

Elkhorn Alpine trail is backpacker paradise

By ZACH URNESS
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BAKER CITY — Views across the length of northeast Oregon feel almost commonplace on the Elkhorn Crest Trail, one of the highest and most unique pathways in the state.

The 23-mile national recreation trail tightropes across the granite spine of the Elkhorn Range, where mountain goats roam sheer peaks and alpine lakes dapple multicolored valleys high above the prairie below.

“It’s this beautiful little gem tucked into a part of Oregon that’s still pretty unexplored,” said Pat Thomas, owner of Range Tour and Shuttle Company in Baker City. “To hear my friends in Bend tell it, the Elkhorns are located somewhere near Outer Mongolia.”

I made the journey all the way to Outer Mongolia, er, the Elkhorn Mountains, this month for six days of adventure.

The first thing that sticks out about the Elkhorn Crest is its elevation. The trail stretches from one high pass to another — staying close to 8,000 feet throughout — on a fairly level route between trailheads at Anthony Lake Campground and Marble Pass.

Water is almost nonexistent on the crest, but short trails lead to five alpine lakes: Dutch Flat, Lost, Meadow, Summit and Twin lakes.

“It’s a very nice place to backpack,” said Jay Moore, recreation specialist with Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. “With the exception of one steep area near Anthony Lake, it’s a gentle trail with small ups and downs. It’s very well designed.”

The trail is intertwined with northeast Oregon’s mining history. Sections of the path show up on Forest Service maps as far back as 1931, connecting old boomtowns to the high mountain lakes and crest.

The trail was gradually lengthened, sometimes using dynamite to blast through mountain passes, on a route that had a reputation for multiple uses.

Motorcycles were once a common sight on the Elkhorn Crest, though only a few are seen these days. While day-hiking and backpacking are the most popular uses, the fastest-growing activity on the Elkhorn Crest is mountain biking.

“There’s a feeling of being way out there, as you’re riding one of the highest trails in the state and playing around in these stunning lake basins,” said Thomas, who offers mountain bike tours, along with shuttles for bikers and backpackers. “There aren’t many places in Oregon where you can do that.”

Mountain bikes, and motorcycles for that matter, don’t have free rein across the Elkhorn Crest.

From Marble Pass, riders can travel 14 miles before they hit the boundary of the North Fork John Day Wilderness, where bikes and motorcycles aren’t allowed.

Established in 1984, the wilderness boundary has long been a source of frustration among locals for the way it creeps just across the Elkhorn Crest, limiting recreation on one of the few alpine trails in Oregon where pedals and engines can be used.

“Especially with mountain biking getting bigger, there’s this sense that without the wilderness right there, the Elkhorn Crest could be this ultimate destination trail,” Moore said. “You hear it a lot, that people really wish this particular area wasn’t in the wilderness.”

“Would I like to see people be able to ride all the way? Would it help me as tour operator?” Thomas said. “Of course, the answer is yes. The fact that the boundary is there, on this trail, is a little frustrating.

“But the rides are still really incredible, and the trail so beautiful, no matter how you use it.”

GUIDE TO HIKING AND BIKING THE ELKHORN CREST TRAIL: There are many ways to day-hike, backpack and mountain bike the Elkhorn Crest Trail. Here are a few.

To set up a shuttle or take a guided mountain bike tour, contact Range Tour and Shuttle at (541) 403-2616 or rangetour(at)gmail.com.

BACKPACKING: The recommended route for backpacking the entire 23-mile Elkhorn Crest Trail is to begin at Marble Pass (which eliminates a steep climb from Anthony Lake to Angel Pass). Make sure to have a good map or guide. Plan on bringing extra water, as there is almost none on the main route. Plan on detouring off the main trail to camp at Twin Lakes, Summit Lake, Dutch Flat Lake or Lost Lake. There is a long stretch between Twin Lakes and Summit Lake of 10 miles that usually makes for a long day.

HIKES FROM ANTHONY LAKE: The most popular trailhead is right next to this popular campground. From the trailhead, the trail climbs almost 1,000 feet to Angel Pass before flattening out. Popular day-hikes or backpacking trips include 4.2 miles to Dutch Flat Lake (8.4 if you go out-and-back), 6.4 miles to Lost Lake or 10 miles to spectacular Summit Lake.



