



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Elephant Rock is on a steep slope above the Umatilla River at the southeast boundary of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Below, alder leaves cast reflection in a deep pool on the Umatilla River.



DENNIS DAUBLE
THE NATURAL WORLD

A unique basalt formation known as Elephant Rock stands sentry over the Umatilla River canyon 30 miles east of Pendleton. The geologic landmark is most easily viewed when you travel upstream on River Road. A nearby road sign, trimmed in red and showcasing half a dozen bullet holes, serves as a boundary marker for those not familiar with local lore: “Welcome to the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Home of the Cayuse-Walla Walla-Umatilla.”

The three-horse logo — paint, black and appaloosa — remind of the once-great wealth of the three area tribes whose homelands covered over 6,200 square miles, stretching from the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers east to the Grande Ronde Valley, and as far west as The Dalles, where they traded with the “salmon eaters.”

The story behind Elephant Rock connects closely to members of the Cayuse tribe who, known for their fierce nature and expert horsemanship, roamed the hills and valleys of the Blue Mountains. Early fur traders called them “Cailloux,” meaning “People of the Stones or Rocks.”

The nearby remains of three true elephant species, including the extinct *Elephas columbi* (a formidable specimen that stood 11 feet tall at the shoulder), reinforce how historical narrative often converges with the archeological record.

As recounted by tribal elders, Elephant Rock marks the location where a young elephant was turned to stone after his curiosity got the best of him and he disobeyed instructions given by the trickster Coyote to “not look back.”

Recent rainfall brought welcome relief to the nearby foothills and raised the voice of running water where the spent carcasses



of chinook salmon decay in shallow riffles. Their ocean-derived nutrients are part of the circle of life for aquatic creatures and terrestrial wildlife that prowl the river corridor.

Autumn also signals the arrival of mountain whitefish in schools of a dozen or more. They can be taken from deep pools on a No. 18 Beadhead Chironomid drifted deep or with a live stonefly nymph hooked through the collar, although the latter method is considered cheating in some social circles.

When maple trees drop their last leaf and heirloom apples ripe for picking drop to the ground, our cabin’s well pump is turned off. Water must be hauled for washing up and to flush the toilet. “Plan your activities and your diet accordingly,” I remind visitors. But it’s only 50 yards to the river, and I’ve yet to fill more than a dozen plastic milk jugs over a long weekend.

Reading through passages from old journals, I’m reminded that I am alone in

carrying on a fall fishing tradition that’s four decades long and counting. There’s no hurry to get on the stream, though. Angling opportunity is best during brief periods when sunlight penetrates the leafy stream canopy and dark-hued trout can be seen rising from the shadows.

Dew hangs heavy on bracken fern when I hike up the North Fork Umatilla Wilderness trail.

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Sampling the Strawberry Wilderness



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

Strawberry Mountain isn’t the tallest peak in Eastern Oregon but it looks as though it ought to be.

Few summits in the region dominate the surrounding topography as thoroughly as Strawberry Mountain.

Its eminence exceeds its elevation.

Which is not to say that Strawberry is a middling mountain.

Its apex of 9,038 feet (or 9,042, or 9,055, depending on which map you consult) falls short of more than a dozen summits in the Wallawas.

And Rock Creek Butte in the Elkhorns west of Baker City has a slight edge, at 9,106 feet.

But between the Elkhorns and Steens Mountain — a span of about 150 miles — no pinnacle reaches higher than Strawberry Mountain’s.

This massive pile of andesite — a volcanic rock that has more silica than its

IF YOU GO

Drive Highway 26 to Prairie City. Turn south onto S. Main Street, crossing the John Day River and passing the Sumpter Valley Railway Depot and Dewitt Museum on the left. At an intersection, turn left on SW Bridge Street, and, in a short distance, turn right on S. Bridge Street, at a sign for Strawberry Campground, 11 miles away. Continue south on the paved County Road 60, which turns to gravel after a few miles. The road is well-maintained for all but the last mile or so, when it becomes steeper and rougher. The road ends at Strawberry Camp, which is also the trailhead for Strawberry Basin Trail. There is no fee to park, and no permits are required for hiking in the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

eruptive cousin, basalt, but less than another, rhyolite — commands the terrain of eastern Grant County in a way few other peaks in the area can replicate.

In no spot, perhaps, is Strawberry Mountain more impressive than from Prairie City, where its bulk nearly fills the southern skyline.

My favorite vantage point, though, is a short section of Highway 26 just west of Dixie Pass.



Mark Morical/The (Bend) Bulletin, File

Strawberry Mountain is the tallest peak in Eastern Oregon between the Elkhorns near Baker City, and Steens Mountain.

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