One final climb

80-year-old reaches southern Oregon peak for the last time

By MARK FREEMAN
Mail Tribune

Art Ekerson via AP

In this photo taken Sept. 15 and provided by Art Ekerson, Ekerson, center, sits on the summit of Mount McLoughlin for his 80th birthday near Butte Falls,with his daughter, Cheryl Krieg, left, and son Kevin Ekerson, 45 years after the first time he led them to the summit. During the previous 41 times climbing to the top of Mount McLoughlin, Art Ekerson would soak up the views of Southern Oregon and Northern California in a panorama like none other. But trip No. 42 had a distinctly familial feel.

BUTTE FALLS — During the previous 41 times climbing to the top of Mount McLoughlin, Art Ekerson would soak up the views of Southern Oregon and Northern California in a panorama like none other.

But trip No. 42 on Sept. 15 had a distinctly familial feel. He couldn't let his eyes venture past son Kevin and daughter Cheryl as they peered off the peak like they did the first time they joined their father atop Mount McLoughlin 45 years earlier. And next to them stood 22-year-old granddaughter Keely, who helped save Ekerson's life in a nearly fatal climb in 2010.

Hell of a place to celebrate Ekerson's 80th birthday.

"It's kind of like a reunion," Ekerson says. "There comes a time you realize there's a last time for that sort of thing."

What started as the adventure of a Boy Scout 66 years ago and continued over the decades through all sorts of family milestones, Ekerson's regular dates with the 11-mile round trip on Mt. McLoughlin may be over, but the love affair will never die.

"It's local, it's close and when you get up there it's a beautiful view," he says. "It's like the old saying, 'Why do you climb it? 'Because it's there.'"

"You feel like you've accomplished something," he says. "Then you eat your lunch, and it's all downhill from there."

Ascending the 9,495-foot mountain has been a constant in Ekerson's life, from those teenage days through his tour as mountain-climbing instructor in the U.S. Army and later as the owner of Medford's Rogue Ski Shop for more than three decades.

Since retirement, the Ekersons winter on a boat in the Bahamas and regularly make it back to the Rogue Valley, where Ekerson regularly entertains visitors at the family cabin at Lake of the Woods. Often the visits transformed into a day on the mountain.

"He likes to host people on things they normally wouldn't do," says son Kevin Ekerson, 52, of Jacksonville. "That lets people learn they can do something they didn't think they could and he's always liked that."

That leadership tendency began in 1949, when Art Eckerson was a 14-year-old attending the Boy Scout camp near the trail. That campout included a hike up the mountain.

"It was exciting and I got to where I loved it," he says.

The next three years he worked at the camp for $1 a day, and his duties included leading a half-dozen Boy Scout groups on ascents while he worked his way up to Eagle Scout.

Ekerson helped parlay those experiences and training into a stint teaching climbing in Japan to American and other armed forces during the mid-1950s. Ekerson, however, kept returning to the mountain of his youth, and over time he noticed the ascent numbers accumulate.

The 75th birthday trip almost became his last. While on the descent, Ekerson's trifocals betrayed him, causing him to slip on a rock and plunge about 12 feet down. He struck a boulder head-on, and he thought it was over.

His granddaughter Keely, then a teenager, scrambled up enough gauze to keep his wound in check before he was airlifted more than four hours later to safety. The 26 stitches left a scar on his scalp but not on his mindset.

"I wanted to do it one more time and I did," Ekerson says. "I thought that would be my last time. Then I turned 80."

The clan had to wait past Ekerson's Aug. 16 birthday in a bow to family schedules and to give Kevin Ekerson more time to heal from a skiing accident. They nailed the trip, with Ekerson feeling just as spry the day after the climb than ever.

Art Ekerson via AP

In this 1970 photo provided by Art Ekerson, Ekerson's children Cheryl Ekerson, right, and Kevin Ekerson flash peace signs on their first trip to the summit of Mount McLoughlin near Butte Falls.

