

PONDERING OUR PLACE

Orion's on the rise, the Northern Cross on the downward slide, and the December solstice just around the corner.



THE LAY OF THE LAND

ETHAN SHAW

The high country is putting on its snowpack; in the valleys, the rain-barbed wind has been gale-force. The elk are filing down to their winter range — except, perhaps, for those few old bulls who sometimes tough it out on high — and the rough-legged hawks have returned from the Arctic to sit on our fenceposts and hunch in our fields. El Niño looks poised to deliver a mild winter, but, still: no telling when those Blue Mountain passes will be closed to blizzard this time of year.

This hunkered-down season sees our remote corner of the Northwest at its remotest-feeling, which makes it as good a time as any to think about connections. Northeast Oregon is unique, of course, but also threaded through with linkages to other lands: linkages of stone and weather system, plant and beast.

Every place, whether heartland or borderland or something in between, has its bigger-picture geographic context. Allow me a lurching, incomplete meditation on ours.

Roughly speaking, the Blue Mountain Province is something of a topographic bridge slung between the Cascades to the west and the Rockies to the east, and something of a divide between the Columbia Plateau to the north and the Basin-and-Range to the south.

It's good, I think, to zoom out like this sometimes. And you can zoom out yet farther (and further) in space and time. We're a couple hundred miles from the Pacific, yet the ocean haunts our landscape. Much of our foundational rock hails from bygone islands glommed onto the western margin of North America. The Pacific, of course, also brews up much of our weather, which this season may be a gale from that great storm factory of the Gulf of Alaska, or what's left of an "atmospheric river" sourced (like some of our rock) from faraway tropical waters. More marine infusions come (or came) our way in flesh-

and-blood form via the fish marrying the saltwater and freshwater realms: salmon, steelhead, lamprey, sturgeon.

This Intermountain position of ours — and our staggering range of elevation and microclimate, from the arid gullet of Hells Canyon to the alpine summits of the Blues and Wallows — also makes us a biological crossroads, where Maritime Northwest, Rocky Mountain, and Great Basin organisms and ecosystems mingle.

The sight of a particular plant or plant community can evoke faroff places. Far Northeast Oregon's comparatively limited juniper woodlands suggest the vaster juniper savannas of the more southerly Blues and of Central Oregon's High Lava Plains, not to mention the piñon-juniper scrub covering such enormous territory in the Southwest. Wild ginger, western yew, mountain hemlock, red alder, devil's club, and sword fern in our wettest mountains call to mind the Pacific slope. The limestone and marble faces of the Wallows mark the only appearance of limber pine — widespread in the Rockies and Great Basin — in Oregon; these Wallowa pines are counterparts to isolated stands of limber pines in the Great Plains, on the far opposite margins of the tree's range. And so on.

The blended nature of our ecology is mirrored in Northeast Oregon's snowpack, with bearing on such important subjects as skiing and avalanches. While the white stuff that falls on our mountains can take all kinds of forms depending on atmospheric conditions, overall we've got a transitional type of snow bridging the wet, heavy "Cascade concrete" of the Maritime Northwest and the light, dry powder — the "cold smoke" — of the interior Rockies.

A bridge, a crossroads, a blend — and a hodgepodge, too, probably the best word to describe our diverse geology. Northeast Oregon is youngish ground built on what



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald file photo

Mother Nature throws a chilly blanket over Baker City and the Baker Valley as the clouds cap the Elkhorn Mountains.

was not all that long ago the leading edge of the continent. The story of our rocks — our greenstones and andesites, our shales and basalts — has much in common with the volcanically and tectonically tumultuous Maritime Northwest. But it also ties us to some extent to the Rocky Mountains: Sediments shed off the granitic Idaho Batholith come woven into our rock fabric, for instance, and some evidence suggests a connection between the epic lava floods our region bled out back in Miocene time and the magmatic "hotspot" now fueling the Yellowstone Supervolcano.

Speaking of those lava

floods — the Columbia River Basalts — they put the scorched stamp of Northeast Oregon on a lot of Northwest landscapes, all the way to knobby Saddle Mountain in the North Oregon Coast Range, and beyond to black headlands and stacks white-washed by seabirds and hammered by surf.

