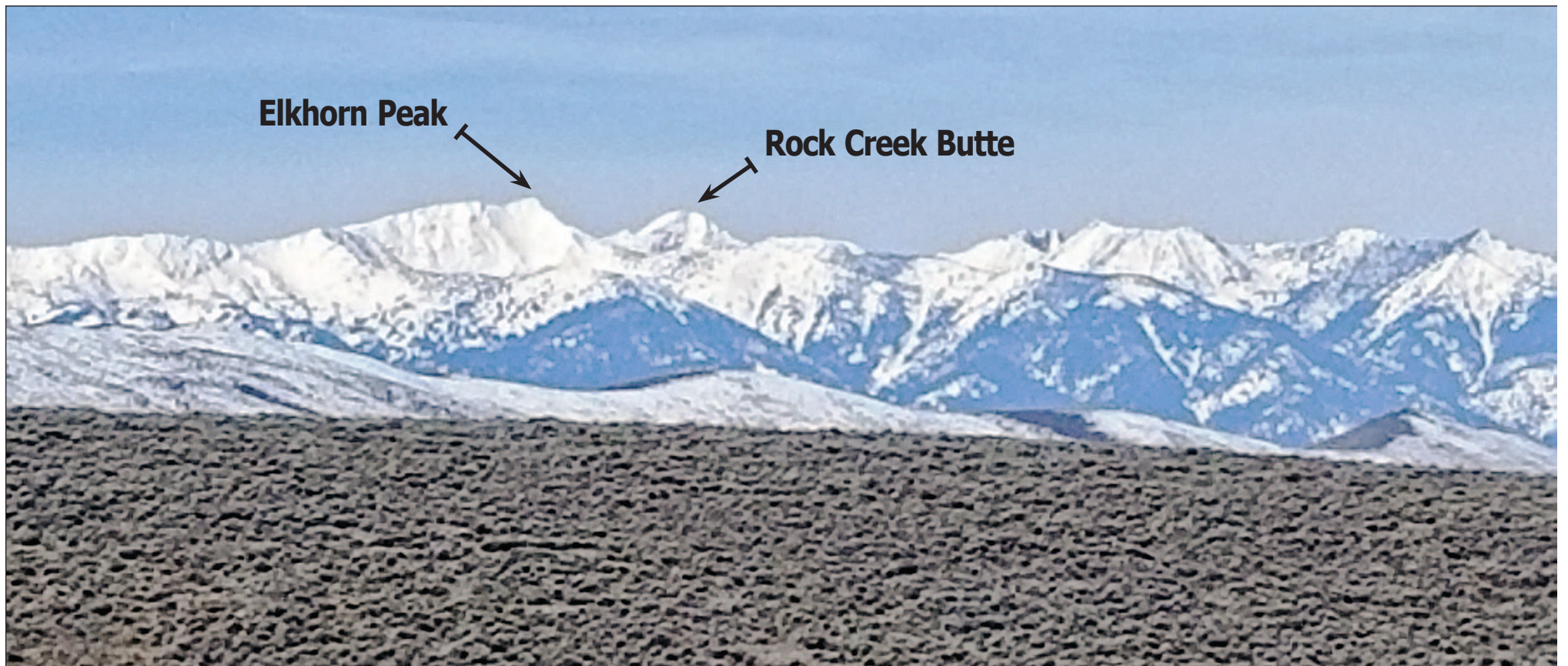


SPRING HIKING IN THE SAGEBRUSH COUNTRY NEAR BAKER CITY



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

The Elkhorn Mountains from the Virtue Flat area east of Baker City. The view includes the highest and second-highest peaks in the range — Rock Creek Butte, 9,106 feet, and Elkhorn Peak, 8,932 feet.

VIRTUOUS VENTURE

The first spring hike is always a revelation.

Even when, as often is the case, it happens during the waning days of winter.

It is a testament to both the length and, frequently, the severity of our winters that when at last I can walk on bare ground I feel refreshed, almost as though the pull of gravity has weakened just a bit.

Of course it matters that I'm getting around without a couple pounds of plastic and aluminum attached to my boots.

I enjoy snowshoeing. But at some point each winter I pine for the simplicity of hiking, of not having to fumble with rubber straps or stop every dozen strides to dislodge from each shoe a sticky clod of sun-softened slush.

