

Back to the meadow

Sixth straight April hike to Eilertson Meadow proves the most difficult



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

Even before my snowshoe broke I was good and ready to get mad.

The busted footwear merely afforded me a focus for my simmering anger.

Although it takes a certain creativity to get terribly perturbed about an aluminum peg the approximate size of a Tic Tac breath mint.

As with many episodes of wrath, this one was largely irrational.

A triumph of emotion over reason.

The whining of an entitled brat.

Not that I recognized it as such at the moment when I looked down and saw that the snowshoe on my right boot was askew.

Severely so — the snowshoe, which is supposed to point in roughly the same direction as your toes, was about 90 degrees off, the way a person's actual foot is in those awful sports videos I can't watch without feeling sick at my stomach.

I had thought, for the past 10 minutes or so, that that shoe seemed to be sliding around in an awkward fashion every few steps.

But I put this off to the quality of the fresh snow coating the Rock Creek Road, which follows its namesake stream into one of the great chasms that cleave the east slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City.

That quality being terrible.

Snowshoeing through powdery snow, even many inches of it, can be almost a pleasure, particularly if the terrain is gentle. Dry snow has little left to it — it doesn't clutch at your shoes, like a toddler who is forever grabbing your pantsleg and throwing you slightly off balance with each tug.

The snow on the Rock Creek Road was closer to quicksand.

As is typical for snow that falls nearly a month after the spring equinox, it was sticky and dense, heavy with moisture.

This is fine snow for bolstering the scarce snowpack.

It is much less so for sloggng through.

Especially when one of your snowshoes suddenly turns from a somewhat useful accessory into an appendage more akin to an anchor.

My wife, Lisa, helped me effect a repair, by means of a keychain, that would have worked perfectly for MacGyver and helped him foil a whole cadre of henchmen.

Alas, I am not him, lacking both the classic 1980s mullet and a team of screenwriters.

We made it some fraction of a mile before the snowshoe, missing that crucial peg, resumed its previous dangling posture.

Lisa, although both of her snowshoes were intact, was tired of hoisting a couple pounds of slush with each step, so we decided to cache them in a drift and continue unencumbered.

(Well, we kept our boots and socks on. We're not, you know, crazy.)

It was one of those days in the mountains when the utility of snowshoes is not as certain as I would like it to be.

That I had felt the need to strap them on in the first place had merely primed me for the subsequent tantrum when the snowshoe failed.

We were hiking there along Rock Creek, on the day before Easter, because it's become a tradition.

Or possibly a compulsion.

The difference between the two can be a trifle murky, as anyone knows who, for instance, sets off large explosives when the old year gives way to the new.

My purpose in coming back each April to Rock Creek is to take photographs.

A particular sort of photograph — the repeat.

The idea is to replicate a viewpoint so as to compare whether the place has changed, and if so to what degree.

Repeat photography more typically is employed to illustrate changes spread over many years, decades or even centuries, since the duration of the interval often coincides with the scale of the difference.

The subject of my experiment in repeat photography is rather mundane by comparison.

In April 2017 I hiked to the automated snow-measuring station at the eastern edge of Eilertson Meadow, along Rock Creek — what's known as a Snotel. I did this for no reason other than I like to get out in the mountains in the spring, when the air is especially fresh and the occasionally cloying summer heat inconceivable.

I of course had my phone, and of course it was equipped with a camera (this particular phone is today a dusty relic relegated to my bedside table, since I subscribe to the notion that it is unAmerican, or at least anticapitalist, to not replace consumer electronics regularly, no matter how well the current version is working).

Anyway I took several photos of the site, which is inside a low split-rail fence, mainly, I think, to prove that I was there.

I returned the next April. Again I had no defined purpose. But again I had the phone, and it occurred to me — I think because the measuring site, unlike the previous year, was snow-free — that I ought to take photos from the same vantage point by way of comparison.

Four years later this annual excursion has become something of a habit.

Although the amount of snow has differed each year, and in some cases dramatically, each of the five trips had a commonality — they happened on a sunny day.

Moreover, each trip was preceded by at least a few dry days, with no fresh snow.

