

TOM CLAYCOMB
BASE CAMP

Visitors in town? Show off your state

My daughter got married recently so a lot of out-of-state relatives flew in. We had a great time. I have awesome relatives on both sides of the fence. That’s one thing that I regret, we never get to see them enough.

Of course, a lot of families who live close to each other tell me that they get busy and don’t get together much even though they’re close. That’s not good. You can always count on your family when you encounter trouble. I remember one time I got hung on a cliff. A thing that brought me great hope was that I knew, even if search and rescue gave up, I knew that my brother and brothers-in-law wouldn’t.

So if you have relatives from out of state visiting this summer, why sit around the house with everyone bored stiff? Come on, we live in some cool country. Even though we were in the middle of organizing the wedding and all of the hectic activities surrounding that, I wanted to take them out and showcase Idaho!

I talked about taking Katy’s nephew, Colter, to the Jump Creek trail. The day after the wedding Katy’s sister and brother-in-law, Tim and Shayla Stutzman, wanted to go look around. Sometimes I’m afraid that some of us forget how lucky we are to live where we do. Don’t do that. Count your blessings daily.

I remember years ago when a fellow writer and I had been up in the mountains chukar hunting. We were coming down at sunset. There was deep snow up above a mountain lake and it was one of the prettiest sunsets that I’d ever seen.

The guy that I’d taken hunting was one of, if not the best, outdoor writers in America. He gets to hunt all over the world. As we came around the corner he said, wow, look at that sunset. It was stunning. He said we ought to take a pic. I said, do you want to? He said naw, it’d just go in the pile of other pretty sunset pics.

I made a promise to myself then that I’d never take another sunset for granted. Ever since then, any time I see an awesome sunrise or sunset I stop for a millisecond and exclaim, ‘wow, God, You really outdid Yourself on this one.’ I don’t ever want to take stuff for granted.

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Club reopens fire-ravaged Illinois River Trail in Southern Oregon after 22 years

By MARK FREEMAN • Medford Mail Tribune

SELMA — Trying to reclaim the famed Illinois River Trail after two horrific fires in the past two decades felt like a nightmare in which Gabe Howe was caught in backwoods carnival game with no way to win.

The 2002 Biscuit Fire, followed by 2017’s Checto Bar Fire, left the Illinois River Trail impenetrable with downed trees and asphyxiating brush, no matter how hard Howe’s Siskiyou Mountain Club crews worked to reclaim the trail.

“It was like a game of whack-a-mole,” says Howe, the club’s founder and executive director. “You’d get something opened up, and you’d think you got somewhere — and then, no. You’d realize that, 15 miles away, you had a new impenetrable jungle.”

“It was a game of trying to get ahead of it, but we were never able to,” Howe said.

The club recently pushed the “Game Over” button — for now — when it officially reopened one of Southern Oregon’s most iconic wilderness trails for the first time in 22 years.

The 30-mile Illinois River Trail is now hikeable from the Selma area over the Siskiyou Mountains to the

“The brush is chest high, the sun’s beating down on you, but you push through it. But your mission is to get through it so other people don’t have to.”

— Natalie Frison, a Portlander who helped finish the trail

remote river town of Agness for the first time since the Biscuit Fire roared through the drainage 22 years ago.

This single-track trail, rated extremely difficult, bisects the rugged Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area and crosses Bald Mountain as it snakes through lands that iPhones don’t acknowledge.

Much of the work has been done with hand saws or cross-cut saws, working through downed snags, smaller trees and impenetrable brush that sprouts annually after fire allows sunlight to reach these fer-

tile soils.

The brush- and tree-free trail is, in part, the success of nine years of work by Siskiyou Mountain Club interns who carried 80-pound packs into the wilderness for eight-day hitches of back-breaking work on behalf of the backwoods hiking community.

The biggest obstacles, as always, are massive brush fields of ceanothus and tan oak that shroud the post-fire trail.

“The brush is chest high, the sun’s beating down on you, but you push through

it,” says Natalie Frison, a Portlander who helped finish off the last stretch of trail. “But your mission is to get through it so other people don’t have to.”

