

Siskiyou Crest driving tour connects participants to nature

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

The Siskiyou Crest has many remote wildlands difficult to access and rarely visited, wild roadless areas that provide important wildlife habitat and a secluded backwoods experience for those who venture into them. In other portions of the Siskiyou Crest an existing road network provides vehicular access to backcountry destinations.

On July 6 my husband, Luke, and I took a group of 13 Applegaters interested in ecology and conservation on a Siskiyou Crest “driving tour” for an accelerated sightseeing overview of the Applegate’s backcountry, especially of the high-elevation headwaters. For those who, for one reason or another, would rather explore the Siskiyou by vehicle, driving the crest is a great option for getting to know the region. One person on our tour, for instance, was recovering from a recent knee surgery.

Cheryl Bruner described her experience this way: “In our drive from Dutchman’s Peak to Elliott Creek I was stunned by the absolute beauty and diversity that I saw. Wildflowers, meadows, trees of all species, and glorious mountains—landscapes for hikes that will entertain me for years.”

Leading a caravan of five high-clearance vehicles, each with its own two-way radio for communication, Luke started the

trip off by jokingly saying, “Welcome to the Siskiyou Crest Driving Tour. I’m Luke Ruediger, and I’ll be your tour guide today.”

We started on Beaver Creek Road, also known as Forest Service Road 20, which was built in 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Road 20 starts in the Upper Applegate, climbs towards Dutchman Peak, then rides the Siskiyou Crest east all the way to Mt. Ashland. Instead of driving east, however, we left Road 20 at Jackson Gap and headed west to Alex Hole.

Our first stop was the Dutchman Peak lookout. We parked below the gate and walked up to the lookout, where Luke named all the peaks in the sweeping, 360-degree view. Along the walk we looked at rare plants in the Dutchman Peak Botanical Area. We saw rare and endemic plant species such as split-hair paintbrush (*Castilleja schizotricha*), Henderson’s horkelia (*Horkelia hendersonii*), and Douglas’s buckwheat (*Eriogonum douglasii*).

Next, we drove out Forest Road 40S01 past Observation Peak to Cow Creek Glade. Here, we enjoyed the view down Cow Creek past vast flower-filled meadows and little groves of quaking aspens to the forests of Beaver Creek, a tributary of the

Klamath River. At this stop local geologist and driving-tour participant Chas Rogers gave an informative talk about the unique geology of the region.

We then drove to the upper end of Donomore Meadows and stopped for lunch. With a sweeping view across



Tour leader Luke Ruediger names the peaks seen in the 360-degree view from Dutchman Peak Lookout. Photo: Suzie Savoie.

the expansive high-elevation meadow, we strolled through a spectacular patch of yellow mule’s ears (*Wyethia angustifolia*) and heard stories of historical events and place names dating back to the so-called Humbug Wars, a skirmish between settlers and indigenous tribes on the Klamath River.

From there we drove east toward Alex Hole, stopping along the way to check out the rare, endemic Jayne’s Canyon buckwheat (*Eriogonum diclinum*) near its namesake, Jayne’s Canyon.

At Alex Hole we took in the commanding view framed by Big Ridge and Condrey Mountain. We also checked out the quaking aspen, common juniper, and rare (for the Siskiyou) ledge stonecrop (*Rhodiola integrifolia*) growing on the tall rocky ledge above the meadows.

We then drove back to Ward’s Fork Gap and ended the tour with a drive through old-growth forests in the spectacular Elliott Creek canyon. “Thanks for joining us on the Siskiyou Crest Driving Tour,”

Luke said, continuing his mock-tour guide persona. “It’s been a pleasure to be your guide today.”

It was a pleasure for the participants as well. One of the drivers, Diana Coogle, summed up the attitude of many: “I have done a lot of hiking on and around the Siskiyou Crest,” she said, “but to drive on it gave me in one afternoon a whopping big hit of much that I love about my home: the wild, rugged Siskiyou; the wildflowers; the kestrel and the fisher; the magnificent forests; the vistas of meadows, canyons, and peaks—what a gorgeous and special place we live in.”

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Wildflowers in the Dutchman Peak Botanical Area. Photo: Suzie Savoie.



Checking out the view from Dutchman Peak Lookout. Photo: Suzie Savoie.

REGULATORY HOOPS

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dollar for these leases because lessees can realize a profit of up to 100 times the lease price.

Both Josephine and Jackson County require permits for these structures. Usually alerted by neighbors’ complaints, code enforcers inspect these properties for violations. There are a lot of complaints, typically several hundred cases in a county inspector’s file.

Neighbors also complain about illegal water takings. State and county water inspectors regularly issue citations to the property owners who are using water without rights. There are so many complaints that watermasters can’t keep up.

Our county sheriff personnel are doing their best to make arrests and pull plants, but warrants can be hard to come by when the illegal plants are identical to the legal ones.

These cases don’t stop with just building codes, water rights, and cannabis violations. Enforcers are increasingly noticing other, more troublesome, activities: gun violence, squalid living conditions, human trafficking, worker abuse, unsafe working conditions, and environmental degradation.



An aerial view of a black market hoop house near Central Point raided by a multi-agency task force in July. Similar operations in the Applegate are being targeted for code violations. Photo: Jackson County Sheriff’s Office.

Who are these people? Some of them are locals out to make a quick buck. Some are transplants from California, well-versed in the nuances of growing and selling illegal cannabis. And some are slick drug cartels from all corners of the world—criminal business enterprises who are making millions on the black market. They are well aware of the bureaucratic and legal impediments that protect law-abiding landowners. The inevitable delays allow them to operate with

virtual impunity. The time from seed to flower is a little over two months—plenty of time to get a crop out before a civil decree can be levied.

These problems have sparked the interest of the state. Governor Kate Brown has just signed House Bill 3000, which was pushed by one of the Applegate Valley’s representative in Salem, Lily Morgan,

and supported by our other representative, Pam Marsh. Among other things, this law has increased the staffing and funding of both the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) and the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission (OLCC, which formerly stood for Oregon Liquor Control Commission). From now through September, agents will be field-testing all of the registered hemp grows in our two counties. The law will also help sheriff’s personnel identify unregistered

grows. OLCC Director Steve Marks is hoping that “this will enable ODA or law enforcement to stop the illegal production of marijuana disguised as hemp production.” Enforcement agents are hoping that if this effort is successful, it will lead to the adoption of additional, more aggressive measures.

Jackson County has conducted a series of planning sessions to address what the county administrator has called a crisis. (The county anticipates 1,700 active cases this year.) One outcome of these meetings has been to double the code enforcement staff and give inspectors increased access to offending properties. As of this writing, the county commissioners are considering a “declaration of emergency,” which would enhance resources and tighten up the bureaucracy. Another idea is to develop joint agency teams that would be empowered to conduct coordinated property inspections.

“We get it. We know we have a big problem, and we’re going to address it,” said Jackson County Commissioner Dave Dotterer. “A cancer is enveloping our community and could possibly kill everything we love about this valley.”

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