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Reversible Courses Open at Oregon's Silvies Valley Ranch

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They took nearly eight years to build, but the Craddock and Hankins Courses are finally taking visitors.

By Tony Dear



Course architect Dan Hixson stands on the 16th tee of the Craddock Course at Silvies Valley Ranch in eastern Oregon, and asks the group he's playing with how many double greens there are on the property. Each of us thinks back to our two rounds here—one on the Craddock, the other on the Hankins – and throw out some speculative numbers. “Er, seven,” one brave soul ventures. “No, eight...nine?” “Well,” says Hixson. “There’s four and 14, five and 13, six and 12, seven and...hang on.” He ponders for a second. “You know, I can barely remember myself.”



The Craddock's eighth hole and the Hankins's ninth.

There are two things you should know about the routing for the reversible course(s) at Silvies Valley Ranch.

1) It is complicated—there are 36 holes, 27 greens, and 16 fairways. You play down a certain fairway one day, and back up it the next all the while feeling this is strangely familiar. You see a lone green in a depression to your left, and wonder which hole that is and if you've already played it, or are going to. You choose your club for a short hole whose green you recognize, but which is angled very differently to how it was the previous day.

2) It is brilliant.



The Hankins course's 18th.

Hixson began working at Silvie's Valley Ranch in 2009, shortly after the opening of his inland links design at Wine Valley Golf Club in Walla Walla, Wash. But the course(s) took an awfully long time to build. He employed a tiny crew, had to halt work in the -30F° winters and was employed by a veterinarian Dr. Scott Campbell (Banfield Pet Hospital owner and former CEO), who purchased the 140,000-acre ranch in 2007 and was never in any particular hurry.

In addition, the well providing the water for irrigation malfunctioned a couple of years ago.



Silvie's sprawling ranchland provides a superb golf tableau.

At one point, Silvie's was going to beat The Loop—Tom Doak's design at Forest Dunes Golf Club in northern Michigan—to become the first 18(36)-hole reversible course since the Old Course at St. Andrews. And though Campbell says his 600-acre layout has actually been playable since the summer of 2015, it didn't officially open until a few weeks ago, a year after The Loop.

The thing about reversible courses though, is that while designing one that works is really pretty clever, if the holes themselves aren't terribly exciting you would probably play each direction once for the novelty value, then never go back.

That certainly isn't the case at the Loop which, judging from reports, has proven extremely popular. Nor is it likely to be true of Silvie's Valley Ranch which is intriguing and full of engaging shots with amazing views.



Hixson didn't build an entirely genuine reversible 18 here, because to do so would have meant several very bad uphill holes, hence the nine stand-alone greens. Chief Egan, an amusing nine-hole pitch-and-putt is also open to the east of the two main courses, and the dramatic, seven-hole McVeigh's Gauntlet opens next year.

Silvie's only drawback is that it is extremely remote—a fact some might find an asset rather than a liability.



A cabin at The Retreat

The ranch is located roughly 40 miles north of Burns, Ore., which is 130 miles east of Bend. No, you don't decide after work that you might try to get in a few holes before dark. You resolve well in advance that you want to venture this far into the high desert, and prepare for a very different sort of vacation experience.

The cabins at the Retreat are appropriately rustic and low key, but very comfortable—perfect for couples or golf groups.

Prepared by Executive Chef Boomer and Executive Chef Lynette Bushy, the food in three areas of the main lodge—the Dining Room, Gun Room, and Porch—is absolutely superb. Everything on the menu looks tempting, but the highlights are the ranch's own organic "Naked" beef, and the surprisingly delectable chevon—meat from the American Range Goat which the ranch has bred since 2012.

Elsewhere on the Ranch, you can herd the goats, drive cattle, fish, hike, bike, and shoot. A spa is coming in 2018.

It's still early at Silvies Valley Retreat (the Ranch has been here since 1883, but the retreat is a new enterprise) and it's going to take a while for people to become cognizant of a destination this far from civilization. It surely never will see the annual numbers of traveling golfers who flock to the Oregon destinations of Bandon Dunes and Bend, but for some, it is going to become a very special home away from home.

Green fee – \$225 for resort guest, \$260 for non-resident.
Cabins (two king bedrooms) – \$850. Other options available.

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