

GROWING UP IN THE FOREST

■ A new generation of trees is rising in the North Fork John Day Wilderness, where a blaze burned in August 1996

As we hiked through the young forest I was pondering the fiery fate of the old forest.

I remembered the days when a smoke plume towered over the Elkhorns, nearly as tall as a thunderhead, the afternoons acrid and the setting sun as red as arterial blood. It was hot the day we walked the Peavy Trail, in the valley of the North Fork of the John Day River southwest of Anthony Lakes.

July 11 was in fact the hottest day so far in 2020. The temperature topped out at 101 at the Baker City Airport.

It was on much the same sort of day, just shy of 24 years earlier, that the old forest began what was in effect a cremation, one that would extend over the better part of a week.

On Aug. 8, 1996, a blaze which had been relatively placid since it was sparked by lightning 9 days earlier began to feed on the combination of heat, kiln-like humidity and a gusty northwest wind as though it were a Saturn 5 guzzling rocket fuel.

The Sloans Ridge fire incinerated almost every tree on about 1,500 acres that day, when the temperature hit 96 at the Baker City Airport.

Two days after that it was 104 degrees.

And the fire continued to surge south, reaching the North Fork's headwaters in the seeps and springs below the granitic crest of the Elkhorns where both the John Day and the Powder rivers begin.

The blaze had blackened 4,200 acres of forest by the evening of Aug. 11.

And 9,000 acres by Aug. 12.

Before heavy rain on Aug. 13 and 14 helped firefighters subdue the Sloans Ridge fire, it had spread across about 10,500 acres.

The fire generated about

as much controversy as it did smoke.

Officials from the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest acknowledged that fire crews almost certainly could have doused the blaze soon after the lightning bolt ignited it.

But Bob Richmond, then the Wallowa-Whitman's supervisor, heeded the advice of the forest's fire managers and decided instead to let the blaze burn.

The goal — and it's one the Wallowa-Whitman continues to pursue in the Eagle Cap Wilderness — was to allow naturally sparked fires to play their historic role in wilderness areas.

The Sloans Ridge fire started in the 13,700-acre Baldy unit of the North Fork John Day Wilderness, designated by Congress in 1984.

Wallowa-Whitman officials conceded that letting fires burn is risky — particularly during midsummer and in an area such as the North Fork valley, where a pine beetle epidemic in the 1970s killed many of the lodgepole pines that grew thickly along the river.

The blaze grew much faster than officials expected, or hoped, that it would.

On Aug. 8, the day the fire became an inferno, Richmond declared Sloans Ridge a wildfire and summoned hundreds of firefighters and a fleet of air tankers and helicopters.

But this army couldn't prevent the flames from spreading across most of the Baldy unit.

The fire also burned about 140 acres of private property.

That prompted a \$1.4 million lawsuit that the Forest Service settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

Revisiting The Sloans Ridge Fire 24 Years Later



Lisa Britton/For the EO Media Group

The Peavy Trail, in the North Fork John Day Wilderness southwest of Anthony Lakes, runs through the area burned in the Sloans Ridge fire in August 1996. The lightning-sparked blaze killed most of the trees around the headwaters of the North Fork John Day River, but a new crop of trees has become well established amid the skeletons of the previous forest.

I've hiked parts of the Peavy Trail a few times since 1996, usually accompanying Wallowa-Whitman employees who were there to study the aftermath.

The 4-mile trail, which connects to the Elkhorn Crest National Recreation Trail at Cracker Saddle, basically bisects the burn zone.

I learned a great deal during those hikes about how fire has affected the forests of the Elkhorns over many millennia. Two Forest Service ecologists — Dave Swanson and Charlie Johnson, who died in 2007 — explained that the Sloans Ridge fire, though it besmirched the agency's reputation, was a "natural" event in that it almost certainly mimicked many previous fires in that valley.

The ecologists told me that the forest that carpeted the upper North Fork in 1996, a dense mixture of lodgepole, tamarack, subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce, along with thickets of whitebark pine at the higher elevations, is the type of forest that, due to its elevation and heavy winter snowpack that combine to keep the ground moist, doesn't burn often.

Lightning might spark an occasional blaze, they said, but the vast majority of those fizzled before they covered more than a couple acres.

Also, for most of the 20th century the Forest Service had endeavored to squelch those blazes as quickly as possible, a campaign memorialized by the now-defunct "10 a.m. rule."

The idea was to try to control every fire by 10 a.m. the day after it was reported.

But rarely — the interval likely ranging between about 75 and 300 years — a certain combustible combination would coalesce.

