

HARES

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Imagine standing at the bottom of the deep end of a swimming pool and trying to throw a baseball, which is more dense than the surrounding water, so that it breaches the surface with much velocity.

Northeastern Oregon's dramatic topography exacerbates the inversion effect. On New Year's Eve, which was both clear and nearly windless, I watched the exterior thermometer on my Toyota drop from 2 degrees to 6 below zero in just a mile or so of driving in the middle of Baker Valley, a vertical distance of less than 100 feet.

I don't particularly mind this aspect of inversions.

But I abhor another common effect which, I think, is largely responsible for the inversion's sordid reputation — clouds.

The skim of frigid air, if it's stranded for more than a couple days in valleys, tends to become damp, in part because its moisture, which it acquires from a variety of sources, ranging from our exhalations to snow on the ground, has no place to go. And because the air is cold it can't hold much water vapor, so clouds, and in many cases fog, quickly form.

Baker Valley went through this progression last week.

The morning of Jan. 22 was bright and beautiful, if seasonably chilly, in Baker Valley. Keating Valley, by contrast, was soaked in with fog much of the day.

But the next morning, Jan. 23, the fog also enveloped Baker Valley.

I checked temperatures that morning and the inversion was unusually intense. At 7 a.m. the temperature at the Baker City Airport, elevation 3,373 feet, was 23 degrees. At the same time at the top of the chairlift at Anthony Lakes, elevation 8,000 feet, it was 40 degrees.

In more typical atmospheric conditions, the temperature at 8,000 feet could be expected to be from 16 to 23 degrees colder — not 17 degrees warmer — than at 3,373 feet.

(As a general rule, the temperature drops from 3.5 degrees to 5 degrees for every 1,000 feet of altitude gained.)

The overcast layer during an inversion rarely extends higher than about 5,000 feet, so I figured we could find sunshine somewhere along the road to Anthony Lakes Ski Area.

We saw the first wedge of blue sky gleaming amidst the muck while we were



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Max Jacoby mimes taking a lick from a "cake pop tree" in the Elkhorn Mountains on Sunday, Jan. 23, 2022.

driving past the Gorham Butte Road, just a few miles up from the valley.

Our destination was a couple miles farther, where the highway describes a half circle just before the turnoff to the Anthony Creek Road. There's a large parking area on the south side of the highway here.

We were above the overcast but, at about 5,100 feet, we hadn't gone high enough to get out of the chilly layer. It was 21 degrees when we started.

I thought about driving farther, maybe to the Van Patten Lake trail, which starts at about 6,300 feet, but my wife, Lisa, figured we would warm up easily enough once we started into the woods on our snowshoes.

Our kids, Olivia, 14, and Max, 10, were with us, and I had picked this place because the terrain is relatively gentle.

The conditions, Lisa and I agreed, were nearly ideal for snowshoeing.

Although we pegged the snow depth at around 30 inches, it had consolidated quite a lot over the previous two, mainly dry, weeks.

There was a thin crust but it was covered with an inch or two of powder — from the minor storm

a few days earlier — that absorbed most of the shock from each stride.

More pleasantly, the scrim of fresh snow prevented our steps from making the horrific racket that plastic snowshoes are capable of when clattering against ice.

We had walked just a hundred feet or so into the forest when we noticed the distinctive tracks of snowshoe hares — two larger prints, side by side, in front, and two smaller marks at the rear, sometimes parallel, sometimes beside each other.

The snow was imprinted with veritable hare highways.

We spotted three of these furry forest dwellers in the hour or so we hiked.

Snowshoe hares — the name inspired by their large and fuzzy rear feet, which have a similar flotation effect as snowshoes do — swap their reddish brown summer coat for the fine winter camouflage of white hair.

(Mostly white, anyway — the tips of their ears are black year round.)

They are of course difficult to spot when they're standing still atop the snow. And the hares are quite adept being motionless, as well they should be

when any passing coyote or bobcat would surely relish making a meal of one.