This photo taken July 6 shows the Hoffer Lakes, which are a one mile hike from Anthony Lake in the Elkhorn Mountains west of Baker City.



In this photo taken on July 8, the mountain goats of Twin Lakes Basin stand on the Elkhorn Mountains west of Baker City. The animals are not particularly fearful of humans.

HIKES FROM MARBLE PASS: The roads en route to this remote trailhead are awful and require a reliable high-clearance vehicle along with a person comfortable with driving sketchy roads. However, the journey is rewarded, since the trailhead begins at 7,540 feet and the incredible views begin almost immediately. A hike of roughly 5 miles (one way) will bring you to the Twin Lakes Basin, probably the most impressive spot in the Elkhorn Mountains.

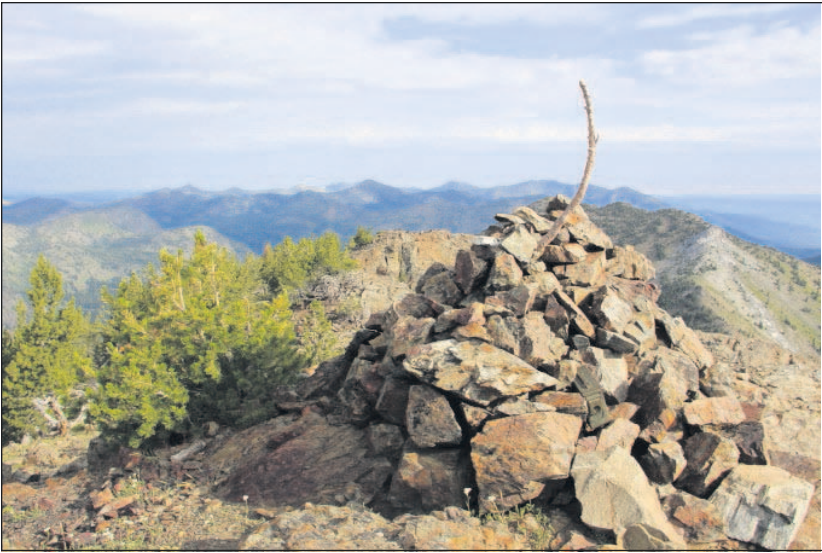
HIKES FROM TWIN LAKES TRAILHEAD: The lowest of the three trailheads, the trail here provides steep but direct access through wildflower meadows to spectacular Twin Lakes Basin. The hike is 3 miles one-way and climbs 2,300 feet to the basin. From the basin, it’s another mile and 500 foot of climb to connect with the Elkhorn Crest Trail.

ROCK CREEK BUTTE SCRAMBLE: You can climb to the highest peak of the Elkhorn Range on a nontechnical scramble. The Elkhorn Crest contours below Rock Creek Butte about a mile west of the junction with Twin Lakes Trail. To climb the 9,106-foot peak, follow the trail to the butte’s flattish-meadowy west side (not on the craggy exposed northeast side). The most direct route begins on Twin Lakes Trailhead and climbs about 3,700 feet and 6 miles (12 round-trip) to the summit, which is marked by a large rock carin.

MOUNTAIN BIKING: Bikes are allowed, and most common, on the 14 miles from Marble Pass Trailhead to the boundary of the North Fork John Day Wilderness area. Most bikers either ride out and back on the Elkhorn Crest Trail from Marble Pass or complete a 20-mile loop on the Elkhorn Crest Trail, Summit Lake Trail and down a rough Forest Service Road along the North Powder River. For more detailed information, contact Range Tour and Shuttle at 541.403.2616 or rangetour(at)gmail.com.

DIRECTIONS: Directions to Anthony Lake Trailhead: From I-84 between La Grande and Baker City, take Exit 285 in North Powder. In North Powder, follow the ski area signs on Highway 237 for 4 miles to Ellis Road. Turn left on Ellis Road and go about 1 mile to the Anthony Lake Highway. Turn right and follow the Anthony Lake Highway (becomes Forest Road 73) for 16 miles to trailhead (just before the campground entrance) on the left.

Directions to Marble Pass: The awful nature of this road cannot be stressed enough — only high-clearance vehicles should attempt this



This photo taken on July 9, shows a view of Rock Creek Butte, the tallest peak, at 9,106 feet, in the Elkhorn Mountains.



