

RECREATION
REPORT

Some state park campgrounds reopen

Several Oregon state park campgrounds reopened Friday and others are slated to resume overnight camping on June 9, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department announced.

Parks that reopened Friday are ones that have first-come, first-served campsites. They include:

- Minam, between La Grande and Wallowa
 - Hilgard Junction west of La Grande
 - Catherine Creek near Union
 - Clyde Holliday near John Day
 - Cottonwood Canyon southeast of The Dalles
- Campgrounds scheduled to reopen on June 9:
- Wallowa Lake
 - Farewell Bend near Huntington
- "I am cautiously delighted," Lisa Sumption, director of the Parks Department, said in a press release. "We are working hard to welcome campers wherever we can safely do so, as soon as we can."

Sumption said that due to lost revenue, COVID-19 precautions and staff reductions, services will be reduced at most if not all campgrounds that reopen. Cabin and yurt camping, except in rare cases, will not be offered. Group camping remains closed across the state, due to distancing concerns.

RV and tent campers with existing reservations for a campground that opens will be honored beginning June 9. For updates check the parks website, stateparks.oregon.gov.

Idaho Power reopens campgrounds

BOISE — Idaho Power Company on Friday reopened several campgrounds in Hells Canyon that had been closed since March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Camping areas now open include dispersed sites on both the Oregon and Idaho sides of lower Brownlee Reservoir, and Hells Canyon, McCormick and Woodhead parks.

Copperfield Campground remains closed because it is close to Idaho Power facilities where power plant employees are most likely to be close to campers, according to a press release from the company.

Brownlee Reservoir is about 4 feet below full. At that level all boat ramps are usable.

The Observer & Baker City Herald

Defining disturbances

■ Volcanic eruptions and wildfires both show the power of nature, and its resilience

High mountains stare at one another across long spaces. Think of how the Wallows and Elkhorns lock eyes over the Baker Valley, how the Wallows in turn gaze across Hells Canyon to the Seven Devils.

Well to our west, the solitary snowpeak stratovolcanoes of the Cascades keep a bead on each other with dozens of miles between. South of the high-standing North Cascades, the intervening range between those white giants tends to be much lower than they themselves are. They've been compared to an archipelago of snowy, alpine islands — or a string of icebergs — in a green sea.

I'm thinking of peak-to-peak sightlines on account of we're just past the 40th anniversary of the great eruption of Mount St. Helens — also known by the indigenous Sahaptin name Loowit — which ravaged its north flank the morning of May 18, 1980. There is no shortage of incredible up-close pictures of that cataclysm, but, for me, some of the most evocative photos are those taken more distantly from Mount Adams and Mount Rainier. You can almost sense these massive snowheads keeping tabs on one another across the millennia, waiting to see which will make the next violent move. These past tens of thousands of years, it's often been Loowit to do so.

The mountain's world-famous 1980 eruption — preceded by a couple of months of quakes and steam explosions, and followed by additional big eruptions that summer and fall — involved volcanic phenomena immortalized by terrifying firsthand accounts and intense scientific analysis.

The triggering 5.1-magnitude earthquake collapsed the volcano's north face in several slide blocks that became a great debris avalanche barreling into Spirit Lake. The fearsome lateral blast — the "stone wind" unleashed by this epic landslide — surging at close to 700 miles per hour northward, obliterating nearby forest, toppling farther timber in the "blowdown" zone, scorching still more trees beyond in the "standing-dead zone." The pyroclastic flows that churned out of the broken crater, and the devastating mudflows (lahars) scouring down the drainages, most catastrophically the North Fork Toutle River. The mind-boggling eruption column that billowed up and out for some nine hours, racked by lightning and littering ashfall over the Columbia Plateau and far east.

(One of the observations from that wild day that's always struck me: the singed conifer twigs dropping out of the sky seen by climbers on both Adams and Rainier — bits of the blasted-away forest.)

The Cascade snowpeaks — Mount St. Helens included — have contributed fertilizing ash to our Northeast Oregon mountainsides, and their



Photo by Ethan Shaw

A view of the "blast zone" north of Mount St. Helens.



THE LAY OF THE LAND

ETHAN SHAW

occasional eruptions remind us of the bygone volcanism that roiled our landscape. But more generally Loowit's big blow and its aftermath hold lessons for us: perspectives on the unfolding of earth-time and what the sudden, wholesale rearranging of a landscape means.

Looking at those remarkable before-and-after pictures of Mount St. Helens is a good trigger for pondering the different, overlapping timeframes at play in our world. The 1980 eruption — its transformation of smooth cone (the "Mount Fuji of America") into ravaged amphitheater, of forest-cradled Spirit Lake into barren, dead-wood-choked basin — seemed to represent a confluence of "geologic time" with "human time." But geologic process is occurring always, all around, at every scale, though typically so slowly and subtly we don't take notice.

