

Autumn at Elephant Rock



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THE NATURAL WORLD

A unique basalt formation known as Elephant Rock stands sentry over the Umatilla River canyon 30 miles east of Pendleton. The geologic landmark is most easily viewed when you travel upstream on River Road.

A nearby road sign, trimmed in red and showcasing half a dozen bullet holes, serves as a boundary marker for those not familiar with local lore: "Welcome to the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Home of the Cayuse-Walla Walla-Umatilla."

The three-horse logo — paint, black and appaloosa — remind of the once-great wealth of the three area tribes whose homelands covered over 6,200 square miles, stretching from the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers east to the Grande Ronde Valley, and as far west as The Dalles, where they traded with the "salmon eaters."

The story behind Elephant Rock connects closely to members of the Cayuse tribe who, known for their fierce nature and expert horsemanship, roamed the hills and valleys of the Blue Mountains. Early fur traders called them "Cailloux," meaning "People of the Stones or Rocks."

The nearby remains of three true elephant species, including the extinct *Elephas columbi* (a formidable specimen that stood 11 feet tall at the shoulder), reinforce how historical narrative often converges with the archeological record.

As recounted by tribal elders, Elephant Rock marks the location where a young elephant was turned to stone after his curiosity got the best of him and he disobeyed instructions given by the trickster Coyote to "not look back."

Recent rainfall brought welcome relief to the nearby foothills and raised the voice of running water where the spent carcasses of chinook salmon decay in shallow riffles. Their ocean-derived nutrients are part of the circle of life for aquatic creatures and terrestrial wildlife that prowl the river corridor.



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Elephant Rock is on a steep slope above the Umatilla River at the southeast boundary of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Autumn also signals the arrival of mountain whitefish in schools of a dozen or more. They can be taken from deep pools on a No. 18 Beadhead Chironomid drifted deep or with a live stonefly nymph hooked through the collar, although the latter method is considered cheating in some social circles.

When maple trees drop their last leaf and heirloom apples ripe for picking drop to the ground, our cabin's well pump is turned off. Water must be hauled for washing up and to flush the toilet. "Plan your activities and your diet accordingly," I remind visitors. But it's only 50 yards to the river, and I've yet to fill more than a dozen plastic milk jugs over a long weekend.

Reading through passages from old journals, I'm reminded that I am alone in carrying on a fall fishing tradition that's four decades long and counting. There's no hurry to get on the stream, though. Angling opportunity is best during brief periods when sunlight penetrates the leafy stream canopy and dark-hued

trout can be seen rising from the shadows.

Dew hangs heavy on bracken fern when I hike up the North Fork Umatilla Wilderness trail. Refusing to be seduced by the sight of the first pool I encounter, I wade shock-cold water in old tennis shoes and jeans, favoring a flannel shirt to ward off the chill. New-spun spider webs and overhanging alder restricts casting yet I remain hopeful for a chance at one last trout before the season closes.

The author-naturalist Roderick Haig-Brown wrote, "Fall fishing is a revival after the quieter times of summer." This change in season leads to aggressive feeding in response to declining water temperature. As if sensing the need to load up on high-calorie morsels, rainbow trout are attracted to oversize fly patterns that resemble the flopping action of October caddisflies. Showcasing vivid parr marks on silvery flanks that flash iridescent purple, native trout are too beautiful to remove from the water. I carefully release



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Declining water temperatures make trout hungry for oversized fly patterns.

them so that others might also thrill to their aggressive strike.

Light is fading after a brief sojourn up the North Fork Wilderness trail. I motor down River Road, park my truck on a narrow shoulder, and clamber up the steep slope to where Elephant Rock stands tall on a narrow grassy bench. Its presence provides permanence in a world where seasons change in response to an evolving space-time continuum. The purple fruit of elderberry hangs like clusters of stunted Concord grapes from tangles of brush crowding the roadside ditch. An upriver breeze tugs at tired leaves that cling tenaciously to streamside alder; their stored-up chlorophyll has long since faded to unmask pigments of yellow and orange. Further upslope, sumac glows blood red in low light.

Leaning into the hillside to maintain my balance, I work up a slanted deer trail lined with lichen-scarred rocks. Elephant Rock appears much larger when viewed up close, stretching nearly 10 paces long and towering twice as high as this 6-footer (in cowboy boots, anyway) can reach. Closing my eyes as if in silent prayer, I run my hand across the craggy surface of its rounded rump and take delight in the hush of a river trapped in the narrow canyon below.

This column is an excerpt from Dennis Dauble's newest book, "Chasing Ghost Trout," to be available in November from Amazon.com, KeokeeBooks.com, and the website DennisDaubleBooks.com.

Schools:

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The Salem-area schools are no longer in favor of going to Bend.

The five-classification plan would have the Bend schools in a conference with those from the Eugene area and southern Oregon.