The free-the-trail mission has its roots in the 2002 Biscuit Fire, which burned nearly 500,000 acres in mostly wilderness areas of Southern Oregon. The Checto Bar Fire of 2017 burned mostly within the Biscuit footprint.

Collectively, they placed a major “No Trespassing” sign on the remote Illinois River Trail, known on maps as National Trail No. 1161.

It spans from Oak Flat near Selma to another Oak Flat near Agness. In between, there is more than 4,000 feet of elevation gained and lost as the trail snakes through a mix of old-growth Douglas fir forests, across serpentine soils and hardscrabble lands baked by summer’s bitter sun.

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The one fish that (almost) got away, the black crappie

LUKE OVGARD
CAUGHT OVGARD

I try to keep track of which species I’ve written about. Many get short posts on my blog detailing where, when and how I first caught a species, but I often write longer columns like the one you’re reading right now.

In part, it lets me remember each species and share stories about obscure fishes most people haven’t heard of. But not every species comes with a great story, so I’m forced to be creative. As someone who writes about fishing for (a small part of) a living, my primary business expense is travel and the costs associated with fishing.

In order to justify to the Internal Revenue Service that I do operate CaughtOvgard.com as a business and justifiably claim my fishing trips as business expenses, I eventually have to write about every species and every trip. I don’t have to write about every injury, close call or misadventure in dating; that’s purely for your entertainment.

Though I’ve written plenty about Hawaii, New Zealand, Mexico, Europe and virtually everything from dusky shiners to dusky sharks, in all my writing, I’ve come to realize that I’ve ignored one of the fish I’ve chased since childhood: the black crappie.

Though I’ve caught more bluegill (2,723) and rainbow trout (2,364), the papermouth comes in at No. 3 on my all-time catch list with a total particularly significant this month — 1776.

1776

It’s been a minute since the United States of America first declared its independence on July 4, 1776, and in the nearly 250 years since, the black crappie hasn’t changed much. Though native to just six of the original 13 colonies, it is now found in every U.S. state except Alaska and Hawaii and is one of the most popular targets of anglers nationwide.

Virtually every fish in American waters had value to Native Americans and colonists as food,



Black crappie are very common, easy to catch in warm water and taste alright — a very American fish.

Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo

but today’s Americans are less likely to eat what they catch than ever before. Most anglers place crappie second only to walleye in terms of table value for freshwater fish. Personally, I don’t eat freshwater fish often because even the best pales in comparison to the most mediocre saltwater fish, but you do you.

Independence Day is a significant measure in crappie fishing because it signals the beginning

of the end of the crappie season. You can catch crappie year-round, but to catch them in numbers, you want to fish water temps between 65 and 80 degrees. In most of the Oregon Outback, that means mid-May through early July.

A few weeks after imported fireworks, barbecues and gaudy flag-choked outfits, the fireworks-between spawning crappie are done, and the fish spread out and move to deeper water.

Nonetheless, our independence was declared in part to pay fewer taxes, and I write these stories, in part, to pay fewer taxes, so it’s symbiotic, really.

Tactics

Early in the season, fishing from mid-afternoon to dark is the way to go, but as the summer sun slowly boils the water, your worthwhile fishing window shrinks. By the end of the season, you’re fishing the last hour before dark.

Crappie like structure, so bridges, rock piles, flooded

timber, logs and other manmade structures can all draw and hold crappie. If the water is shallow (less than five feet or so), crappie will be staging and trying to prolong their genetics. Since they’re a nonnative species out West, feel zero guilt chasing them on their spawning grounds or harvesting them where legal.

Small curlytail grubs are my favorite tool, but tube jigs, small streamers, nymphs and the polarizing fly known as the “San Juan worm” are all very effective. If the water is clear, use natural colors like white, black, brown, purple or blue to imitate small baitfish. If the water is dirty or stained, try brighter colors like glow-in-the-dark white, chartreuse, hot pink or red.

Over the years, I’ve had five nights wherein I caught more than 100 crappie after work. The best was 222 in four hours, so be ready for nonstop action if you time it properly. Crappie don’t fight as hard as other panfish, so even on an ultralight or lightweight fly rod, you’re able to bring them in quickly, one after another.

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