



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

This image, taken from a drone on June 19, 2021, shows Twin Lakes and, at right, Rock Creek Butte.

Scrambling to the top of Elkhorn Peak west of Baker City



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

I wedged my right hand into a crevice in the sedimentary stone and hauled myself up the final few feet to the summit of the great peak.

And there I dropped to my knees.

But not in triumph or elation. This was vertigo.

Several years had passed since I last stood atop Elkhorn Peak, and it seems I had forgotten how exposed this aerie is.

My knees had forgotten, anyway. They refused to be still and support my weight as they're supposed to.

My wife, Lisa, and our son, Max, clambered up the last pitch behind me.

Max, who's 10 and was making his first visit to this second-highest point in the Elkhorn Mountains west of Baker City, reacted much as I did when he saw the void off the east side of the peak.

He hunkered down beside the conical rock cairn that adds a few feet to the mountain's official elevation of 8,931 feet.

I fall, so to speak, around the middle on the acrophobia scale, and I regained my equilibrium in a couple minutes.

And then promptly went all woozy again when I launched our drone.

Many people, of course, can feel a trifle dizzy when they are

standing on an exposed perch and then look up.

I'm prone to the condition myself.

But adding a small flying object to the scene accentuated the effect to an extent that surprised me. It was as if my subconscious insisted that I wasn't standing on solid rock but was instead up there with the drone.

It was disconcerting. I had to return to a kneeling position for the rest of the brief flight, which at least yielded a compelling piece of video and several photographs from vantage points otherwise inaccessible.

Although Elkhorn Peak falls 175 short of Rock Creek Butte, its neighbor across Twin Lakes basin, as the apex of the Elkhorns, the former summit has an unsurpassed view.

From most places in Baker City, Elkhorn Peak is the highest point visible in the range. Its bulk hides Rock Creek Butte, which is a bit west of Elkhorn Ridge, the spine of high ground that dominates the western horizon from town.

Among the significant summits in the area, Elkhorn Peak is comparatively easy to reach.

Depending on how you go, the drive to the trailhead might be the most punishing, and possibly the slowest, part of the trip.

The least taxing option, and the one we chose on June 19, is by way of Marble Creek Pass and the Elkhorn Crest National Recreation Trail.

There are two routes to the pass, one from the Baker Valley side, the

other from Sumpter Valley. The road is steep and rocky on both sides, but the Sumpter Valley route is marginally less awful.

The Elkhorn Crest Trail, by contrast, is a pleasure.

Few if any trails in Oregon reward hikers with such grand vistas for so little physical effort. The trail, as its name suggests, follows the crest of the Elkhorns. And although it's not quite flat, the grade is so gentle as to be all but imperceptible.

Marble Creek Pass is the southern terminus of the trail, which runs north for 23 miles to Anthony Lakes.

The trail stays on the west side of Elkhorn Ridge for the first three miles, so the most expansive view is in that direction. A blue finger of drought-depleted Phillips Reservoir is visible due south, and all major peaks and ranges in the southern Blue Mountains are arrayed, including Table Rock and Monu-



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A whitebark pine snag along the Elkhorn Crest Trail on June 19, 2021.

ment Peak, Strawberry Mountain, Dixie Butte, Vinegar Hill and the rest of the Greenhorn Range, Desolation Butte and, nearer than any others, Mount Ireland.

But the trail also veers into a couple of notches in the crest, and from there the view of Baker City and Baker Valley is reminiscent of what you might see from an airplane.

The Willows dominate the northeast skyline, and due east the view extends well into Idaho.

The Elkhorn Crest Trail runs through a quintessential alpine landscape, the slopes brightened by a palette-spanning selection of wildflowers, including purple lupine and penstemon, orange Indian paintbrush, white phlox and blue flax.

Just two conifers grow in this harsh country, where snow lies for more than half the year and the wind is nearly constant — subalpine fir and whitebark pine.

The latter species is my favorite.

Whitebarks rarely exceed 40 feet in height — those incessant gusts discourage tall vegetation — but they can live for many centuries, and over those vast spans their trunks can grow thicker than an elephant's leg.

Whitebarks are if anything more attractive in death than in life — their limbs contorted into fanciful shapes, the wood weathered to a sheen that can look as though it had been sanded and polished by a skilled hand.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A snowdrift fills a notch in the Elkhorn Ridge, with Goodrich Lake about 2,000 feet below, on June 19, 2021.

'Nemefish': The species that long eluded me



LUKE OVGARD
CAUGHT OVGARD

DOWNEY, Calif.—Dojo loach.

Amur weatherfish.

Pond loach.

Oriental weatherfish.

Japanese weatherfish.

Luke's nemefish.

