

EAGLE CAP WILDERNESS AREA

Rescuers aid hurt hiker

By Ellen Morris Bishop
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Heather Pearson knew she was in trouble when she lost her footing and slid off a wet log. Her ankle snapped — maybe it was just sprained, she thought. But she couldn't walk on it.

She was 8 miles up the trail from the Hurricane Creek trailhead. Getting out seemed almost impossible.

Her partner, Caloum Johnson, made her comfortable, and then set off down the trail to summon help. He reached the Hurricane Creek Grange at a little after 6 p.m. on July 3 and called 911.

Although the sheriff alerted search and rescue equine coordinator Holly Akenson quickly, it was too late in the evening to get a mounted search and rescue underway. Johnson returned to stay overnight with Pearson.

Because they had been backpacking, they had a tent, sleeping bags and food.

Johnson had mentioned that there were a number of large trees down across the trail. So Akenson also invited several members of the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association (WMHCTA) to accompany the SAR team and help clear the trail for horses and mules.

A group of nine rescuers started up the Hurricane Creek trail at 6:30 a.m. July 4.

"There were several big avalanches that we had to cross," Akenson said. "And there were places where the snow was pretty deep. We were worried about the safety of horses and mules because you don't really know what's under the snow that they are 'postholing' through."

Getting the horses, mules and people safely up the trail required clearing a path



Ellen Morris Bishop / Wallowa County Chieftain

Search and rescue team members help Heather Pearson along the Hurricane Creek trail on July 4.

through multiple fallen trees, some that Akenson estimated were 20 inches in diameter.

The SAR members carried not only their usual wilderness first-aid supplies, but also a COVID-19 kit that included masks, face shields, gloves and even a protective Tyvek suit.

They reached Pearson at 10:30 a.m. After the team had splinted and wrapped her ankle, Akenson helped her onto a 20-year-old, calm, experienced mule named Bat.

Progress back to the trailhead was slow, with Akenson leading the mule, and the trail crew opening more of the trail.

They reached the trailhead at 6:15 p.m. Johnson had planned to drive Pearson to the hospital for treatment. But, as luck would have it, his car had a flat tire. So a SAR team member took her to the hospital, while others helped change the tire and direct Johnson to Les Schwab.

"We were glad to be able to help, and really happy that the weather was almost perfect," Akenson said.

Pearson, 25, said that she and Johnson, both from Portland, would be back sometime soon to finish their original planned trip.

Mom's Home And Dinner Is Ready



Photo and caption by Jim Ward

A female western bluebird delivers the "leg and thigh meal" to youngsters in the box below. Bluebirds tend to live outside of our cities, in rural areas along uplands and forests. Homeowners would do well to put out nesting boxes for these birds as they can reduce populations of insect pests. Blueprints are readily available online.

MASSIVE

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In any case it seems to me unlikely that the camp would bear that name and not be associated with Ben Harrison, who is the namesake of an abandoned gold mine only a mile or so to the west.

The camp, whatever its etymology, has clearly been used for that purpose for many decades. The fire ring rocks are blackened by the soot of untold numbers of blazes, and the places where tents have been pitched are nearly as flat as what you'd find in a groomed campground. I would like to know how many elk have hung from the trees, the carcasses cooling in the chilly autumn nights at 6,000 feet.

I muttered quite a few invectives at the sniping arthropod pests — some of these epithets quite inventive, if I may be so bold — but they couldn't actually ruin an otherwise quintessential summer morning in the mountains with its brilliant light and the scent of conifers heavy on the air.

Lisa and I hiked this route about a decade ago and although I had a vague recollection of the general scene I was surprised, and delighted, by how many massive tamaracks and ponderosa pines we passed.

Some of the tamaracks had such girths that I suspect all four of us would have had to link hands to encircle the trunk.

(We ought to have tried this, but the experiment didn't occur to me until later: Lisa did take photographs of Max and Olivia standing in front of one tamarack, to lend scale to the ancient tree.)

As we hiked, I mentioned to Lisa that although the forest seemed primeval, as a federal wilderness — an area off limits to logging and motor vehicles and bicycles, among other things — the North Fork John Day is barely beyond its adolescence.

I recalled that the North Fork, at 121,400 acres, was the biggest chunk of wilderness included in the 1984 Oregon Wilderness Bill in Congress.

That legislation was the largest addition of wilderness ever in the state, a total of 859,000 acres that included several new areas, including the North Fork John Day, as well as expansions of existing wilderness areas, including the Eagle Cap, which added 66,500 acres, and the Hells Canyon, which grew by 22,700 acres.

What I didn't know then is that we were hiking just one day after the 36th birthday of the North Fork John Day Wilderness.

President Ronald Reagan signed the Oregon Wilderness Bill on June 26, 1984.

Coincidental timing aside, I was reminded, as we walked past those soaring tamaracks and ponderosas, that although a popular conception of a wilderness area is an alpine setting where precipitous peaks and glaciers and glittering tarns are the dominant features, and the trees, if any are present, are of the stunted variety common



Lisa Britton / For the EO Media Group

A columbine blooming along Clear Creek in the North Fork John Day Wilderness Area.

to high altitudes, this is not always so.

Indeed, the defining characteristic of the North Fork John Day Wilderness is neither rock nor ice, but rather its dense forests.

That's particularly true of two of the three units that comprise the wilderness — the largest, covering about 86,000 acres, including a long reach of its namesake river; and the 14,000-acre Greenhorn unit that includes Clear Creek, the site of our hike on June 27.

Neither unit has any imposing peaks such as those that distinguish the Eagle Cap Wilderness, although Vinegar Hill, the apex of the Greenhorn Mountains, at 8,131 feet, is just outside the wilderness boundary and about 2 miles south of Ben Camp.

(The North Fork's third unit, the upper or Baldy unit, does include a portion of the granitic crest of the Elkhorn Mountains west of Baker City.)

But each of the two other units has swathes of timber, including some of the more impressive groves of old growth trees in Eastern Oregon.

Lacking both a core sampler and the ability to use one, I can only guess at the age of the thickest of the tamaracks (tamarack being a colloquialism for what botanists call the western larch tree).

But I suspect some might well have been seedlings when the Declaration of Independence was signed.

A book I consider essential reading for anyone intrigued by the flora of Northeast Oregon — "Alpine and Subalpine Vegetation of the Wallowa, Seven Devils and Blue Mountains," by the late Charles Grier Johnson Jr., a longtime Forest Service ecologist — notes that the biggest tamarack found in Oregon grows on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. That tree stands 103 feet high and has a circumference of 269 inches.

I briefly lamented that we weren't hiking in the fall. The tamarack, alone among our local conifers, sheds its needles as though it forgets every year that it is not a maple or an ash. But before the needles flutter down they turn a brilliant yellow-orange, a memorable sight, and one of great beauty.

There is, of course, another advantage to autumn hiking.

The mosquitoes are dead.

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