

Loop hike in Eagle Cap is arduous but rewarding

By JAYSON JACOBY
The Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — I love to hike but I hate to backtrack.

I think most hikers consider it onerous to retrace their steps, and naturally so.

When I’m getting around solely by leg and lung power I want gratification for every calorie burned, and trodding on my own bootprints in the trail dust seems to me wasted effort, a depressing bit of repetition.

What I like, then, is the loop hike.

There is a pleasing completeness to such a trip, a sense of fulfillment with none of the plodding over familiar ground that attends out-and-back routes.

But loop hikes require commitment.

At least the ones do in which the second half of the loop covers tougher terrain than the first half. In that case it would be easier, at least physically, to backtrack.

But I’d rather subject my thighs to a difficult climb than endure the boredom of repeating a section of flatter trail.

Hiking, above everything, ought not be boring.

No one, I’d wager, would use that word to describe the 14-mile loop my wife, Lisa, and I hiked in August in the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

Some might deploy rather earthier adjectives, however.

I certainly did.

Our base camp was at Minam Lake.

I plotted the route in advance, using a large scale map that made the hike seem a trivial endeavor. We had only to cover about the length of my index finger, after all.

We had between us hiked almost the whole of the loop during previous visits, though, so we understood that the more significant statistic wasn’t mileage anyway.

It was elevation gain.

This typically is the case in the mountains, where the rumpled topography can obscure reality with an effectiveness that a master magician would envy.

I was attracted to this route not only because it was a loop, but because it included the crossing of two major passes I had yet to ascend in the Eagle Cap.

Those are Frazier Pass, on the divide between the upper Minam River and East Eagle Creek, and Ivan Carper Pass, between the East and West forks of the Lostine River.

In all this is a three-pass loop. The middle pass is Horton, a granitic cleft between the East Eagle Creek cirque and the Lake Basin.

Of course a loop hike that involves three passes means you have to climb, and descend, all three.

But after tallying up the contour lines on a topographic map I reasoned that the total elevation gain — roughly 3,600 feet — though considerable was not terribly excessive by the standards of the Eagle Cap.

“Not terribly excessive” is not, of course, a synonym for “easy.”

Still and all, there are few if any routes of comparable distance and elevation gain in the Eagle Cap that include three passes, and the elegance of the route exerted a powerful appeal for me.

We decided to hike the loop counterclockwise because that meant the final two miles would be downhill, from Ivan Carper Pass to Minam Lake, rather than uphill.

This also made for an easy start to the hike — 1.5 miles of moderate descent from Minam Lake to the



In this Aug. 20 photo, Mirror Lake, the larger lake in the left center, in the Lake Basin of the Eagle Cap Wilderness area is seen in the distance near Joseph. Eagle Cap peak is at the far right.



This Aug. 20 photo, from the trail just below Horton Pass, shows two of the major drainages in the Eagle Cap Wilderness near Joseph. The East Fork of the Lostine River is shown at left and Hurricane Creek is seen at right as well as the summit of the Matterhorn, the white peak at far right.

Frazier Pass trail junction.

This junction is marked by a sign but the trail itself peters out in the meadow on the north side of the Minam River. Hike due south to the river and look for the continuation of the trail, and for logs that have been sawed through by trail crews, on the opposite side. The tread becomes obvious once the trail starts the steep climb toward Frazier Pass.

If you’re accustomed to the horse-friendly, switchbacking trails common in parts of the Eagle Cap — the route to Frances Lake being a notable example with its grade so gentle that the elevation gain is nearly imperceptible — the Frazier Pass trail might seem rather rude in its straightfoward ascent.

Fortunately the views help to compensate for the toil, if only by enticing you to rest at the occasional

gap in the subalpine fir forest. To the north you can see the basin where Minam Lake lies and the upper canyon of the Minam River, and to the west the basaltic top of China Cap peers over the granitic peaks at the head of West Eagle Creek.

The descent from the pass to East Eagle Creek is similarly precipitous.

It’s also rather longer than we expected. Lisa and I have hiked the whole of the East Eagle Creek canyon, from the trailhead to Horton Pass, and we knew that every foot of elevation we lost we would have to regain on the subsequent climb. Yet the trail, to our escalating frustration, seemed determined to continue downhill, even, for several hundred feet, after we finally splashed across East Eagle Creek.