Or lynx, the predator for whom the snowshoe hare is the most common prey. Lynx haven't been officially confirmed around here for decades, but if any of these big cats wanders through the area where we snowshoed I doubt it would suffer hunger pangs.

I saw two hares, and Max one.

In each case the animals were betrayed only by their movement. Two of the three sprinted away and were gone within a couple seconds, reminding me, with their great graceful leaps and instantaneous changing of direction, of their cousins, the jackrabbits.

The third was hunkered in a hollow beneath a log.

I noticed its slight shift, presumably to get farther below the snow-burdened log. Once it went still I had trouble finding it again even though I knew essentially where it was.

After 10 seconds or so, just long enough for all of us to have a look, the hare

leaped out of its dubious shelter — at least I imagine it would be dubious in the face of a determined coyote — and disappeared between the lodgepole pines and tamaracks and grand firs and Douglas-firs in this classic Blue Mountains mixed-conifer forest.

It was the sort of day when snowshoeing seems the perfect mode of winter transportation rather than the lung- and heart-straining slog it can be when the snow lies deep and soft.

Our shoes sank in just a few inches, enough to ensure we were warm but not drenched in sweat.

Max and Lisa noticed a curious tree that I had missed — probably distracted by another set of hare tracks.

It was a short and slender tree, not much taller than Max, but the snow, which no doubt came down fast and thickly here earlier in the month, had congealed around its crown in a nearly perfect, and quite wide, circular mound.

Lisa called it the "cake pop tree," and indeed it

quite resembled those confections.

Where we turned around, on a road that parallels the power line leading to the ski area, I noticed a scattering of Douglas-fir cones, maybe three dozen in all, reminding me of nothing so much as the smattering of flotsam that marks the margin of a flood tide.

I noticed that there was scarcely a square inch of snow not trodden by the tracks of squirrels. I looked up and saw a big fir on the slope, maybe 100 feet above. I suppose a heavy wind had deposited this nutritious litter. I imagined the squirrels that must have felt such joy as squirrels can feel when they came upon this treasure, so accessible, with no climbing required.

I guess it could have been a trap, a ruse devised by the ever-cunning coyote.

But the tracks were fresh, made since the last snowfall, and I saw no blood, so perhaps this was indeed the scene of a feast for squirrels, but not of them.

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HOROSCOPES by Stella Wilder

SATURDAY, JANUARY 29, 2022
YOUR BIRTHDAY by Stella Wilder

Born today, you are never far from where the action is, and though you may not be front and center, playing a leading role in the spotlight, you can certainly be counted on to do that is possible from where you stand to promote the best ideas and achieve what may sometimes be labeled the "impossible." You have no shortage of imagination, and you can visualize much that is far beyond the capacity of most individuals to see in their mind's eye.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30
AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) -- Giving up is not an option today, not that you were seriously considering it anyway! You know what must be done -- and how to do it.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20) -- Events seem to be stacked against you at this time, but you have a clever way of easing the burden -- at least for now. Make a solid plan!

ARIES (March 21-April 19) -- You may be tempted to avoid what is suggested by another today, but that would be doing yourself and others a disservice. Get involved!

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) -- It's a good time to study something new in order to add it to your list of serious interests. A related opportunity may arise very soon.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20) -- You may be faced with a problem that is too much for you to handle on your own, even though you know precisely how it must be solved.

CANCER (June 21-July 22) -- You must give some thought to how you are affected by budgets -- at home and at the workplace too. You may have a little bit of wiggle room.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) -- The more cavalier you are about a major undertaking, the less others will value it when all is said and done. You must take it seriously!

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) -- You may benefit today from someone's daring, though you cannot expect to repeat this soon. What can you use that others cannot?

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22) -- You may see the obvious for precisely what it is, while others are still somewhat in the dark. While an advantage, this requires some care.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21) -- You have news to send to another today, and you must do it in a way that doesn't warrant any kind of overreaction. Stick to what you know.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) -- You are in a rather serious frame of mind right now, and it's the perfect time to present an idea you've been formulating for a while.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) -- You may not be able to meet with others in person, but you should be well-versed in all kinds of alternatives. Make connections today.

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