

Swap your wheels for a pair of skis

Meacham Divide Nordic Area is one of the larger groomed Nordic areas in Oregon

By MAVIS HARTZ
For the EO Media Group

MEACHAM — Winter is finally here and it is time for some fun in the snow. On a good snow year, one of the most beautiful places to play is the Meacham Divide Nordic Area.

Meacham Divide is one of the larger groomed Nordic areas in Oregon with 18 miles of groomed trails, according to the Blue Mountain Nordic Club

It is just 36 miles east of Pendleton and 1.7 miles north off of Interstate 84 on Summit Road, at Exit 243. Though the road is plowed, it is not of first priority importance and it might be one of the last roads cleared after a snow event and is best if tackled with a vehicle built for winter driving. It is in a Sno-Park area, so make sure to bring traction devices and a parking permit.

Park at the Emily Sno-Park and locate the beginning of the track on the west side of the parking area.

To the right of the path is a collection box. The Blue Mountain Nordic Club is the lovely group of volunteers, based in La Grande, that maintains and grooms this gem. They request each user donate a minimum \$7 per escapade to cover the costs involved in keeping the Nordic Area open and groomed.

Leave the parking area on Loppet and enjoy an easy rolling half-mile start to the bottom of Moose Huff Hill.

This section is wonderful for introducing new adventurers to low angle snow sports, and dogs are welcome. If snowshoeing is the mode of the day, please stay to one side of the grooming off of the set twin ski track. This allows the track to last longer and other users the joy of smooth skate and classic skiing. Remember as you are gearing up, different snow conditions provide more resistance and work to cover the same amount of distance. Do not give yourself a hard time if your goal is 10 miles, but you have to stop after one due to the extra work the snow has provided for you.

Moose Huff Hill is the steepest climb of the day, reaching over a 5% grade and the end of the groom open to dogs. Con-



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Photo/Jeff Petersen, File

Meacham Divide offers 18 miles of groomed cross-country ski trails.



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Photo/Jeff Petersen, File
Trails like Roller Coaster Loop are easy to find.

tinue on Loppet to the highest point of the route at 4,280 feet before gliding to the lowest point, with an incredible view, Loppet Point.

Loppet Point, also called Rock Spring, looks at least 1,000 feet down into Meacham Creek and the Union Pacific Railroad.

Though the train is easy to hear as it chugs along and whistles at the passing animals, it is difficult to spot due to the numerous little canyons and pure expanse. Continue the amazing spectacle by

If you go Meacham Divide Nordic area is accessed from Summit Road, exit 243 on Interstate 84, 36 miles east from Pendleton. At the exit, travel 1.7 miles northeast on Forest Service Road 31. All-wheel-drive vehicles are generally required. A Sno-park pass is required. Recommended donation: \$7 per person.

swinging around Quarry Loop and, if you are lucky, gaze east to see the Owsley Hogback.

Finish out Quarry Loop and return to Loppet, keeping an eye out for Tillicum Loop as you work your way back along Red Saddle, huffing and puffing to return to the high point. Turn off onto Tillicum Loop, an almost 2-mile open loop that includes yet more incredible landscapes. Enjoy the view down Tillicum Creek and into the distant Meacham Creek drainage,

this time to the north, as the path undulates at the perfect pitch to keep a comfortable momentum going on Nordic skis.

Ponder the naming of Tillicum Creek, the Chinook word loosely translated to “friend,” and the idea that the Chinook practiced head flattening that would leave the forehead a status symbol for all to see.

Tie back into Loppet and look for Butcher Loop.

Butcher Loop is fewer than 2 miles of an open loop that visits Butcher Point. The plunge to Butcher Point will wake up all but the most staunch Nordic skier, but the panorama is worth it. Butcher Point allows a final and glorious panorama that looks west and down into Butcher Creek and beyond. Continue back onto Loppet and the waiting Emily Sno-Park.

Along the way, there are still a handful of other loops, such as Kansas, Pendleton Plunge and Roller Coaster, if your legs are still fresh and more wandering is called for.

This area is run on the dedication and funds of volunteers. It is also at an elevation that is prone to significant snow gain and loss.

