Clustered around three different bodies of water, the state parks of the Southern Willamette Valley offer camping and day-use activities for everyone. Located in Eugene’s backyard less than 30 minutes’ drive from I-5, they are a great place to get out on the water and out in nature.
The Southern Willamette Valley is a boater’s paradise, with ramps on both Dexter and Fall Creek Reservoirs and put-ins for kayaking, canoeing, and tubing on the Willamette River. Anglers can hook small- and largemouth bass, crappie, catfish, and rainbow trout on the reservoirs. On the Willamette River, the Pengra access point is a good spot for launching drift boats and catching seasonal salmon and steelhead runs.

In Fall Creek State Recreation Area, Winberry day-use area provides picnic tables and high- and low-water concrete boat ramps. It’s a popular place for swimming, waterskiing, and other water sports. On the other side of the tree-lined reservoir, North Shore day-use area has high- and low-water ramps as well as a picnic area overlooking the water. Free Meadow and Lakeside I and II, meanwhile, are tucked-away day-use areas with swimming spots and picnic tables.

View of Fall Creek Reservoir from Cascara Campground

To the west, Elijah Bristow State Park’s 847 acres of meadows, ponds, and woodland make for great birding and wildlife viewing. The park has 12 miles of hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding trails as well as an equestrian staging area, reservable group picnic sites with fire rings and horseshoe pits, and access to the Willamette River Water Trail. For those with dogs, Elijah Bristow and Jasper State Recreation Site both have fenced off-leash play areas.

Jasper State Recreation Site

Jasper is an ideal setting for family outings, reunions, and company picnics: it has covered, reservable group picnic shelters and kitchen shelters with cooktops, grills, and sinks. Everything you need to enjoy a day in the park is here, including a playground, open fields, a volleyball court, walking trails, and picnic benches at the river’s edge shaded by cottonwoods and maples.

On Dexter Reservoir, two parks offer fun both on and off the water. Dexter State Recreation Site features a native white oak woodland and a challenging 18-hole disc golf course. The reservoir offers sailing and powerboating with views of the Cascade foothills; there is a launch area, boat and trailer parking, a courtesy dock, a swim dock, and shoreline picnic sites. Lowell State Recreation Site is also full of amenities, with a marina, year-round moorage, a playground, swimming and fishing access, basketball and volleyball courts, and a reservable picnic shelter set among towering oaks.

For those who want to spend the night and rough it a bit, Cascara campground has first-come, first-served primitive lakeside sites with fire rings and picnic tables surrounded by Douglas-fir trees. The campground features a boat ramp, swimming area with dock, drinking water, and an amphitheater for evening programs. Just down the road, Fisherman’s Point campground offers group camping on the lake shore. Up to 64 people can stay at the reservation-only site. Check www.oregonstateparks.org for current rates.

Camping at Fall Creek Reservoir

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