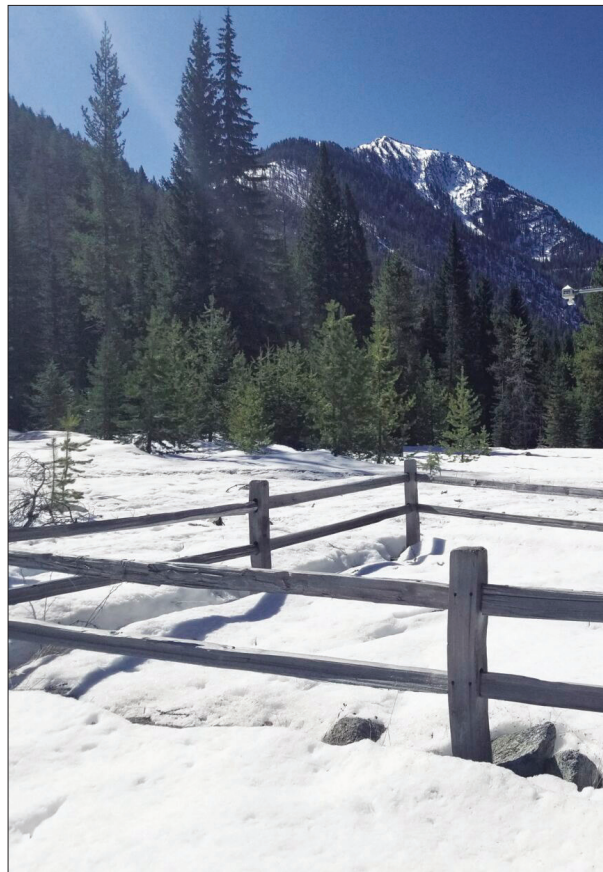
There was old snow, to be sure — even in 2018, when the measuring site was bare. The Rock Creek Road is well sheltered by thick forest and in places by terrain, so the sunshine works only slowly.



2022

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

The snow-measuring station at Eilertson Meadow, in the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City, on April 16, 2022. The water content in the snow was 3.8 inches.



2021

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

Eilertson Meadow Snotel on April 17, 2021. The water content in the snow was 1.6 inches.



2020

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

Eilertson Meadow Snotel on April 19, 2020. The water content in the snow was 1.8 inches.



2019

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

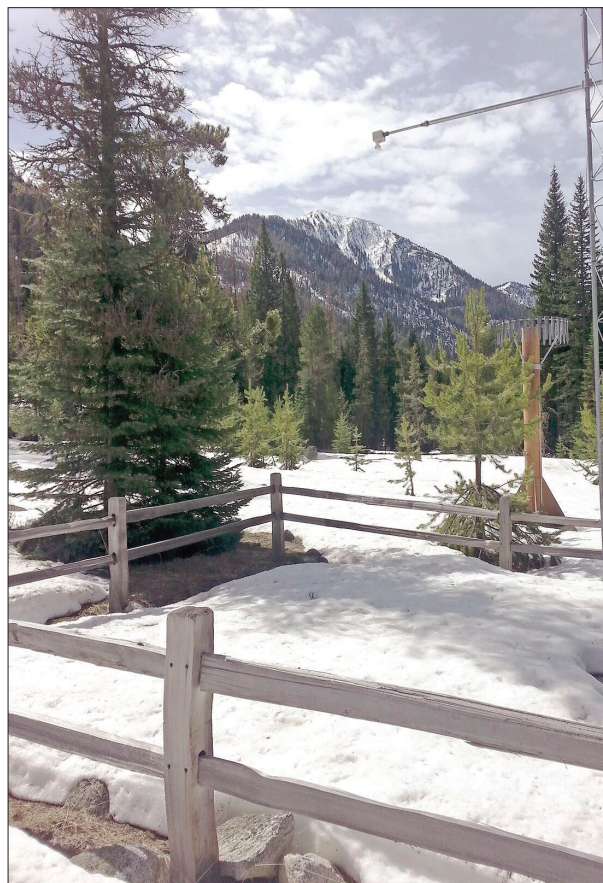
The Eilertson Meadow Snotel on April 21, 2019. The water content in the snow was 9.5 inches.



2018

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

The Eilertson Meadow Snotel on April 21, 2018.



2017

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

The Eilertson Meadow Snotel on April 22, 2017. The water content of the snow was 3.1 inches.