

Dunes outside the desert

Wind sculpts snow into fanciful features — and slashes at exposed skin



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

I felt almost as though I were struggling through the sands of the Sahara, my lungs and legs straining against the implacable, shifting surface.

But the illusion wouldn't hold.

The "sand" was the wrong color.

And the wrong temperature.

It was white and it was cold — adjectives not typically associated with the great African desert.

The wind, at least, was appropriate to my Saharan daydream in one sense. Some of the gusts were strong enough to make me pause in mid-stride, halted by the invisible but formidable wall of air molecules.

But the wind was also too cold.

People plodding across the Sahara are supposed to swelter in the terrible heat, their lives trickling away in beads of sweat, their final moments plagued by visions of pools of cool water that don't exist outside their fevered minds.

I was shivering, not sweltering.

But the scenery all around, at my feet and extending clear to the horizon, was so stunning, on the sunny first day of 2022, that it softened the palpable blow from the frigid gale.

Slightly softened.

A few times, when our snowshoeing route along the Skyline Road, near Dooley Mountain Summit south of Baker City, put me (and worse, my cheeks) pointing directly at the wind, it slashed across my skin, painful as I expect a scalpel wound might be.

(This is supposition on my part, as I've managed to largely avoid encoun-

ters with scalpels. I'm sure, though, that the wind-borne agony is much more brief. And no stitches or scarring.)

My wife, Lisa, and I return at least one time most winters to snowshoe along this spine of high ground that separates the Powder River to the north, to the Burnt River country to the south.

This is best done on a clear day.

(Although perhaps not one quite so cold as the first day of 2022; the thermometer on our Toyota showed 12 degrees when we parked, which happened to be precisely the number Lisa had guessed. As to the wind chill factor, sometimes it is best to leave such things a mystery.)

The Skyline Road, as its name implies, never strays far from the crest of the ridge. The views here have always been expansive but there are, sadly, considerably fewer impediments since the Cornet-Windy Ridge fire killed most of the trees south of the road in August 2015.

Most of the pines, firs and tamaracks on the shadier, cooler north slopes survived. But they don't obstruct the view to the northwest, which is dominated by the Elkhorn Mountains. I quite enjoy this vantage point, which puts this familiar range, parts of which I can see from my own living room, in a decidedly different perspective.

The breadth of the Elkhorns, from west to east, is much more noticeable. The mountains, when seen from Baker City, appear as a single, seemingly narrow, chunk of elevated ground.

But as much as I relish the panorama, my favorite thing about this place during winter is its ability to conjure all manner of wind-sculpted drifts.

Drift, of course, is the

IF YOU GO

The Skyline Road, Forest Road 11, starts on the west side of Highway 245 at Dooley Summit, about 20 miles south of Baker City. Drive south from Baker City on Highway 7, toward Sumpter and John Day. About nine miles south of Baker City, at Salisbury Junction, turn left onto Highway 245 at a sign for Hereford and Unity.

word most commonly associated with wind-deposited snow.

But to return briefly to my Saharan comparison, I sometimes think of these natural creations not as drifts but as dunes, so varied are their shapes and sizes.

Although winter storms aren't so generous with snow here as in, say, the Elkhorns or the Wallowas, there is most winters quite enough snow for raw material.

And few places, at least among those I've visited, are as reliably blustery.

The first day of 2022 was quite still in the Baker Valley below.

And I dared to mention to Lisa, as we drove the serpentine Highway 245 toward Dooley Summit, that perhaps this would be the rare placid day even along the Skyline Road (also known as Forest Road 11).

I really am sometimes embarrassingly naive.

We had scarcely stepped out of the rig before we heard the wind.

And felt it.

There is ample space to park on the west side of the highway, near the shed where the Oregon Department of Transportation stores sand to spread on the snow-slathered highway. Dooley Mountain goes through a lot of the stuff in a typical winter.

(Just don't park directly in front of the structure.)

The drifts — or dunes, if you prefer — started imme-



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Highway 245 winds up the southern slopes of Dooley Mountain toward the summit.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Wind-sculpted snow drifts — or dunes — along the Skyline Road in Baker County on Saturday, Jan. 1, 2022.

diately as the Skyline Road climbs a moderate grade, heading west toward Bald Mountain.

I know nothing of

physics, or whatever scientific discipline it is that would explain how the interaction of wind, snow and terrain com-

bine to create these features, so fascinating and so temporary.

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Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

What are the cumulative effects of solar farms? What about glint and glare? Can proposed projects be built without affecting big game migration corridors?

Sunshine, but is it dark days for deer?

Solar power proliferation threatens mule deer winter range



GARY LEWIS
ON THE TRAIL

In the fall of 1992, a friend and I drove east to hunt mule deer. In places like Joseph and Enterprise, and out past Post and Paulina, we counted hundreds of deer in one day. Herds of 50 or a hundred does with small bucks in the mix and always a big mule deer buck tucked up on a butte. It opened my eyes.

I would never see that many deer in Oregon ever again. The winter of 1992-93 was especially

hard on deer when the snow crusted over. Thousands of deer were winter-killed. Biologists thought the herds would bounce back. They always did before.

In those days deer numbers ebbed and flowed with the numbers of predators. Cougars were hunted with hounds, and a lot of people trapped the coyotes that preyed on the fawns. When the voters outlawed hunting cougars with hounds in 1994, the numbers of deer didn't rebound. Think about it. An adult cougar is probably going to kill 50 deer or elk a year if it gets its way. That's a lot better success rate than your average hunter, who tags a mule deer maybe once every four or five seasons.

It is easy to find reasons why deer numbers have not bounced back. But let's talk about winter range. Drive through the Columbia Basin, out to

Enterprise or Whitney and along the base of the Elkhorns and you will see deer in twos and threes. Count the fawns. Every doe should have a fawn each spring and often two. By January there are probably 45 fawns for each 100 does. What happened to them? Is that enough fawns to rebuild a deer herd? It's not. But the primary limiter is winter range. Deer are most fragile in late March and even in April it is hard to get the nutrition they need to stay alive. Weakened by winter, they are easy prey for cougars, coyotes and bobcats.

Miles of sagebrush, native grasses, stands of bitterbrush and mountain mahogany should provide food, thermal shelter cover and escape for deer, elk, pronghorn and other species that make the desert home when snows blanket

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