

Drifts continue to block Elkhorn Drive, other roads

Damp, chilly spring slows snow melt

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

Dan Story didn't figure a Harley-Davidson motorcycle was a fitting substitute for a snowmobile.

But as the rumble of the distant engine materialized into a visible vehicle, Story had to concede that it was indeed a Harley rolling through a slushy snowdrift on the highest paved road in Northeastern Oregon.

That incongruous sight, along the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway on Wednesday, June 22, was perhaps appropriate in what's been an abnormal season for the byway and for other forest roads, said Story, road manager for the Whitman District on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The hottest weather in nine months blistered the region Wednesday — the high at the Baker City Airport was 87 — but winter refused to relinquish its reign in the Elkhorn Mountains.

It wasn't the temperature. Sunshine on the day after the summer solstice warmed even the peaks well into the 60s.

Yes despite the heat, deep snow continues to block a four-mile section of the byway near Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort.

The drifts aren't solely the remnants of winter blizzards that delighted skiers and snowboarders, though.

Starting in early April and continuing into the middle of June, a persistent weather pattern brought a series of unseasonably chilly storms into the region. Snow, in some cases many inches of snow, has accumulated at higher elevations, including sections of the byway.



Chelsea Judy/Contributed Photo

Snow continued to block the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway near Anthony Lakes on June 23, 2022.

Chelsea Judy, marketing manager at Anthony Lakes, said about 114 inches of snow has fallen at the ski area since the resort closed

The lingering snow is a tangible effect of the trend, and one that is preventing travelers from completing the 106-mile Elkhorn Drive,

said that when he drove up on June 22, the route was blocked by snow between the upper Crawfish Basin trailhead and near Grande

est point on a paved road in Oregon, behind only the Rim Drive in Crater Lake National Park, which ascends to 7,900 feet.

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— Dan Story, road manager, Whitman District, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

for the season the first weekend of April — a respectable amount for the same period in the middle of winter.

"It's been a crazy spring," Story said, "with the late snow and these really cool temperatures."

which circles its namesake range and passes through Baker City, Haines, Granite and Sumpter.

Although warmer temperatures earlier this week melted snow from about a mile of the byway, Story

Ronde Lake, just west of Anthony Lakes.

That section includes the highest parts of the byway, capped by Elkhorn Summit about two miles west of Anthony Lakes. At 7,392 feet, it's the second-high-

And the obstacles are considerably more daunting than a few modestly sized drifts, Story said.

Snow still spans the entire roadway in places.

It's possible the byway won't fully open until early

July. That would be a month later than in 2021, and about two weeks later than usual.

The Forest Service doesn't plow snow from the byway.

But Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, which has a certain amount of experience in moving snow around, starting last year offered to use its equipment to punch through remaining drifts when the byway was almost clear.

That's not the case yet, though.

Peter Johnson, Anthony Lakes general manager, said on Wednesday that it probably would take "another week or two" of melting to make it feasible to clear the remaining snow.

Although the byway opening will be unusually late this year, Story thinks it might have been later still but for a project he coordinated several years ago that had nothing to do with snow but yielded an unexpected benefit.

He hired a contractor to cut small trees — with a diameter of less than nine inches — within six feet of the shoulder of the byway between Crane Flats, a few miles north of Granite, and the Elkhorn Summit.

The purpose was to get rid of tree branches that impeded drivers' views on the curvy byway, Story said.

But since the work was done in 2016, Story said he's noticed that snow doesn't accumulate to quite such prodigious depths in some places, and it seems to melt earlier — he estimates the difference at 10 to 14 days.

He figures that removing the roadside trees, besides extending drivers' sightlines, exposed the byway to more sunlight, hence the accelerated snowmelt.

Story notes that this effect is muted, however, when snow is actually falling, as it did on many days this spring.

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"The only easy day was yesterday."

The main POC for this event is Jack James (CDR, USN, Ret.) who served in the Navy SEALs from 1973 to 2007 (BUD/S Class 70, graduating 23 Feb 73). Phone: (360) 509-2985. DAV VSO: Jack is also a volunteer with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) as a Veteran Service Officer (VSO). He enjoys working with the awesome Veterans of Wallowa County, to help them navigate the VA Disability system, by filling out the proper VA Forms and forwarding them through the DAV system to the VA Headquarters. Please call him at the same phone number above if you need help. Thank you.

Jack B. James (The Jackal)
CDR, USN, Ret., US NAVY SEAL