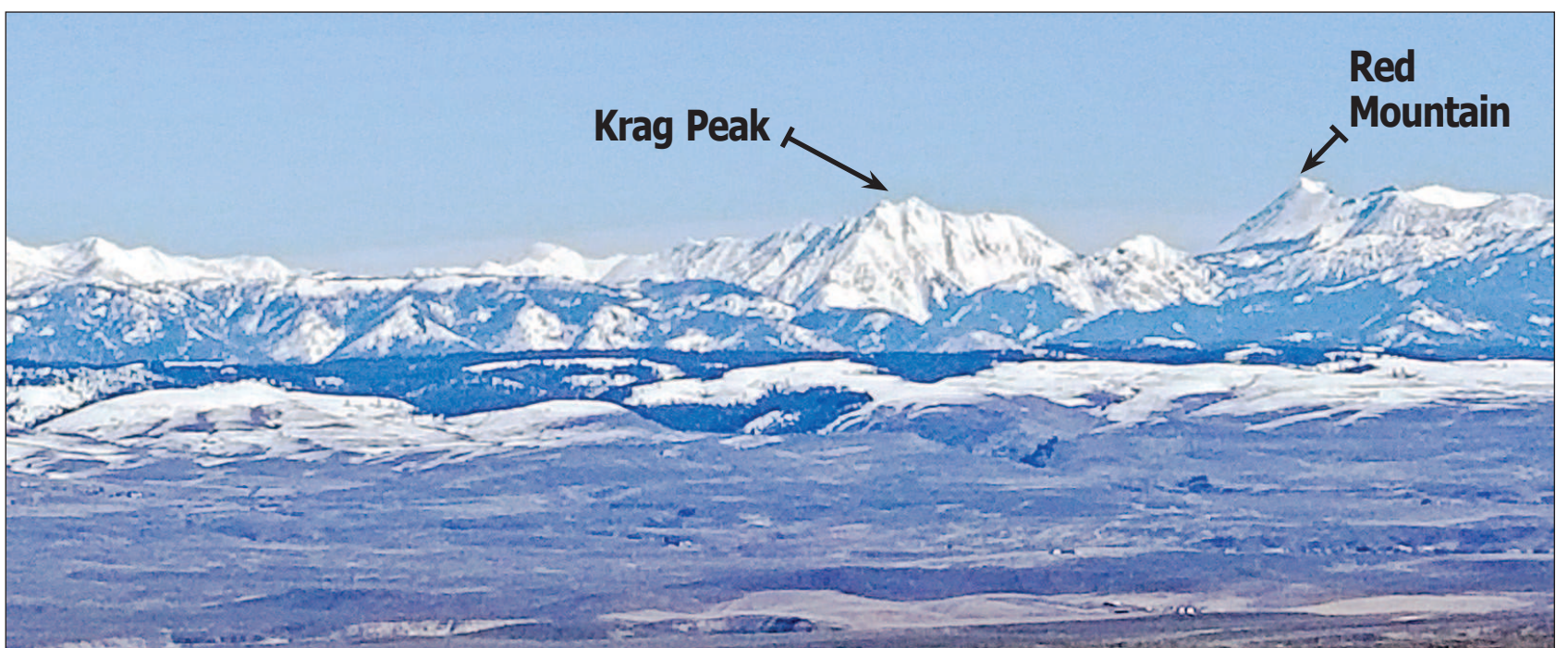
Choosing a spring hiking site can be a ticklish task hereabouts, however.

The immediate successor to snow, of course, is mud.

And mud, as anyone knows who has slogged across a mucky piece of ground from which the frost has recently thawed, is a substance even less suited to human locomotion than soggy snow is.

Mud is more dense, for one thing. A mud-clogged boot can weigh as much as a dumbbell.

Mud is also considerably harder to mop up from the



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

It's called Virtue Flat but the area east of Baker City includes plenty of hills, many of which offer unobstructed views of the Wallowa Mountains, including Red Mountain, at 9,555 feet the tallest point in Baker County.



ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

kitchen than water is.

My favorite early spring — or late winter — hiking spot near Baker City doesn't sound especially inviting based solely on its name.

The Virtue Flat Off-Highway Vehicle Area might seem poorly suited to hiking.

The word "flat" implies a featureless landscape that's about as exciting to walk

across as a desert.

And then there's that "Off-Highway Vehicle" part of the moniker, which suggests hikers

will need to be ready at any time to leap aside to avoid a careening four-wheeler or airborne motorcyclist performing the sorts of stunts that prompt comparisons to Evel Knievel and, potentially, multiple fractures.

But never mind that name.

There is indeed a Virtue Flat nearby, and it is notably lacking in elevation changes.

But the 3,500 or so acres within the OHV area, which is overseen by the BLM, comprise a decidedly unkempt chunk of topography.

Indeed there are just a few places that could reasonably be described as flat.

The area is popular among off-road drivers and riders, to be sure, but it's also open to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians.

And with more than 60 named trails, there is ample space to accommodate all types of users without an inor-

dinate risk of collisions.

I've long gravitated to Virtue Flat because it's usually among the first areas near Baker City where the mud hardens as winter gives way to spring.

But the even greater attraction, in my view, is, well, the views.

There are no imposing peaks to climb but the setting is such that from the top of any of the modest hills you can see mountains — major mountains — in every direction. Spring is the ideal season for taking in the vista, with the peaks particularly comely with their cladding of snow.

The Wallows dominate the northeastern horizon, with China Cap at the extreme left and Cornucopia Peak at the right.

Turn a bit more than 90 degrees to the left and the Elkhorns crowd the skyline.

To the southeast the two Lookout Mountains predominate — Little Lookout a bit closer, and to the northeast of Big Lookout.

As for the hiking, there are, as mentioned, plenty of trails to choose from. The map at left is available online at www.blm.gov/visit/virtue-flat-ohv-area

I prefer the eastern side of the area in part because the views are more expansive, and in part because motor vehicle traffic seems to be less.

The main staging and parking area for OHVs is near the

western edge, just off Ruckles Creek Road.

Although vehicles are required to stay on marked trails, hikers can venture out into the sage.

Beware, though, the occasional mat of prickly pear cactus — a species which both validates its adjectival name and upholds the painful reputation of cacti in general.

Prickly pear patches are most common on rocky south-facing slopes where the sage is scattered or absent.

There is a brief but sometimes spectacular effusion of wildflowers at Virtue Flat — this year's show should be excellent due to the wet winter. Phlox, a low-growing variety with five-petaled flowers in various shades of pink and purple, is widespread, along with desert parsley and its clusters of yellow blossoms, and the pale pink blooms of grass widows.

To get to Virtue Flat, drive east from Baker City on Highway 86 toward the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. Just past the entrance to the Center, which is north of the highway, turn south (right) on gravel Ruckles Creek Road.

The parking area, which includes outhouses, is about 2.5 miles from the highway. The road continues east and then north, forming the boundary of the OHV area, before ending at Highway 86.

