

STRAWBERRY SURPRISES:

Sweet scenery in a lesser-known wilderness area

By Mark Morical
WesCom News Service

PRAIRIE CITY — Oregon is so brimming with incredible wild places for camping and hiking that sometimes it can be hard to determine just where to go when you have a few days to get away.

I was in search of someplace I had never been and someplace less crowded. The Willowa Mountains in Northeast Oregon are stunning in their alpine beauty, but they are about a seven-hour drive from Bend.

Only a 3½-hour drive from Bend is the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, an isolated area of rugged peaks, glacier-carved valleys and high-mountain lakes that appear seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of the high desert. The 68,700-acre wilderness area east of John Day in the Malheur National Forest in Grant County is a diverse landscape that includes about 125 miles of trail, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

This from backpacker.com: “the Strawberry Wilderness — with sparkling alpine lakes and towering glaciated peaks — has more in common with the Canadian Rockies than Oregon’s high desert.”

That convinced me. A friend and I would make our annual camping/hiking trip to the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

The drive east from Prineville through the Ochocos and the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument was a memorable one, and we made good time before reaching Prairie City, population 910, which, naturally, sits on a prairie at the base of the Strawberry Mountain Range.

The Forest Road from Prairie City up to Strawberry Campground went from paved, to gravel, to big rocks, but we eventually made it and snagged the very last tent campsite on a Saturday afternoon.

After a good night’s sleep we set out on our first hike,

which would take us to Strawberry Lake, Strawberry Falls, Little Strawberry Lake, and the base of Strawberry Mountain — a lot of strawberries. According to wilderness.net, wild strawberries within the forest there ripen in July.

The Strawberry Basin Trail started just a few feet from our tents, and we started out in a steady climb to Strawberry Lake, which is only 1.4 miles from the campground. The trail started out on soft soil, then became rockier as we approached the lake through the forest of spruce, pine and fir trees.

Ringed by rugged mountains, Strawberry Lake really is a sight to behold. I have to admit it surprised me, as I was not expecting such grandiose alpine scenery in such a little-known wilderness area.

Brook trout are stocked in the lake — we could see many swimming near the shore — and one fly angler aboard a kayak appeared to be having some success. After circling to the south side of the clear blue lake, we turned on the trail to Strawberry Falls, a thin but strong veil of water that drops nearly 100 feet over moss-covered boulders.

From there, the trail to Little Strawberry Lake led us on switchbacks to the top of the falls, and then to an increasingly steep trek to Little Strawberry Lake, which was 3.4 miles from our campsite. Little Strawberry Lake sits right at the base of a melted glacier that is now mostly shale along the vertical cliff side, though some snow lingered under rock ledges. The lake is bordered by a bright green meadow, and at lakeside we could hear water trickling down the rock cliffs high above.

According to the Forest Service, glacial ice carved the U-shaped valleys into the Strawberry Mountain Range and formed the rock beds that now hold the seven alpine lakes of the wilderness area. From the jaw-droppingly



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Bend’s Jeremy Dickman hikes along the shore of Strawberry Lake.



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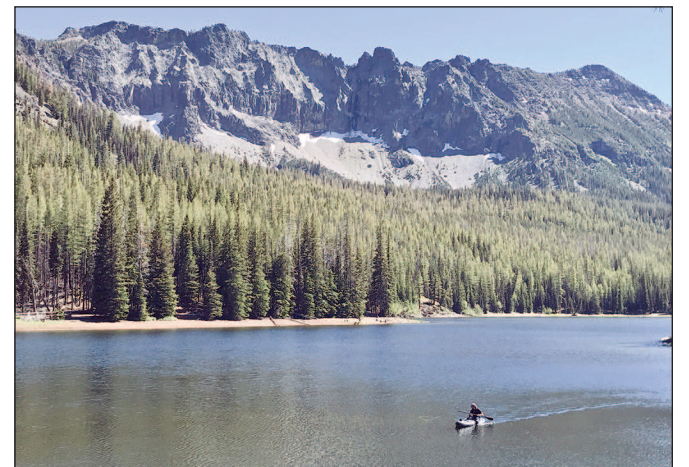
Strawberry Falls in the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

beautiful Little Strawberry Lake, we turned west on the Strawberry Mountain Trail to make a push for the 9,042-foot summit, the highest peak in the wilderness area. (The elevation at the campground is about 5,700 feet.) The trail took us along amazingly picturesque ridgelines where we could look back at the rock-strewn cliffs and peer down on Strawberry Lake.

