



JAMES JOHNSTON

# The 'Bidge

The remotest, loveliest, craziest spot in the Lower 48

I was buying a bag of ice at the country store in the town of Lamoille at the foot of the Ruby Mountains in Elko County, Nevada. A couple of old timers were cracking open beers as they stepped into a big pickup truck (welcome to Nevada). "You got a light?" one of them asked me. I dug around in my pickup and found him a lighter. "How's things in the 'Bidge?" he asked me. I didn't know what he was talking about until I remembered I was wearing my new 'Jarbidge, NV' baseball cap.

"Oh, 'bout the same as always," I told him.

He grunted. "Nothin' like the 'Bidge."

Jarbidge is the craziest of all the crazy little towns I've been to. Officially it is a town of just 16 permanent residents at 6,200' in the Jarbidge Range in the far northeastern corner of Nevada. A dozen or so heavily armed crusty old bastards are always lazing around the dusty dirt road that runs through town. There's a post office, a school in a dilapidated trailer, a bar (closed), another bar and cafe (open), and some houses. Residents claim that it is the most remote town in the Lower 48. It is definitely the most remote town I've ever been to.

The quickest way to Jarbidge is through Idaho. Take Hwy. 93 south out of Twin Falls. Then Three Creek Road West from Rogerson to Murphy Hot Springs. Then south on FS 751 up the canyon of the Jarbidge River, an extremely narrow and windy road. This trip takes approximately three hours.

Being the most remote town in the Lower 48 was evidently not enough celebrity for Jarbidge, which is at the center of the 'Sagebrush Rebellion'—a grassroots anti-government insurrection centered on a mile

or so stretch of dirt road south of town. The basic contours of the controversy are as follows: The Forest Service road to the 113,000-acre Jarbidge Wilderness four miles upstream of Jarbidge blew out in a storm. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest didn't have the money to fix the road, and besides, they reasoned, it'd probably blow out again in the next storm. And it didn't go anywhere, except to the wilderness trailhead. So they decided to simply extend the trailhead two miles toward town.

The locals were apoplectic, convinced it was part of a government/environmentalist conspiracy to expand the wilderness and keep them from ... driving on the road, I guess. In 2001, in a sort of Warner Creek campaign in reverse (in which Eugene activists blocked logging roads), hundreds of Sagebrush Rebels from all over the West defied a cease-and-desist order and rebuilt the road. By hand.

The upshot is you can drive slightly closer to one of the most spectacular and unused wilderness areas in the Lower 48. According to the Forest Service, there are eight peaks over 10,000 feet (I count nine on my topo map) and about a hundred miles of trail. It is a land of aspen, mountain mahogany, high meadows, grim granite towers and you've got a better chance of running into another hiker on the top of Mt. Everest than you do here.

From the end of the road upriver of Jarbidge, it's about eight miles into Emerald Lake, in a pretty basin located near the center of the wilderness. I lost the trail a dozen times or so before I climbed out of the tree line into high meadows choked with lupine and arrow-leaf balsamroot. About

a mile before Emerald Lake, I cut north cross-country to the top of the 10,800-foot Matterhorn, tallest peak in the wilderness. From there I dropped west back down to the infamous road. Needless to say, this cross-country route should only be attempted by people who are experienced in rugged cross-country travel—the dangers include a 500-foot sheer drop off on the north face of the Matterhorn.

A simpler route skips the town of Jarbidge completely. Turn south on FS 073 from Murphy Hot Springs, head south and east on the Three Day Creek trailhead, and cut west up Fall Creek. Or continue east to follow the east fork of the Jarbidge River up to Emerald Lake, returning in a loop along Cougar Creek—a three- or four-day backpacking adventure.

You don't want to miss Jarbidge, though. The longest and most scenic way into Jarbidge (which is closed more than half the year by snow) is by taking Hwy. 225 north from Elko, Nev. Turn east on FS 746, which turns into FS 748. You'll crest Bear Creek Summit at 8,488 feet and drop very quickly into Jarbidge. You'll need a high clearance vehicle for this drive, which involves fifty miles of windy gravel road.

This drive will take you through some of the prettiest country you'll ever see. The Jarbidge Range is blanketed by emerald-chartreuse- and silver-tinged sage and grassy meadows thick with flowers in the summer. Long fingers of lime-green aspens flow out of pale-white rock faces. Impassable jeep trails wind over distant ridge tops, offering fantastic backpacking possibilities.

I did the trip in late June and still managed to get stuck in a small snowdrift just short of Bear Pass. I hadn't seen another vehicle in 24 hours and was surprised to hear the throaty rumble of big engines. It's a bit embarrassing to be blocking the road with a small two-wheel drive pickup with out-of-state plates. The first thing I noticed about the guys who piled out of these trucks was this one guy's T-shirt, which read:

CITIZENS AGAINST  
SUCK HEADS  
TREE HUGGERS  
SUCK

Hot damn, I thought. This trip is getting off to

an interesting start.

I liked these guys. They used their winch to pop my truck off the snow bank in thirty seconds flat and leveled it with real shovels. They were skilled and serious motorheads. They were driving across Nevada east-to-west, entirely on dirt roads.

Two miles later we encountered a 15-foot tall snow bank. The way was well blocked. One of my new friends offered me a Coors Lite. We drank beer and contemplated the snowdrift. It is a hard thing to accept—driving forty miles on a dirt road and having to drive all the way back out again. We hadn't gotten two miles back the way we came when we encountered an Elko County snowplow. Elko County is obsessed with keeping Forest Service roads open. We let out wild whoops.

The snowplow driver told us it would take at least two hours for him to clear the giant drift. But he knew an alternate route that followed the valley bottom below us, if we didn't want to wait. "You've got four-wheel drives and plenty of beer," he grinned, "you'll get 'er done."

I didn't have a four-wheel drive, but what the hell. I spent the next half-hour sandwiched between the Jeep and the Range Rover, flogging my little pickup over small boulders and deep ruts and muddy brown puddles.

And then down a windy, sharply descending road that came out a mile or so above Jarbidge. We took our pictures next to a "ROAD CLOSED" sign. **EW**



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