These two factors make it important to check conditions before making it the destination of the day. The Blue Mountain Nordic Club posts recent updates and grooming schedules on its Facebook page as well as its website, <https://onc.org/bmnc/>. The Oregon Department of Transportation has two weather webcams on I-84 at Meacham, in the area that can easily be seen on its TripCheck website. Through these, the traveler can learn if there is enough snow for the area to be open and if the freeway is currently allowing for travel.

As with most experiences worth the time and effort, no one will be there to save you and it might be best to travel with a buddy. Make sure to wear or carry multiple layers of clothing, extra food and water, materials to make a fire and some way to communicate with the outside world. Tell a responsible individual where you are heading and when you should be back, making sure to check in upon returning.

Follow the Blue Mountain Nordic Club’s brief list of rules to preserve the track for others and pick up your dog poop. If by chance you feel that the area needs more love and maintenance than it is receiving, the club is always looking for more capital and volunteers and can be reached through the routes previously listed.

CAUGHT OVGARD

Planes, cranes and automobiles

By LUKE OVGARD
For the East Oregonian

OCALA, Fla. — As the man-sized bird with a beak larger than my forearm sprinted toward me, my flip-flop strap broke off as I flailed and failed to pry it from the inch-deep mud. It left me stumbling backward and thinking to myself, “So this is how I die.”

It was one of those “Oh *%#%5E” moments you have from time to time, and it was not the first one I’d had involving birds.

There was the time, as a kid, I was devoured by a hawk after climbing a tree too near its nest. I fell out of the tree into the ditch and sprinted away, covered in mud, taking shelter in our nearby shed.

Of course, there were at least half a dozen seagulls and grebes I’ve hooked by mistake while fishing, usually when they fly into my line, and they can draw blood.

Then, of course, there was the time I stood on a log to shoot at a grouse, only to find the log full of angry yellowjackets.

I’d survived all of those encounters, but I feared that wouldn’t be the case this time. Cranes can spear small rodents and birds, and my flesh is arguably less resilient than skin covered in fur or scales.

My crabwalk turned to full sprint, which probably didn’t help my cause in the eyes of the cranes, a bird known to eat crustaceans. Once I got a solid 50 yards away from the angry sandhill crane, it stopped and just stared at me, gloating over the soiled man allegedly more evolved than it.

Soaked in sweat, mud and shame, I carefully edged closer to my car, which stood about halfway between me and the crane. I’d step forward, and it would match my every move. It would’ve been comical if it wasn’t horrifying.

Calculating the distance in my mind, I was able to parse out that we would meet before I made it to the car if I moved at this pace. So I picked up a rock, threw it next to the bird to distract it momentarily, and sprinted for my car door. It craned its neck to the right just long enough to give me the element of surprise, and I got a few steps of my mad dash in before it could react.

It sprinted for me, but I was faster. OK, well, I had a head start.

I swung open the door, blocking its menacing beak and hopping into my car just feet away from it. The crane and its nearby mate just stared daggers at me as I backed the car away and tried another access point on the pond. No way was I going to risk being skewered for a new fish species. Not again.

Lined topminnow

I’d flown to Florida for a conference, and paid for a rental out of pocket, so I could



Photo contributed by Luke Ovgard

This crane stopped and stared at the author long enough to pose for a picture after chasing the author down at a remote pond in north-central Florida.



Photo contributed by Luke Ovgard

Lined topminnow, *Fundulus lineolatus*, are sexually dimorphic, meaning the male (vertical bars) and female (horizontal bars) look different.

fish the evenings. There’s a lot of daylight after 3 p.m. in Florida, and I figured I can always sleep when I’m dead, so I took the day to drive up to Ocala, about an hour out of Orlando, to meet some friends and chase rare micros in the area.

Now, I’ve been skewered by fish, nails, thorns, branches and sharp rocks, but I wasn’t about to add “territorial bird” to that list — especially not after I’d already had a productive days fishing some nearby springs.

