



Lisa Britton/For WesCom News Service

Hiking the switchbacking trail that descends to Swamp Lake in the Eagle Cap Wilderness.



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From the plateau above Swamp Lake the view extends southwest to the peaks above Traverse Lake and the Minam River Canyon. The trail in the left foreground leads to the Minam River Trail.

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ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

TAP THAT GROWLERS

**RETREAT**

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The stream's water was tepid, though, compared with the frigid elixir that flows from my favorite trailside spring in the whole of the Wallowas.

(Or at least my favorite among those whose water I've guzzled; my experience with Eagle Cap springs is far from comprehensive, and I'd be happy to come across the spring that knocks this one back to the runner-up spot.)

It was the second time I had drunk from the spring beside the trail between Copper Creek Meadow and Swamp Lake, and I had awaited my second visit with considerable anticipation and no small thirst. I had first passed the spring almost five years ago to the day, when we made a three-day loop starting at Bowman Trailhead on the Lostine and ending at Two Pan.

The spring emerges, full-grown, from a ribbon of basalt that slices through the granitic rock that makes up most of this part of the Wallowas.

The water pours from a cleft in the dark-brown rock not much bigger than my fist, then settles briefly in a tiny pool ideal for using a pump-action water filter, as we did twice that day.

I can't conceive of the mechanism by which this water could become contaminated, given its origin deep in the bedrock. But as one of the unfortunates afflicted by the cryptosporidium contamination of Baker City's water supply during the summer of 2013, I have an instinctive, but altogether rational, fear of all waterborne parasites, however improbable their presence. If it doesn't emit from a tap, I filter it. And my trust of tap water will never be quite as stolid as it once was.)

The spring water trickles across the trail tread and through a patch of yellow monkeyflower, then tumbles down a slope crowded with alpine fleecflower to join one of the many forks that come together as Elkhorn Creek, which itself joins Copper Creek near the meadow.

We filled our water bottles and (plastic) bladders and

then resumed our hike toward the plateau above Swamp Lake.

The scenery isn't quite so dramatic here as at some of the more precipitous passes in the Wallowas — I'm thinking here in particular of Polaris and Hawkins passes to the west and southwest, respectively.

Which is to say it's merely beautiful — a vista that could provoke people who aren't accustomed to such grandiose sights to pen poetic verse.

A hiker has plenty of options from the plateau. One trail heads north and descends to Swamp, Steamboat and Long lakes, and eventually to North Minam Meadows.

Another path runs south, leading either to Cheval Lake — a side trip on a trail that's no longer maintained by the Forest Service — or a long, long descent to the Minam River Trail, the great thoroughfare of the west side of the Eagle Cap Wilderness.

The plateau is also a fine place to ponder different methods of wilderness trail construction.

You can look down on the steep slope just southwest of Swamp Lake and see both the current trail and its predecessor.

The "modern" trail, like so many routes in the Wallowas, climbs the ridge by way of a series of gently graded traverses and switchbacks. This design is accommodating to horses — and in particular strings of pack animals — but it adds quite a bit of distance.

You can also see the traces of the older trail, which attacks the climb in a much more straightforward way, with far fewer — and considerably steeper — zigs and zags.

As with much else in life, this lesson in trail engineering highlights a tradeoff — a short trail that's much more taxing on your lungs, or a trail more gentle on your respiratory system but which requires that you take many more steps.

I've long thought that the history of trail building in the Wallowas is a fine topic for a book, and if I had even the most meager of skills as a historian I might take it up

myself.

Many times while hiking a section of trail that seems especially well-adapted to the terrain — the Frances Lake trail as it ascends the east wall of the Lostine River Canyon is an excellent example — I've pondered, in the sort of daydream that happens sometimes during a long journey by foot, the person who looked about and conjured this route that lies so lightly on the land. There is an elegant efficiency to such trails that pleases my eye, even though I'm as ignorant of the transit and the plumb bob as I am of Swahili.

I feel much the same about other travel routes — a grand bridge or a mountain highway such as the Going to the Sun Road in Glacier National Park. But I have a particular fondness for trails both because I prefer hiking to driving and because the designers of trails, especially wilderness trails, haven't access to the behemoth machines that make it possible to pave almost any place we choose to go.

We took the trail, my wife, Lisa, and my daughter, Olivia, down to Swamp Lake. We soaked our trail-dusted feet in the clear water and swatted at horseflies and reveled in the breeze that carried the cool of the heights and refuted the very notion of anything so terrible as a thermometer showing 109 degrees.

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