Misgurnus anguillicaudatus, a resilient, eel-like fish goes by many names. The latter is just what I call them. Well, called them until this month.

Native to east Asia, the fish has been introduced all over the world by aquarists desiring to send it "back to nature" after deciding it's not the pet for them. As these fish can survive in heavily polluted waters, a wide array of temperatures and even barely oxygenated puddles until the next rain, they've taken a foothold — fin-hold? — almost everywhere they've been released. The name "weatherfish" allegedly comes from the fish's increased feeding activity before storms, though I wouldn't know because prior to this month, I'd never seen one in the wild.

They're supposed to exist all over the place, and I've investigated almost a dozen locations purported to have populations from marshlands of Astoria to sloughs of Portland to agricultural ditches in Ontario. The one thing all of these locations have in common? I couldn't find weatherfish.

Last year, I expanded my search beyond Oregon and tried a pond outside of Salt Lake City where a friend had videotaped several of them feeding during the day. Nope. I tried a ditch in Florida purported to have them. Nada. I even checked the Weather app on my phone. Nothing. So, just as I've done with dating during the pandemic, I resigned myself to failure and hoped I'd get another shot sometime before I began to lose my hair.

Enter Peter Chang.

Peter

I met Peter in the old-fashioned way: when he shouted my name from a passing car as I walked down the side of a Californian road.

"Luke?"

"Luke!"

"Luke Ovgard!?"

The shock of someone five hours from home in a car I didn't recognize shouting my name as I skirted the edge of a boujee Californian waterfront would've killed someone with a weaker heart. Fortunately, repeated heartbreak has made the beating scar tissue in my chest resilient.

Unsure who the guy (or the three others in his car) were, I followed him to the nearby parking lot. It was broad daylight, and there were people everywhere, so I figured at least there would be witnesses to my murder.

Out of the car popped some guy I'd never seen before in my life.

In the passenger seat, a woman (I'd later learn this was his wife, Julie), seemed a bit embarrassed and kept apologizing profusely. Figuring this wasn't the typical behavior of a Bonnie and Clyde-type duo on a murderous rampage, I went up.

He introduced himself as Peter Chang, and told me he'd started reading my blog and then my column years before when he first got into fishing. I was floored.

It's not uncommon for me to get recognized in my hometown by people I've never met who read my column, but I've been writing there for seven years. This seemed almost unreal.

I'm horrible with names but



Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo

After years and years of hunting for them, Peter Chang helped Luke Ovgard find and catch his "nemefish."

great with faces. Here, I was drawing a blank.

He told me as I tried not to visibly sigh in relief, "You wouldn't know me, but I'm a fan of your writing!"

I was humbled to rare speechlessness for a moment.

We talked for a few minutes, grabbed a picture together, and we parted ways.

I followed him on Instagram that day, and a few months later, I saw he'd caught my nemefish ...

Shame

As I planned this year's summer trip, I arranged to meet up with Peter and try for these weatherfish on one of my first days on the road. We planned to visit a spot our mutual acquaintance, Ben Cantrell, had discovered. Peter and Julie graciously invited me to stay with them.

Peter and I met up in the early evening and walked to a remote creek on the outskirts of Los Angeles. After catching my first arroyo chub, another fish I'd tried and failed to catch a few times, I finally hooked my weatherfish — and promptly dropped it.

It's OK because I caught another one. And dropped it.

This repeated, comically, for at least half an hour. I lifted no fewer than eight Oriental weatherfish/dojo loach/Luke's nemefish out of the water but failed to get one in hand for a picture. I touched several, even got one on land before seeing its snake-like movements propel it from the muddy shoreline into the stream and out of my life forever.

Peter was remarkably helpful, spotting the abundant fish for me and stifling most of his laughs as I dropped fish after fish.

Daylight faded with my patience, and he informed me we had about 15 minutes left before we had to move the cars out of the park.

In the wan light, I hooked my ninth? Tenth? Eleventh fish? I landed it, walked an unnecessary distance from the water and snapped a quick picture as Peter looked on approvingly.

I owed him so much; I could barely contain my joy. He helped me close a long, embarrassing chapter of failure in my fishing career, but the good news is that I was experimenting with my GoPro that night, so I immortalized 20 or 30 minutes of that repeated failure on film for future generations.

Though I hadn't released the video, I'm pretty sure his adorable infant daughter, Hailey, must've heard about my failings because she seemed pretty uncertain about me when I met her the next morning. Eventually, I won her over the same way I won over the weatherfish: with Peter's help. Grapes admittedly helped, too.

After years of repeated failure, Peter helped me solve that problem. So the next step, it would seem, is to have Peter take a look at my online dating profiles, right?

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