

Peaks, pines and a panorama

Returning to Pole Creek Ridge



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Looking southeast, toward the Elkhorn Crest trail and peaks above Rock Creek, from Pole Creek Ridge.

I peered down the gravel road, a narrow slice between the firs and the occasional ponderosa pine, and it struck me that at long last I had managed to misplace a once familiar path.

I wasn't lost.

And by that I don't mean, as people sometimes do, that I truly didn't know where I was but was too ashamed to admit it.

I could see multiple landmarks through the windshield of our Toyota FJ Cruiser, peaks I could name with as much confidence as listing my own address or phone number.

I knew I was on Pole Creek Ridge, a prominent spur on the west side of the Elkhorns north of Sumpter.

I even knew what road I was



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

driving on — 5536.

What I couldn't figure out is why the road was descending.

To get to the trail, I recalled from many previous visits, you have to drive uphill pretty much the entire way.

I pulled over — well, actually I just stopped in the middle of the road, which is too narrow to justify the term "pulled over."

I confessed to my wife, Lisa, that I needed to consult a map — the ultimate admission of navigational incompetence.

Except the map tucked into the pocket on the back of the passenger seat didn't include Pole Creek Ridge.

Or any place within about 10 miles, come to that.

Which made it about as useful as toilet paper.

But bemused though I was, I had little doubt that I had gone

IF YOU GO...

From Baker City, drive Highway 7 for 25 miles to the Sumpter junction. Drive through Sumpter and, just after crossing Cracker Creek on a bridge, turn right (north) on the Cracker Creek Road. Follow the road, which turns to well-graded gravel, for 2.4 miles. Just after crossing Cracker Creek again, turn right onto Road 5536, which is marked by a sign for the Pole Creek Ridge trail. Drive Road 5536 for about 2.6 miles to an intersection. Continue straight on Road 150 (Road 5536 heads downhill, to the right). Drive Road 150 north for about 0.3 of a mile, then turn right onto Road 160 and continue for about 1.3 miles. Turn right onto Road 170 and follow it for about 0.6 miles. Road 200 heads steeply uphill to the right. The Elkhorn Crest trail is about 2.6 miles away, the last 0.7 of a mile on a single-track trail.

astray in trying to reach the Pole Creek Ridge trail. I turned around, a maneuver that, due to the road's modest width, required about half a dozen neck-straining jolts, first forward, then back. A 10-point turn, basically.

When we got back to the junction of 5536 and its 150 spur I immediately recognized that the former road had lured me away from my destination.

We made it the rest of the way with no detours.

I remembered, as we bounced along on the increasingly rough roads, that the route has a pleasing mathematical precision to it — from

the 150 road to the 160 and thence to the 170.

(Pleasing to me, anyway, for whom intervals of 10 is about as large as my brain can comprehend.)

The Pole Creek Ridge trailhead is more a concept than a reality.

There is no parking lot, no wooden bulletin board with signs reminding hikers to be careful with fires.

The "trail" for most of its length is actually a road, or at least something resembling a road.

People ride 4-wheelers on it, anyway.

See, **Pole Creek**/Page B6



Looking west from Pole Creek Ridge to Windy Creek Peak, in the middle foreground.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Forest Service urges Labor Day weekend visitors to be prepared

EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — The U.S. Forest Service is reminding people planning to visit a national forest during the Labor Day weekend to be prepared for conditions, including high to extreme fire danger.

Tips from the agency include:

- **Fire:** Weather conditions have been hot, and forest vegetation is very dry. It's extremely important that visitors follow any public use restrictions in effect for the area they are visiting, such as campfire bans. Ensure tow chains can't

strike asphalt, rocks or dirt as you drive, and don't drive over dry grass. Fireworks are prohibited on National Forests.

- **Navigation:** In remote areas, cell service may be unavailable. If you're relying on GPS navigation, make sure area maps are downloaded to your phone, or that you'll have reliable satellite access when you are out of cell phone range. Paper maps are also lightweight and portable, and don't rely on batteries.

- **Wilderness:** Wilderness areas are managed for minimal human development, including motorized

vehicles and equipment. If you plan to hike or camp in a wilderness area, it will take longer for help to find you.

- **Burned areas:** As access is restored to previously burned areas, understand that these areas will be at higher risk for hazards. During rainy weather, burned areas are at a higher risk for flash flooding and landslides. Practice "4 Steps for Safety" — look up for damaged branches or leaning trees, and look down for signs of previous rock fall, trip hazards and erosion. Look around to maintain awareness of changing

weather conditions, including those at higher elevations. In the water, look below the surface for fallen trees, rocks and debris, which could strike or ensnare boats and swimmers, or change currents.

- **Outdoor Essentials:** Access to water, food, shelter, and first aid are important for comfort, but they are critical for survival during an outdoor emergency. Many outdoor educators recommend 10 outdoor essentials that can help prevent a mishap from becoming a crisis, and a crisis from becoming a disaster.

Find the list at <https://tinyurl.com/2t6a4mp3>.

- **Be Bear Aware:** Bears live in the woods, but human-bear encounters may be even more likely at busy campgrounds, especially if a bear has learned to associate human activity and food. Learn how to secure food to discourage bear encounters and what to do if you encounter a bear at www.fs.usda.gov/visit/know-before-you-go/bears.

Learn more about the 17 national forests and grasslands in Washington and Oregon at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r6>.