We haven't shipped off any waves of molten basalt to the North Pacific lately, but of course every day we send it our waters — and with it the sand and silt washed off our terrain, bound for riverbed and beach and seafloor. Running water gives us another link to the Greater Yellowstone — the Snake River ris-

es there — as well as to wild sources of upstream Snake tributaries such as the Sawtooths, the Lost River Range, the Salmon River Mountains. Our central position in the 260,000-square-mile watershed of the Columbia — the biggest river on North America's Pacific coast — ties us to such farflung real estate as the Columbia Icefield in the Canadian Rockies, Diamond Peak in Oregon's central Cascades, the Long Beach Peninsula along the Graveyard of the Pacific.

(We send our snowmelt and streamflow and runoff through the Cascades via the Columbia Gorge; the

Cascades, in turn, periodically send us blasted bits of themselves in the shape of ash: an old routine.)

Sure, you can get carried away with this zooming-out: the North American Plate! Earth! Heck, the Milky Way! But envisioning our home base in the big scheme of things highlights all the physical interconnections that inform and shape this place, and also draws into focus what makes it special and distinctive.

And, hey: Next time you run across a rough-legged hawk, consider the goodly chunk of globe embodied in that far-traveling raptor once again wintering among us.

Eagle Cap Extreme gains prestige by joining race series

By Katy Nesbitt
For WesCom News Service

JOSEPH — The excitement for the Eagle Cap Extreme sled dog race stepped up a notch with the announcement of the Wallowa County race's inclusion in a three-race series.

This fall the organizers of the Extreme announced that mushers in the 200-mile course can enter the Rocky Mountain Challenge Cup and compete in the Idaho Sled Dog Challenge in McCall and the Race to the Sky in Lincoln, Montana.

Extreme President Randy Greenshields said there's been talk among mushers for several years to start a circuit.

"We are hoping people who do the other two races will want to come here," Greenshields said.

Julian Pridmore-Brown said the series came about through conversations between Extreme board

members and the race director for the Idaho Sled Dog Challenge, Jerry Wortley.

The Extreme, scheduled to start Jan. 24, is the first of the three races — the Idaho Challenge race starts Jan. 30 and the Race to the Sky is Feb. 9. It's also the shortest — the Idaho and Montana races feature 300-mile routes, but none compare to the steep terrain of the Wallowa County sled dog race.

"It's not your typical flat frozen course along a river with little elevation change, Greenshields said. "Every year some of the mushers say, 'Now I know why you call it the extreme!'"

Pridmore said the planning is still in the early phases of working out prizes and sponsorships, but the directors agreed to keep the costs down.

All three races are qualifiers for the Iditarod and Yukon Quest.

As organizers ramp up for the Extreme, just a little more than a month away, Gwenn Bogart of Boulder, Wyoming, Clayton Perry of Power, Montana, and Gabe Dunham of Darby, Montana, have signed up for the 200-mile race. Hugo Antonucci of Adin, California, David Hassilev of Priest River, Idaho, Patrick Campbell of Etna, California, Melissa Turner of Herald, California, and April Cox of Adin are running the 100-mile course.

David Sindelar of Fallbrook, California, and Dina Lund of Okanogan, Washington, have entered the two-day, 31-mile course, and Isreal Seeman of Boulder, Wyoming, is registered for the 22-mile junior race.

With 15 years running sled dog races in Wallowa County the organizers have honed the Extreme into a well-oiled machine from the shuttle buses supplied for spectators who

park in a nearby field to the communications team that relies on a variety of technology to keep track of the mushers and communicate results to the judges and the public via the website.

Pridmore-Brown said longtime volunteer Dan Smith is a computer programmer who runs communications from the Ollokot Campground, where mushers check in, layover and have a meal. While a lot of the communications is run through ham radios, Smith has written a program for spot trackers. Data entered into a tracking program goes to the Extreme website, Facebook page and Twitter account to keep spectators apprised of the mushers' times as they cross certain checkpoints.

The steep country isn't just difficult for the sled dog teams, but also for communication, Pridmore-Brown said.

"It's a challenge with the terrain and lack of cell service," she said. "We've tried a lot of different thing — satellite phones don't work. There are several different layers of atmospheric conditions and weather can affect it — we have to have redundancy for communications to work consistently throughout the event."

More than 100 volunteers come together each year to put on the race and throngs of school kids from Union and Wallowa counties show up for the race start at Ferguson Ridge as well as for vet checks in downtown Enterprise and Joseph the day before the event.

The public is invited to the pre-race mushers potluck and the post-race banquet, both held at the Joseph Community Center. For more information on the schedule, mushers and race results visit www.eaglecapextreme.com.