As we continued climbing we came to an opening in the trees through which we could clearly see Strawberry Mountain — and made a pretty easy decision. The climb to the top of the bare peak appeared to be a

vertical slog, and we knew we lacked the energy for the summit and the return trip. So we turned around and headed back down to Strawberry Lake and eventually our campsite. The 11-mile hike took 5½ hours — including lots of time for sightseeing — and featured 2,350 feet of elevation gain.

According to wilderness.net, wildlife is abundant in the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, which is home to a native population of Rocky Mountain elk as well as mule deer, antelope, black bears, cougars, and mountain goats introduced from a population in the Elkhorn



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A fly angler aboard a kayak fishes for brook trout on Strawberry Lake.

Mountains near Baker City. We saw mostly deer, including a few up-close encounters as we sat around the campfire during the evenings.

The next morning we awoke with sore legs but ready to explore another part of the wilderness on a hike to Slide Lake, which sits in a higher basin southeast of Strawberry Lake.

The 4.5-mile trail to Slide Lake was entirely different from the trail we had hiked the day before. This trail led us on precipitous switchbacks to an exposed ridge as we walked below intriguing rock column formations. From a vantage point along the way we could look down toward Prairie City and north toward other far-off mountain ranges.

Pristine, blue-green Slide Lake was impressive in its own right, also rimmed by rugged cliffs. But the mosquitoes were intense, and we did not linger too long before turning back the way we had come. The 9-mile hike required a little more than four hours and included about 1,800 feet of elevation gain.

One more night in the Strawberry Wilderness — when the temperature dipped below freezing and I slept in my ski jacket — and we were headed back on the relatively short drive to Bend the next morning.

Sometimes we do not need to go far — but just far enough — to enjoy the diverse beauty of the Oregon outdoors.

PEDALING

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As you trek along Pierce Road to the north, take time to remember our one-time governor of Oregon, state representative, U.S. Senator and congressman, Walter M. Pierce.

Pierce was an eclectic individual who had a number of jobs ranging from school teacher, lawyer, county clerk, rancher, real estate speculator and partner in the infamous Hot Lake Sanitarium. Political and influential into his 81st year on Earth, he endorsed many proactive, progressive bills as well as a number of controversial ones.

Some remnants of his work are state-funded education, hydropower, community libraries and state utilities. Some works, since stricken from the books, revolve around the Alien Property Act, Compulsory School Act, Prohibition and Oregon’s Eugenics Law.

After crossing Highway 203, Pierce Road becomes paved as it cuts next to La Grande/Union County Airport and through a number

of beautiful fields of crops.

This year, I was fortunate enough to see and smell fields of mint, clover, wheat, sunflowers, sugar beets and alfalfa along this stretch. Crops such as these are frequently planted in rotation to keep the soil and crops healthy using till and no-till techniques as well as any number of fertilizers, pesticides and biological pest controls. Continue on Pierce Road to the Willowa Lake Highway 82. Follow Highway 82 briefly to the northeast before diving west onto the paved Booth Lane.

Roll past one of Pierce’s once-majestic white houses, just prior to the gravel Pierce Road intersecting Booth Lane. Please note that all of the paved surfaces covered on this route up to now were scheduled to be chip-sealed on July 24. Chip-sealing is an inexpensive way to lengthen the life of pavement. The advantageous things about chip-sealing is that it makes the roads easier to see at night, there is less skidding than on regular pavement and it seals the surface to keep water at bay and extend the life of

the road. The downside to chip-sealing is that it makes it not so fun to ride on a regular steel or aluminum road bike for at least a couple of months after application and often longer.

Continue from Booth Lane onto Mount Glen Road, still moving west. Curve south just past mile 20 onto Lef-fel Road. Lef-fel Road cuts

through a number of boutique farms and onto Fruitdale Lane. Follow Fruitdale Lane to the southwest and past Riverside Park. Follow North Spruce Street, Monroe and Adams Avenue back to the center of La Grande and the Mountain Works Bicycles. Enjoy the shops downtown then go hide from the heat and revel in the rest of your day.

Farm chemical disposal is free ... and easy.

For information, contact your nearest collection facility.

Union County ...	City Garbage Service	3412 Hwy 30, La Grande	541.963.5459
Baker County ...	Baker Sanitation	3048 Campbell Street, Baker City	541.523.2626
Wallowa County ...	Wallowa County Public Works	619 Marr Pond Ln, Enterprise	541.426.3332