My friends, Zain Khalid and Jessel Sanchez, had quickly shown me the ropes, and I waded through the frigid springs to catch both of the species I was after: iron-color shiner and rainwater killifish. The former was easy. On micro sabikis, I could’ve caught 100 or more, but I stopped at 20. The latter was difficult, but once I figured it out, I quickly caught half a dozen, including a prized male about the size of my thumb. Zain and Jessel had brought a kayak, and

they opted to paddle downriver to chase trophy bowfin and/or try to catch an always infuriating chubsucker, a fish almost impossible to catch for even the most skilled angler.

When they took the kayak downriver, I opted to chase another nearby micro: the lined topminnow.

They’re allegedly common in this part of Florida, and Jessel told me to just look for any pond and fish it. It took me a few minutes of combing through my maps and Fish-brain, but in just a few minutes, I found one. The pond was natural, surrounded by vegetation, and once I got through the menacing cranes, I learned it was cold (for Florida) and spring-fed.

Topminnows zip around on the surface of the water, thus the name, and they are quite aggressive if you don’t get too close and spook them.

By simply dragging a baited micro hook on the surface like tiny topwater, you can catch a fish on every cast. And that’s exactly what I did.

Dozens of fish came out to play, and I caught both male and female lined topminnows and kept them briefly in my photo tank, side-by-side, to see the sexual dimorphism, which just means males and females look notably different.

It’s not unique to this fish, as many species (including humans) have physically unique external differences between genders not limited to just sex organs. But the magnitude of difference between male and female variants of lined topminnow is unique. It’s not simply a matter of one fish being drab and the other being colorful; the two are dramatically different in appearance.

Males have thicker, widely spaced vertical black stripes, while females have tightly spaced horizontal stripes. The difference, when seen side-by-side, is dramatic.

Also dramatic? Staring down a bird the standing on the ground and almost meeting your eye line. Fortunately, my travel troubles sort of ended before they began on this trip, but that doesn’t immunize me from future struggles.

So while you wrap up this story and move on to the next, consider the words of Steve Martin’s character, Neal, from “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” but swap out “Trains” for “Cranes” in your own mind because that’s punny: “Eh, look, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m not much of a conversationalist, and I really want to finish this article, a friend of mine wrote it, so.”

Yes, I suppose that means we can be friends.

Read more at caughtovgard.com; Follow on Instagram and Fishbrain @lukeovgard; Contact luke.ovgard@gmail.com.

Backcountry festival benefits avalanche center

Baker County hosts Feb. 7-9 event

By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

BAKER COUNTY — A fun-filled weekend celebrating winter recreation in our region that will support and help sustain the Wallowa Avalanche Center.

The Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival is Feb. 7-9, with activities in Baker City and Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort. Participants are invited to a screening of Teton Gravity Research’s new flick, “Fire on the Mountain.” The Friday, Feb. 7 viewing is at 7 p.m. with the doors opening at 6 p.m. at Lefty’s Taphouse in Baker City.

The evening event is sponsored by Barley Brown’s Brewery and their beer will be available for purchase. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$5 for students with identification and free for kids under 12. Also, a raffle (tickets are \$2 each or 3 for \$5) and live auction will benefit the avalanche center.

The following day — Saturday, Feb. 8 — the party moves to Anthony Lakes for the Fourth Annual Kip Rand Memorial Backcountry Race. It begins at 8 a.m. in front of the main lodge.

Overall winners will receive a 2020-21 season pass at Anthony Lakes or a \$150 cash prize. For more about the race, visit <https://eobf.redpodium.com/kip-rand-memorial-backcountry-race>.

Also, at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m., companion rescue and avalanche basics clinics will be offered and lead by WAC forecasters — participants can register at the EOBf tent. At 3 p.m., a gear auction and live music by Bag of Hammers takes place in the Star-bottle Saloon.

Wrapping up the weekend on Sunday, Feb. 9 is a social ski day. Groups can self-organize and explore the backcountry surrounding Anthony Lakes. OAP Director Michael Hatch and WAC Director Victor McNeil will lead a tour into Angel Basin starting at 9 a.m. from the Anthony Lakes lodge. Those that are interested can register Saturday at the EOBf booth or email Michael Hatch at mhatch@eou.edu.

Activities on Saturday and Sunday are free to attend and participate in. For additional details about the festival, visit www.eou.edu/outdoor/eastern-oregon-backcountry-festival-2020.

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