

# Course Review: Willow Creek Country Club

OK, we have to say this up front: the name Willow Creek *Country Club* seems a bit of a stretch. Yes, it's a privately owned, semi-private enterprise in Heppner, and the (mostly) friendly folks who own and run the place are free to call it whatever they want. That said, Willow Creek "Golf Course" would be more appropriate. Just sayin.'

Willow Creek Country Club — we'll just go with "Willow Creek" from here on out — was a destination of Golf Week 2009, the tour we've dubbed "Nearer Eastern Oregon." ("Far Eastern Oregon," Baker City, Ontario, Burns, John Day and such, is coming in 2015 as this review is written.) We had played the Pendleton Country Club that morning, then took a fascinating drive down Highway 395 to the Oregon Highway 74 interchange over to Heppner. That route includes miles and miles of uninterrupted farmland with few people, residences or driveways. You sort of wonder who decided the road needed to be built, and why. But it does get you to Heppner.

Open since 1954, Willow Creek is an executive course measuring 1700 yards and playing to a par of 30. The course features six par 3s, including four in a row on holes 2-5. Hole No. 1 runs parallel to Oregon Highway 74, so you're on full public display as you start your round. The good news is that it's a mere 230-yard par 4, and unless you really, really hook it onto the highway, it's otherwise wide open and should get you off to a good start.

Next comes the aforementioned quadruplet of par 3s. No. 2 is the longest; at 190 yards, it's only 40 yards shorter than the opening par 4. There is a small stream that runs all along the left-hand side; the stream continues on and is in play on the left on No. 3 as well.

Since the longest of the par 4s is only 275 (No. 6; No. 8 is another 230-yarder), the most difficult hole on the course is probably No. 7. It's a pretty much straight ahead 185-yard par 3 — all of the holes at Willow Creek are basically straight — but the stream that's left of Holes 2 and 3 is right on No. 7, so a push may get you wet and a slice definitely will. You finish off a quick nine with a 160-yard par 3.



Willow Creek is a playable, but not highly manicured layout. The greens were so-so, not particularly quick but consistent throughout the round.

There is a little story to the picture you see here. There wasn't a great Willow Creek Country Club sign for our photo op, so we wanted to get the "Welcome to Heppner" sign in the background. It was located up off of the first green alongside the road. We finished our round, then asked the woman running the clubhouse if she could possibly run out there in a cart and take our picture. She was "too busy," so we asked if her 14-year-old daughter could be our chauffeur. She seemed hesitant to entrust her girl to us (apparently we look suspicious), though she finally relented. The daughter, of course, being a typical teenager, enjoyed the diversion and chatted about school and life in Heppner. We quickly delivered her safe and sound back to Mom.

This will sound more negative than we mean, but bottom line: not a "country club," not a great course. You've got to work at it to get to Heppner to begin with, which is a fine little town, just don't go there *just* for the golf.