East Eagle canyon is one of

the textbook glacial valleys of the Wallowa Mountains, a mile-wide, U-shaped trough in granite and limestone. The walls show distinct avalanche chutes — sections where all the trees are about the same age, resembling a replanted clearcut or a Christmas tree farm, only much narrower than either.

The climb to Horton Pass is more typical for the Eagle Cap, with a couple dozen switchbacks and easier grades than Frazier Pass.

The vistas are more expansive, too. Horton Pass is on the northwest shoulder of Eagle Cap, and a rough trail climbs that shoulder to connect to the main trail to the summit of the wilderness area’s namesake peak.

The Lake Basin begins at the foot of the pass, and the distinctive white thumb of the Matterhorn, second-highest in the Wallowas to Sacajawea but decidedly more

spectacular with its great west face, rises above. From the pass you look nearly straight down both the East Fork of the Lostine and Hurricane Creek, which are, along with the forks of the Wallowa River, the major north-flowing drainages in this corner of the Eagle Cap.

From Horton Pass the trail drops to a junction — north to the East Fork of the Lostine, or east to Mirror Lake and the rest of the Lake Basin. But we weren’t going to either place so we opted for a spur trail that follows the east shore of Upper Lake, then hiked across an open slope for a few hundred yards to the Ivan Carper Pass trail.

This was Lisa’s second trip over the pass but, as I mentioned, my first.

It’s a challenging climb, not so steep as Frazier Pass, but unrelenting. We stopped to filter water and fill our bottles from the stream that tumbles off the east side of the pass.

At 8,560 feet, Ivan Carper Pass is the apex of the loop, about 100 feet higher than Horton Pass.

(Frazier’s summit is a middling 7,560 feet.)

Having covered 12 miles or so, we were grateful that the rest of the hike was downhill.

Although the final stint hardly qualified as a stroll.

We could see Minam Lake, our destination, from the pass. But as we dropped it seemed that the lake, shimmering indigo in the August sun, grew no closer.

This was of course an optical illusion, yet our lack of progress, and the sense that we might not reach the lakeshore until long after dusk, felt as real as the fatigue in our muscles.

But there was nothing to do but to plod forward.

Besides which, I knew there was beer cooling in the stream near our campsite. There are few incentives more powerful.

BRIEFLY

Coeur d’Alene Tribe to open eagle aviary, a Northwest first

COEUR D’ALENE, Idaho (AP) — The Northwest’s first tribal eagle aviary is opening on the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation.

The Spokesman-Review reports that the Coeur d’Alene Tribe is partnering with the nonprofit Birds of Prey Northwest to create The House of the Bald Eagle for birds that have been injured and can’t survive in the wild.

Seven other tribes have U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permits to operate eagle aviaries, but they are all in the Southwest.

The permit allows the tribe to keep captive eagles and collect their feathers for ceremonial and religious use.

There are about 80 raptor rehabilitation facilities in the region. Eagles that recover but can’t live on their own need permanent homes, and the Fish and Wildlife Service says the need has grown with the resurgence of bald and golden eagle populations.

No significant impact of mineral testing near Yellowstone

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — The state Department of Environmental Quality says a Canadian company’s proposal to explore for precious metals in a mining district north of Yellowstone National Park

will not have a significant impact on the environment.

The agency’s draft environmental assessment on Lucky Minerals’ plan, which was released Thursday, recommends the company be given an exploration license, with some additional measures to mitigate any damage.

The DEQ is taking public comment through Dec. 12.

Lucky Minerals wants to obtain core samples from up to 46 drill holes on private land in the Absaroka Mountains in Park County, about 12 miles southeast of Emigrant.

The total project disturbance area would be just under 5 acres. The company wants to gauge the area’s copper, gold, silver and molybdenum deposits.

Yellowstone sees another month of record tourism

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. (AP) — Record numbers of visitors continued to flood Yellowstone National Park in September despite burning wildfires and a temporary gate closure.

Yellowstone visitation increased by 3.17 percent in September compared to last year, and overall visitation to the park is up 4.1 percent over the first eight months.

That’s a total of 3.9 million tourists so far this year.

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