Lightning would supply the spark.

Summer's dry heat and a desiccating wind would invigorate the normally placid flames.

Another natural and periodic event, such as the tree-killing pine beetle infestation of the 1970s, would further prime the forest for a great burning.

Foresters call this a "stand-replacing" fire, meaning one that effectively erases the existing forest and makes way for a new one.

That's essentially what happened starting on Aug. 8, 1996, Johnson and Swanson told me.

The sequence, from crucible to the cool green of rejuvenation, is predictable, the ecologists said.

I first saw the fire's aftermath in the fall of 1996.

Probably the seeds of the revival, of wildflowers and conifers and grasses, had already been sown. But to me, ignorant of ecological matters, it looked like a wasteland.

The first autumn storm had drenched the Elkhorns recently and the North Fork, normally a crystal-clear sanctuary for some of Oregon's healthier salmon and steelhead runs, looked like the chocolate river in Willy Wonka's factory where Augustus Gloop came to a bad end.

The trees had yet to shed their scorched black bark, making for a scene dramatically different from the familiar soft forest green.

I went back to the wilderness in August 1997, the first anniversary of the week the blaze exploded.

I followed Johnson, our boots creating a brief black cloud of soot with every step, between each of the 10 areas he had designated just after

the fire as "test plots."

He had returned a year later to study each plot and see how much vegetation, and what sorts of plants, had begun to colonize the scorched earth.

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If You Go...

From the parking lot at Anthony Lakes Ski Area, drive west on the two-lane, paved Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway, Forest Road 73, for about 11 miles. Turn left at a sign for Peavy Trail and Cunningham Cove Trail.

Follow the gravel road, Forest Road 380, for about 3.5 miles to its end at the Peavy Trailhead, just beyond Peavy Cabin. There is no fee to park at the trailhead.

(The rustic log cabin, built in 1934 and named for George Wilcox Peavy, a forestry professor at Oregon State University, is public property managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The cabin can be rented through Oct. 31, for \$54 per night, although it has already been reserved on most nights through August. More information at recreation.gov.)

The trail immediately enters the North Fork John Day Wilderness. Motorized vehicles and mountain bikes aren't allowed. The trail is relatively flat for the first 2 miles as it follows the North Fork John Day River upstream. The trail crosses about a dozen streams or boggy stretches. Logs make it possible to get through most of these sections with (relatively) dry feet — it's not a trail suited for sneakers or flipflops.

At the 2-mile mark the trail veers left, heading up the steep slope toward the crest of the Elkhorns at Cracker Saddle. A sign marks this junction.

(The route that continues along the river is an abandoned road that leads to private patented mining claims.)

The final 2 miles of the Peavy Trail are difficult, and for multiple reasons. Most of the trail's 1,800 feet of elevation gain is crammed into this section, and in common with most trails in the Elkhorns, the grade is not eased by the switchbacks that make trail climbs in the Eagle Cap Wilderness so much gentler, albeit longer.

The other challenge is simply staying on the trail, especially the final mile or so.

The trail crosses an area where the Sloans Ridge fire killed every mature tree, leaving a labyrinth of logs bleached grayish-white by the sun of 24 alpine summers.

A series of rock cairns, and in some cases a single rock set atop a log that's been cut by a trail crew, marks the way, but in the bewildering maze of logs, some of them 3 feet through the middle, it might be a challenge to stay on the official route. If you do go astray, the last stretch of trail below Cracker Saddle is visible if you look up the slope to the southeast.

Cracker Saddle is a major wilderness crossroads, and an access point for the Elkhorn Crest National Recreation Trail. To the left (north) the Crest Trail heads toward Lost Lake, Dutch Flat Saddle and, 10 miles away, the trail's northern terminus near Anthony Lake. If you continue straight (downhill), you'll reach, in several hundred yards, the rough road that climbs along Cracker Creek from Bourne. Options here include continuing south on the Crest Trail toward Rock Creek Butte, Twin Lakes and the southern end of the trail, 14 miles away at Marble Creek Pass, a 2-mile route to Summit Lake that branches off the Crest Trail, or roads/trails that lead to Lost Lake and the North Powder River, one of the major canyons on the east side of the Elkhorns.

Lisa Britton/For the EO Media Group

The view northwest across the valley of the North Fork of the John Day River from near Cracker Saddle. Sloans Ridge is in the center. Although the August 1996 Sloans Ridge fire killed most of the trees in the valley, scattered clumps, including the subalpine firs and whitebark pines in this photo, survived.