The man who kept in shape by hiking, skiing and moonlighting as a rancher still has a pop in his step.

"I still feel great," he says. "I still can do anything, but it won't last much longer. That's a fact."

So is the realization that there won't be any more Ekerson family reunions at the top of Southern Oregon. At least not with their patriarch there.

"My kids made me sign a statement saying I'd never do it again," Ekerson says.

October a glorious time for Northwest hikers, bikers

By RICH LANDERS
The (Spokane) Spokesman-Review

SPOKANE — Fall colors, crisp air and blue skies make October a premier month to hit the region's trails on foot or by mountain bike.

The Inland Northwest has more trail options than anyone can cover in a season if not a decade. We're blessed with urban gems at the Finch Arboretum and Riverside State Park to longer adventures in the Idaho Selkirks and other spectacular mountains in every direction.

Whether you have a few hours or a few days, there's a colorful destination ready for your arrival.

Gated old logging roads can be excellent places for an autumn walk or bike ride, especially with dogs that can get their exercise unleashed without issue.

Huckleberry, aspen, cottonwood, mountain ash and other shrubs and trees are shedding leaves of red and yellow to carpet the ground with color. Larch are putting on their annual autumn show of golden brilliance in the region's high country, from the North Cascades across the high Selkirks and Purcell Mountains of British Columbia and through the Bitterroots to the east.

A late-October breeze in a stand of larch turns on a shower of amber needles.

The normal preparations for hitting the trail apply to autumn outings — checking the weather report, leaving an itinerary with a responsible person and carrying the 10 essentials of map, food, clothing and gear to get you through an unexpected overnight experience. But autumn also adds a few notable twists to keep in mind, such as:

Rich Landers/The Spokesman-Review via AP

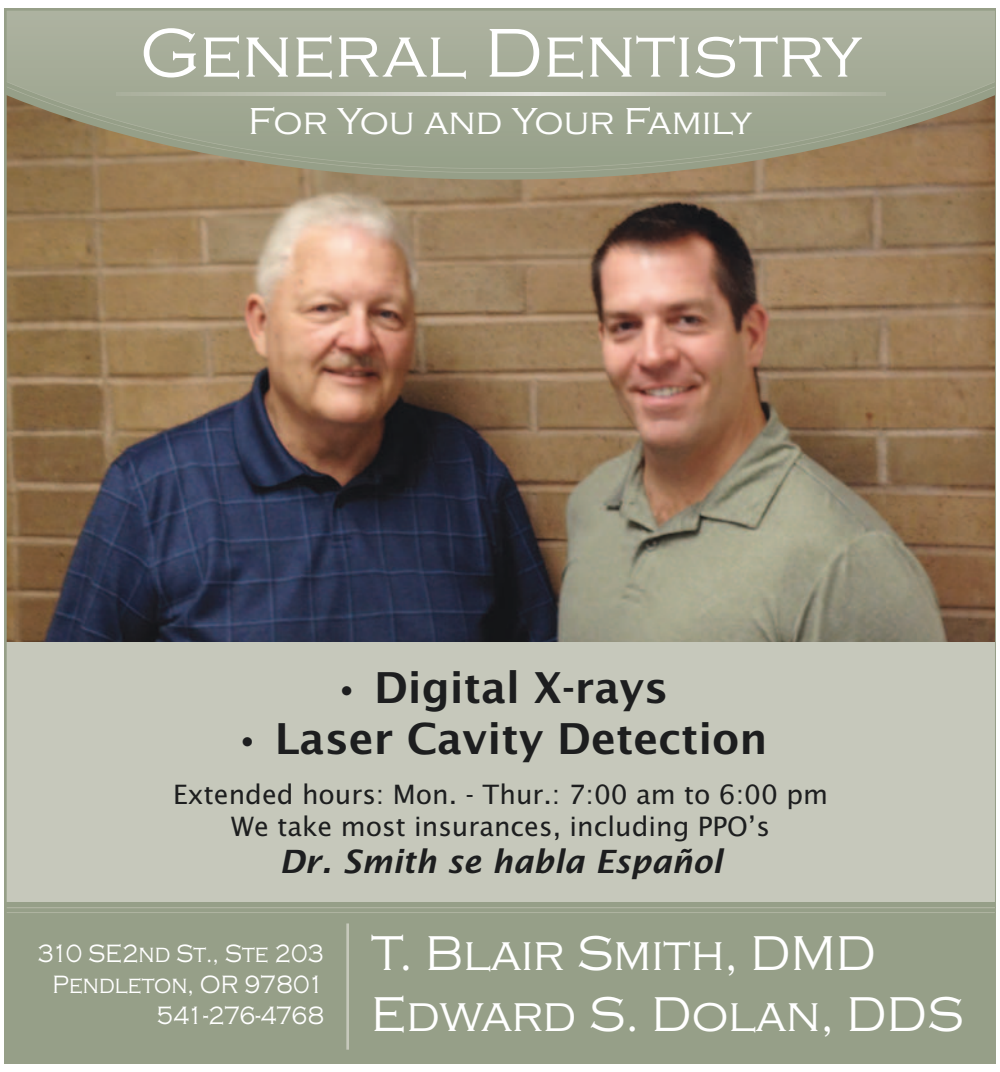
Erik Schmidt, Gonzaga University associate professor of philosophy, pedals his mountain bike on Oct. 3, above the treeline on Abercrombie Mountain northwest of Metaline Falls, Wash.