Milk Shakes and Table Rock on the Wenaha-Tucan-non horizon from a ridgetop far south, the Elkhorn Crest snow-gleaming above spring-time sagelands: Mountains always seem to be waiting. Biding long eons with the same skyline silhouettes, the same snowfields forming year and after. Of course they are not constant: freeze-thaw cycles are wedging open outcrops, rockfall and landslides and torrents are wearing down those mountain bones, the timberline's moving up and downslope.

Usually this change proceeds at the slow tempo of gnawing water and ice, fracturing roots. But sometimes a mountain's getup changes dramatically in a relative instant. One of the basalt spires atop Twin Peaks in the Wallows partly toppled overnight. Avalanches and landslides open bold scars. And, yes, depending on the mountain, sometimes its whole crown opens up and a stone wind comes roaring out.

To our eyes, an explosive volcanic eruption is the most stunning expression of a mountain's geologic energy. But it's only one embodiment, a dramatic, "realtime" symbol of all the other slower- or



Photo by Ethan Shaw

Wildflowers rapidly return following a wildfire in the Wallowa Mountains.

smaller-acting ones: faulting, glaciation, the weathering of a boulder by lichen, a spill of pebbles here, a few more soil grains formed there.

Scientists have been surprised by both the speed with which revegetation and animal recolonization have occurred within the Mount St. Helens Blast Zone, and by how they've happened. One profound lesson has been the limitations of the language we use to describe an event such as a volcanic eruption and its aftermath. We talk of the eruption's "destruction," and indeed landforms, trees, elk, and human beings were destroyed in it — but the place itself was not. With a long-range view, those "destroyed" forestlands will be resurrected; the elk are already "replaced." A whole part of the volcano vanished, but new landforms have been made: canyons in the Sasquatch Steps below the crater breach, badlands in the North Fork Toutle debris-avalanche deposits.

In the decades since the blowup we've also talked a lot about "recovery," and in a sense that's just as troublesome a word as "destruction." That's because it suggests some kind of baseline state to return to, whereas there's always a little flux involved in the evolution of both ecosystems and terrain, multiple pathways the land can take.

"Recovery" is also tricky because it seems to diminish the legitimacy — the naturalness — of the raw, gray, ham-

mered here-and-now of the Blast Zone. That's as intrinsic a part of the Cascadian landscape as stately evergreen forest, even though, geologically speaking, it's a fleeting feature.

The same is true of a stand-replacing Northeast Oregon wildfire: Blackened trunks and charred ground are also the way a forest looks around here, some of the time. This is beyond the values, good and bad, we humans might apply to a burn. (A lot of folks prefer the way Spirit Lake used to look, but its current guise is just as authentic and natural.)

Think of the clock by which these "disturbances" — as landscape ecologists call volcanic eruptions, severe storms, wildfires, and the like — abide. The Mount St. Helens blast was the culmination of a long priming of magma. The schedule of that magma buildup, the timing of that triggering earthquake, determined when a whole host of trees — some seeded hundreds of years before — would perish. The groundwork for a Blue Mountain wildfire may be laid over decades or centuries of shrubs and saplings crowding a stand. Then there's the lifespan of the thunderstorm that lights the match, the stage set days or weeks before by airmasses getting charged with moisture, large-scale dynamics of temperature and pressure and airflow — then an afternoon's worth of actually boiling up a

thunderhead and aiming just the right lightning bolt over just the right patch of dense, dry woods.

How a fire spreads across the land can be shaped by the pattern of past wildfires, with previously burned acreage often less intensely flammable; long-ago blazes sparked by long-ago storms (or human hands) can thus have a lingering ghostly influence, steering new flame fronts and helping dictate the ecological patchwork.

All of this — the way atmosphere and terrain conspire to light an inferno, or a volcano in one fell swoop lays a whole forest flat and chokes up a river with mud and boulders — speaks to the volatility of this here planet of ours. And also to the bewilderingly complex forces acting together to build — and tear down, and rebuild — any given place on it.

Mount St. Helens — located well to the west of the main Cascade crest — isn't one of those few Cascade snowpeaks we can spot in our longest westerly prospects out here. But you can make a pilgrimage. If you haven't visited the mountain, I highly recommend it: whether you drive to the Johnston Ridge Observatory and take in the big-picture view of the Blast Zone, tramp all the way around on the Loowit Trail, or climb up the south face — sometimes a snow climb, sometimes a dusty slog — to stand at the jagged summit rim.