges: one over Martin Way, one over Interstate 5 and then one over Pacific Avenue to reconnect with the southern trunk of the trail. The first two are already open; construction on the third is expected in early 2011.

To navigate this stretch, use the existing at-grade crossing of Pacific Avenue, approximately 100 yards east of where



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The trail briefly parallels active tracks south of Waldrick Road; (below right) the Deschutes River right off the pathway.

the trail touches the road. After you cross Pacific, continue east another block until Sleater-Kinney Road. Turn right, or south, and go 100 yards to 12th Avenue. Take a right on 12th and follow until the end (approximately 300 yards). You'll find an "on-ramp" to the trail at the end of the road.

Soon you'll reach the Chambers Lake trailhead and recreation area, just west of the trail after it crosses 14th Avenue. You're separated from the lake by no more than a strip of trees or a few rows of houses, yet you may not even know it's there. As you parallel the lake on the trail, a wooded deck on your left overlooks a quiet, lily pad-ed pond. If you could peer through the woods on the other side of the corridor, you'd see the southern tip of Chambers Lake. (Step off at the 14th Avenue trailhead to access everything the lake offers.)

Next up is the Yelm Highway Pedestrian Overpass, after which you'll slice along a golf course and through residential neighborhoods and farms nestled among Douglas-fir and hemlock, the state tree of Washington.

About four miles south of Chambers Lake, you'll come to a short, narrow detour—the trail doesn't break but briefly departs the rail corridor—on dirt and gravel to Rainier Road before reacquiring the main pathway. The reward for the rail-trail's return is a dense forest, with steep hillsides and a tunnel of foliage shading out the sun.

The lush canopy peels away when you reach the Deschutes River, splashing right along the trail for several miles. Cottonwoods and long-leaf maples turn a pale gold in October, like morning sunlight through yellow curtains. These



KARL WIRSING/RTC

trees also drape the trail with leaves. Trail managers sweep the pathway often, but you should still anticipate some leaf cover on the ground.

As the Deschutes gurgles out of sight and sound, the Chehalis grows more curvy and hilly. It's nothing overly strenuous, but you'll certainly notice some climbs as foothills and distant mountains surge up on all sides.




Weather permitting, you can steal glimpses of snow-capped Mt. Rainier, which rises a dizzying 14,411 feet. If it's cloudy, you'd never know the old volcano was there, but on clear days you can see all the way to the base. "The mountain was out today," you'll hear locals say.

When you finally hit the t-junction with the 14.5-mile Yelm-Tenino Trail, it's awfully easy to keep on cruising southeast toward Rainier. Luckily the Chehalis Western Trail has scattered treasure throughout the route. From farm valleys to hazy foothills and evergreen forests, there's an acorn here for every kind of squirrel. Once you've made the first pass, you're sure to go scrambling back for more.

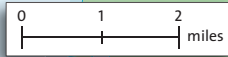
## Chehalis Western Trail

Total trail length:  
20.5 miles  
Trail surface:  
Asphalt

### Other trails

-  Trailhead
-  Parking
-  Restrooms

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLEMARKS.COM

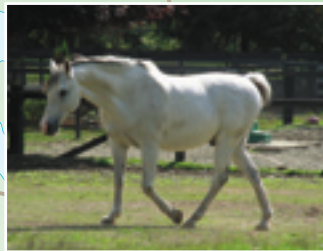


**GETTING THERE:** Generally, the most affordable local airport is Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, about 55 miles from the Chambers Lake trailhead in Lacey. From the airport or any points north of Olympia, head south on Interstate 5 until you reach exit 108 to Sleater-Kinney Road. Head south, cross Pacific Avenue, and at the four-way stop sign turn right onto 14th Avenue. The entrance is approximately a half-mile on your left; restrooms and parking are available here.

If you are arriving on I-5 from the south, take exit 109. Take a left on Martin Way and then the first left onto College Street. Head south, cross Pacific Avenue and then Lacey Boulevard, and then turn right onto 14th Avenue. After approximately one mile, you'll pass a trestle, and the entrance will be on your left.

Alternatively, to reach the Woodard Bay trailhead from Lacey, head north on Sleater-Kinney Road for five miles. The road will take a sharp turn to the left and become 56th Avenue NE. Take a right on Schinke Road, and then bear left on Woodard Bay Road. After you cross over a small bay, turn right into the parking lot. Parking and rustic toilets are available there.

There is no direct parking access at the southern end point, where the pathway connects with the Yelm-Tenino Trail.



**Trail note:**  
For views of  
Mt. Rainier,  
look eastward.



**WHERE TO STAY:** A great place to start your search is the Olympia-Lacey-Tumwater Visitor and Convention Bureau ([www.visitolympia.com](http://www.visitolympia.com); 877.704.7500). You can search by type of accommodation to find everything from a cottage on Puget Sound to a campground near the trail.

**RENTALS:** Rental bikes are available at the Bike Stand (360.943.1114) at 407 Fourth Avenue East in Olympia, only about four miles from the Chambers Lake trailhead. The owners keep hours seven days a week and rent bikes for half-day, full-day or overnight rides. You can try their popular cruisers, which are perfect for the trail, or other options to suit your speed. Even better, you can pedal right to the trail from the shop.

**FOR MORE:** To learn more about the Chehalis Western Trail, including directions and amenities at each trailhead, visit Thurston County Parks and Recreation at [www.co.thurston.wa.us/parks/Trails/trails.htm](http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/parks/Trails/trails.htm) or call 360.786.5595.

Also, for a detailed geographic information system (GIS) map of the Chehalis Western Trail, more images, user reviews and other useful trip-planning tools, visit [www.trailink.com](http://www.trailink.com), RTC's free trail-finder website.



### DETOUR AT PACIFIC AVENUE



PHOTOS BY KARL WISSING/RTC