Pendleton is a 5A school, playing most of its sports in the Intermountain Conference with Hood River Valley, The Dalles, Ridgeview, Redmond and Crook County.

The football team plays in Special District 1 with four of the IMC teams, with Parkrose, Putnam and La Salle Prep thrown in.

If the OSAA condensed to five classifications, the Bucks would find themselves in a league with Crook County, La Grande, Madras, Redmond, Ridgeview and The Dalles.

"We are very much in favor of that," Pendleton Athletic Director Mike Somnis said of the five classifications. "That is very much our preference. I think we have a lot more schools similar in student numbers. We want to be in a big league with a lot of schools. The bigger the league, the better for us. The smaller the leagues, it's too hard to get nonleague games."

The move would have Pendleton dropping to a 4A school, but Somnis said that is not a concern.

"We would still be in the second biggest classifica-

tion," Somnis said. "Part of the scenery has Hood River moving, but it is a good-looking league and we are in favor of it. Either scenario works, but we are in favor of the five classifications. There are a lot of decisions to be made before December."

The current 5A classification that Pendleton plays in, has schools ranging from 515 to 999 students. The Bucks are on the bottom end of that spectrum with 588 students.

In the new proposed 4A classification, the student numbers would range from 401 to 899, still leaving Pendleton in the bottom half.

"We are still very competitive across the board," Somnis said.

While Pendleton is in favor of five classifications, La Grande Athletic Director Darren Goodman would like things to stay as they are.

"There are different trains of thought," Goodman said. "The overwhelming thought is that the travel involved in the league with Pendleton is extensive. Our travel budget would increase two or three times and the kids would miss so much school. The closest game, other than Pendleton, is The Dalles, which is a 6-hour round trip. If you are going to Madras or Redmond, it's 5-plus hours each way. Kids would miss the entire day of school and they are already out too much."

Goodman does like the thought of a bigger league and better competition, but those issues don't outweigh



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Pendleton's Sauren Garton dives after a ball Sept. 21, 2021, during a win over The Dalles Riverhawks at Pendleton High School. Pendleton High Athletic Director Mike Somnis supports a plan to reclassify schools and put the Bucks in a league that would include La Grande and Madras.

the others. Currently, the Tigers are in the Greater Oregon League with Baker, McLoughlin and Ontario.

"Who doesn't like good competition?" he said. "We can schedule games with those teams for better competition, but we aren't forced to do it every week. "It's hard to play against schools twice your size, and that's what going to five classifications does."

La Grande has 432 students, which would make them the second-smallest school in the 4A classification after Madras (418).

If La Grande were to be moved, its GOL counterparts would move to 3A and be put in a league with Burns, Nyssa, Riverside, Umatilla

and Vale. Ontario would be the largest school of the group with 364 students.

"La Grande is not a priority for the committee," said Goodman, who also noted the winter months can be hard with extensive travel. "At the end of the day, we will go where we have to go, but the class time the student-athletes will miss will be dramatic."

Baker Athletic Director Buell Gonzales Jr. is on the fence about the changes.

On one hand, he said he would hate to lose La Grande

out of their league. On the other hand, a larger league makes it easier to schedule for football, volleyball, basketball, baseball and softball.

"The smaller the league, it makes it more difficult to find games later on," Gonzales said. "I would prefer to stay where we are and have the ability to create our own league for that specific purpose. What makes sense for me is that your league is not tied to your classification. It's silly that La Grande would not be in our league. If we are going to go five classifications, still put them in our league."

Right now, Baker's longest trip is Mac-Hi, which is roughly 2 hours. Umatilla and Riverside add a little more time on the bus, but it's not unreasonable.

"For a lot of schools, the ultimate thing comes down to travel and money," Gonzales said.

The core of the 2A Blue Mountain Conference — Heppner, Stanfield, Weston-McEwen and Grant Union — would stay the same in either proposal.

In the both proposals, Irrigon and Enterprise would round out the conference.

Pilot Rock, which already plays 8-man football, would drop from 2A to 1A in either classification proposal.

McCarty:

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FAMILY FUN

McCarty comes from an athletic family.

Her dad, Dan, played high school football, basketball and ran track at Echo. He went on to run track at Blue Mountain Community College, where he once held the school's hurdle records. He still might, but the BMCC track team hasn't existed for more than 20 years.

Her mom, Brandy, who went to Hermiston High School, was a standout javelin thrower and went on to throw at Western Oregon University.

"We are such a competitive family," McCarty said. "My Dad is no mercy. He would beat us by 20 points (in basketball). We would get so angry at each other and we would get grounded. My dad never loses."

McCarty puts that fire into her play on the court and the softball field.

"I love all my sports that I play," she said. "Volleyball is the one I have the most fun in. Basketball is where I am more competitive. I hope to play in college. I wish I could do all three, but I really love basketball. If I can go and play in one, that would be great."



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