- Days are shorter, so get an early start.
- Hunting seasons are in full swing, so wear bright clothing and avoid blacks, browns and whites that resemble game.
- Cooler temperatures require closer attention to wearing and bringing layers of non-cotton clothing.
- This year, it's even more important than usual to check ahead on national forest websites to be sure roads or trails to your destination aren't blocked by a wildfire closure. Fires and fire-mop up still active in some areas.

1. **Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge** (south of Cheney) — An easy stroll along the refuge's Pine Lakes rewards hikers with colorful fall scenery worth the trip in itself. But bring binoculars to appreciate the even more vivid wild art of migrating waterfowl. The hike leads past waters frequented by trumpeter swans that produced cygnets this year that will be fledgling this fall. Bring your Northwest Forest Pass, federal senior or disabled pass or Duck Stamp to avoid the $3 vehicle entrance fee.

2. **Pulaski Trail** (a mile out of Wallace toward Moon Pass) — Interpretive signs along a 4-mile round-trip trail tell a story of heroism and survival en route to the mine where Ed Pulaski saved his crew from a 1910 fires blowup. Info: Historic Wallace Chamber of Commerce, (208) 753-7151.

3. **Fault Lake** (Trailhead access north of Sandpoint,12 miles up Pack River Road) — This 12-mile round trip trail is especially appropriate for mountain biking to treeline in the Idaho Selkirks and then hiking to Fault and McCormick lakes and bagging Hunt Peak before saddling up again for a blissful 6-mile descent.

4. **Moose Mountain Loop** (north of Lake Pend Oreille up Trestle Creek and Lightning Creek roads) — Hike 2 or 3 enjoyable miles to any of several backcountry lakes or, better yet, do the classic 9-mile loop trip to Blacktail, Moose Mountain, Moose Lake and back to the trailhead. Leaving Spokane at 6:30 a.m., you can hike this entire 9-mile loop and a side trip to Lake Estelle and be home by 6 p.m. — tired, hungry and fulfilled.

5. **Abercrombie Mountain (northeast of Colville)** — The 6.5-mile round-trip trail up to the summit of Eastern Washington's second-highest peak leads to sweeping views of fall colors, especially the larch in the prime of their "goldness" in the Pend Oreille River Valley by the third week of October.