This photo taken on July 8 shows the Elkhorn Crest Trail tightropes across the Elkhorn Range of Eastern Oregon.

drive. From Baker City, go north on Highway 30 to the northern edge of town to Pocahontas Road; turn left (west) on Pocahontas Road and go about 7 miles to the Marble Creek Road (becomes Forest Road 6510); turn left on Marble Creek Road and go 9 miles to the top of the ridge to the trailhead.

Note: Although there is access from the southwest, near Sumpter on Road 6510, it is not recommended. The roads are even worse than the route from the Baker City side.

Directions to Twin Lake Trailhead: From Baker City, travel south on Highway 7 (also known as the Elkhorn Scenic Byway) toward John Day, for about 22 miles. Turn right on Deer Creek Road, and veer left to stay on Forest Road 6550. Drive about 3.5 miles and turn right on Forest Road 6530. Go 0.6 mile and turn left on Forest Road 030 for 2.5 miles to the trailhead entrance sign. The final 0.5 mile is steep and quite rough.

BRIEFLY Nature hike highlights Wallowa Lake

JOSEPH — To learn about Wallowa Lake’s botany and geologic history, people are invited to an Into the Wallowa Outing. Wallowa Lake State Park Wanderings with Land Trust Staff is Saturday, Aug. 8 from 9 a.m. to noon. Participants will meet near the teepee at Wallowa Lake State Park at Joseph.

The land trust’s mission is to protect Wallowa County’s rural nature by working with private landowners, American Indian tribes, local communities and governmental entities to conserve land.

For more information, including other outings and lectures, contact julia@wallowalandtrust.org, 541-426-2042 or visit www.wallowalandtrust.org.

A handy guide to hiking the Elkhorn Mtns.

The Statesman Journal

Here’s a guide to almost all of the best easy, moderate and challenging hikes at Anthony Lake and the Elkhorn Mountains.

EASY HIKES AT ANTHONY LAKE

The great thing about Anthony Lake is the number of easy and moderate hikes nearby. Here are a few.

Hoffer Lakes (1.2 miles, easy)

The best easy hike at Anthony Lake heads to Hoffer Lakes, a pair of scenic pools nestled below craggy peaks.

From the day-use area at Anthony Lake, the route follows the trail past walk-in campsites and then onto Hoffer Lakes Trail (hash)1641. It’s just a 0.5-mile hike from Anthony Lake to Hoffer Lakes. We swam in both and even found a small waterfall up against the cliffs.

Black Lake (2.2 miles, easy)

This hike is a little more interesting than Hoffer Lakes, even if the end result isn’t quite as dramatic.

Beginning near the boat ramp at Anthony Lake, Black Lake Trail (hash)1600 passes the aptly named Lily Pad Lake, swings onto the Elkhorn Crest Trail and arrives at large and pretty Black Lake after just one mile. We swam from a log jutting out into the lake.

The trail climbs a semi-steep section near the end, but is still classified as easy.

Dutch Flat Loop (8.2 miles to viewpoint, 10.4 miles to lake, difficult)

This is the most spectacular but most difficult hike at Anthony Lake by far. It’s not really for kids, unless they are very strong hikers.

The trail begins at the Elkhorn Crest Trailhead (right next to Anthony Lake Campground) and climbs 1,000 feet to Angel Pass and Dutch Flat Saddle, both beautiful spots.

If you want to swim in very pretty Dutch Flat Lake, it’s an extra 2.2 miles and 600 feet of elevation loss and gain. The loop turns right onto Crawfish Basin Trail before following an old road back to Anthony Lake.

Make sure to bring a map and plan a few hours for this adventure.

HIKES NEAR ANTHONY LAKE

North Fork John Day River (5 miles, easy)

Follow the Wild and Scenic North Fork John Day River on a trail to a place called the “Bigfoot Hilton” on a five-mile out-and-back hike.

The hike begins at the North Fork John Day campground just off the Elkhorn Scenic Byway.

Baldy Lake (2 to 3.5 miles, easy)

This beautiful cliff-rimmed lake is a bit of wild card because the access road to reach it is so awful.

Follow Road 7345 and signs for Baldy Lake for two miles before parking (unless you have a rugged high-clearance vehicle). Hike the road for about 0.5 mile and the trail an additional mile to the lake.

THE ELKHORN CREST

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