

Spring Hiking In The Sage Country East Of Baker City



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Looking northeast down the west fork of Ritter Creek and across Keating Valley to the Wallows.

BUGS AND BUTTERCUPS

The buttercup and the tick are cousins.

Not literally, of course.

A wildflower and an arachnid stand about as far apart, on the spectrum of living things, as, say, the salamander and the Sitka spruce.

Nor is taxonomy the only area in which this pair makes for an odd couple.

Buttercups are beloved. Their glossy yellow blossoms, beaming from the scant shelter of a sagebrush, herald spring's arrival as surely as the frigid north wind and The Masters golf tournament (almost always, anyway, with the latter bellwether; we'll give Augusta a mulligan for 2020).

Ticks, by contrast, are despised. In common with most sorts of bloodsucking organisms — leeches, vampires, head lice — ticks provoke in many people a deep revulsion, a loathing that overrides their normal attitudes.

My 10-year-old son Max, for instance, hates to see almost anything suffer, including insects and other “lesser” creatures. Max was disgusted with me when I accidentally hit a small bird while we were driving, and he was not persuaded by my argument — compelling though I believe it was — that it was purely an accident and besides, our sedan isn't nearly so nimble as a bird in flight.

Yet when Max found a tick on his neck the other day — still crawling, not embedded — he exhorted me to take it outside and burn it, as I had done one other time. Flushing the bug down the toilet



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

was not sufficiently harsh, by Max's way of thinking.

The tick had hitched a ride on Max earlier in the day while we were hiking in the sagelands east of Baker City.

I picked the place not only because it's just a 20-minute drive from our home, but because I was pretty sure we would see some new buttercups.

Which we did. Along with clumps of another yellow denizen of dry places, the desert parsley.

This intersection of the buttercup and the tick, the potential to both revel in nature's beauty and to be infested with vermin, is only one of the tradeoffs inherent to early spring hiking in our elevated corner of Oregon.

There is the matter of mud.

The gumbo common to the sage steppe is a particularly foul concoction, a viscous stew of soil and gravel that can thwart even knobby off-road tires and cling to boots with a disturbing tenacity. In the worst conditions, one stride can saddle each boot with a pound or so of slippery muck.

Desert roads are most prone to turning into quagmires when the frost is going out of the ground, usually sometime in March depending on elevation and slope aspect. I've been turned back, by roads the approximate consistency of half-congealed oatmeal, on many otherwise fine spring days.



Lisa Britton/For the Baker City Herald

Sure signs of spring: buttercups (left) and desert parsley.

Which are themselves relatively rare.

That chilly north wind I mentioned earlier is another occasional spring irritant — especially to eyes, like mine, burdened by rigid contact lenses.

It's nefarious, that wind.

The most blustery days, perversely, also tend to be the sunny days that entice us outdoors after the long months of ice and snow.

This meteorological phenomenon results from the passage of cold fronts, a seasonal

fixture hereabouts. Skies tend to clear in the front's wake. But as the low atmospheric pressure slinks southeast into Idaho and Utah, hauling off the clouds and precipitation, the wind — which is just air moving from high pressure toward low — freshens.

Yet for all the potential impediments — bugs and mud and gusts — the allure of snow-free ground is powerful.

The area east of Baker City beckons for reasons other than buttercups.

Few places put our great

mountain ranges — the Wallows and the Elkhorns — in a more fetching perspective. The topography is relatively gentle, but even the modest knolls have the sort of vista that real estate developers covet.

Fortunately there's little chance that these minor summits will ever be capped by mansions — a godly portion of the ground is publicly owned.

Our destination on the day of Max's tick encounter is between Virtue Flat and Love Reservoir, about a dozen miles

east of Baker City.

From Interstate 84 at Exit 302, drive east on Highway 86, toward Richland, Halfway and Hells Canyon, for about 5 miles. Just beyond the turnoff to the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (north), turn right (south) onto Ruckles Creek Loop, a well-maintained gravel road.

Drive east for about 6.7 miles. For much of the distance the Bureau of Land Management's Virtue Flat Off-Highway Vehicle Area borders the road on its left side. Just beyond a ranch with a distinctive horse corral made of old tires, turn right onto Love Reservoir Road, marked by a small white sign (distinguished from the more official, and larger, green sign for Ruckles Creek Loop).

Love Reservoir Road is rougher, with ankle-deep ruts in places that betray its sometimes muddy condition. This is a road to avoid when it's not dry.

Follow the road about 2.9 miles. Just before the road drops into a canyon, a narrow track bears off to the right, toward the ridge that forms the divide between the Powder and Burnt River drainages. The Oregon Trail crossed this ridge a mile or so farther west.

We hiked this road, which climbs very gently, for about a mile and a half, to a locked gate at the fence that marks the boundary between public and private land. The creek just to the east is a fork of Ritter Creek.

For a better view, climb the unnamed butte that rises west of the road and is also publicly owned.

A scratched airplane flight prompts column about air guns

I got up on a recent morning at 4 o'clock, ran to the airport and jumped on a plane heading to the inaugural Shooting Sports Showcase in Alabama. We boarded and it quickly became apparent that something was wrong. An hour and a half later they deboarded



BASE CAMP

TOM CLAYCOMB

The plan was to meet Fred Rielhl, a good buddy of mine and the publisher of AmmolandShootingSportsNews, in Atlanta. From there we'd run over to Alabama a

and herded us into a long line for rebooking. Five hours later I'm back home where I started.

day early. There's a park where you can shoot howitzer cannons and drive tanks. Scratch that item from the agenda.

Oh well, I got to go home and be with Katy one more day. I was going to write my article for the next week on the four-hour flight so I'll also get that done while at home. I sat down to plan what topic to cover and suddenly it hit me. I've never written

a series of air gun articles for the papers! Wow, how did I let that one slip by me? I'm big time into air guns. I've tested air guns for a lot of the major air gun companies, been on Prostaff with one of the major ones, hunted big game with the big Umarex .50 cal. Hammer, etc. etc. So I'd like to encourage you to check out some of the modern air guns.

I won't be able to do air guns

justice in one small article so I'm going to do a two-part or maybe even a four-part series to pique your interest. (That is unless some other hot topic pops up in the meantime, like whistle pigs attacking school kids at their bus stop, in which case I'll have to do my civic duty and write about that).

See **Air Guns**/Page 6B