

Flowing through forests, meadows, parks, farms, and cities large and small, the Willamette River is the defining natural feature of the Willamette Valley. The river descends from its headwaters in the Cascade and Coast ranges, with their wide, blue-green vistas, to the city of Eugene. It then winds its way 187 miles northward through the valley to Portland. Towering black cottonwood trees frame the mainstem's riffles and pools throughout its length.



**Black cottonwood tree**

The Willamette's headwaters are some of the purest in the United States. Waldo Lake, at an elevation of 5,400 feet, feeds pristine water to the North Fork of the Middle Fork Willamette, which reaches the Middle Fork just north of Cottage Grove. After many mountainous miles, the Middle Fork joins with the Coast Fork to form the mainstem Willamette River just south of Eugene. As one travels northward, the McKenzie, Calapooia, Santiam, Molalla, Clackamas, and other rivers from the Cascade Mountain Range feed in from the east, while Coast Range rivers such as the Coast Fork, Long Tom, Mary's, Luckiamute, Yamhill, and Tualatin flow in from the west.

The Willamette's upper stretch is typically dynamic, with fast, shallow currents rushing between small gravel islands covered by Pacific willow. The river retains this aspect in places as it moves northward and widens into the valley, but occasional pools of slower water also begin to appear. Soon towns and cities come into view: Eugene, Corvallis, and Albany in the southern valley and Salem, Newberg, and Portland in the north. The river enters its final 26 miles at Willamette Falls, where the entire flow tumbles 40 feet in a whitewater rush, framed by horseshoe-shaped basalt. Below Willamette Falls the river gains depth and begins to rise and fall with the tides of the Pacific Ocean, some 133 miles distant.

### **View of Molalla and Willamette confluence at Molalla River State Park**

