

RECREATION REPORT

GUIDED HIKES PLANNED FOR NEW YEAR'S DAY AT STATE PARKS

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department has scheduled free guided hikes on New Year's Day at 31 parks across the state, including two in Eastern Oregon.

- Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area along Interstate 84 near Meacham: 11 a.m., meet at the day-use parking lot (right of park entrance.)
- Wallowa Lake State Park: 10:30 a.m., meet at the parking area across from the south entrance of Iwetemlaykin State Heritage Site.

All hikes will be guided by a park ranger or volunteer who will share stories about the park's history, geology, wildlife and plants.

All hikes are free; day-use parking fees will be waived at all participating parks Jan. 1 only.

Hikers can register for specific hikes online at the Oregon State Parks Store: bit.ly/ParkStoreEvents. While online registration isn't required for participation, visitors are encouraged to register. It helps park staff plan the hike and provides them with participant contact information should hike details change.

OPRD advises visitors to plan for inclement weather, dress in layers, wear sturdy shoes, bring water and remember to carry binoculars for viewing wildlife.

NEW LICENSING SYSTEM TIPS

ODFW's new licensing system allows you to carry your licenses and tags on your smartphone. (Though you can still print them to paper at home or at a license vendor.) The first step is to go to the MyODFW licensing page to locate and verify your account. Next you'll want to download the MyODFW app, which will store your documents even when you're out of cell phone range. Be sure you verify your account at MyODFW.com BEFORE your try to log into the MyODFW app.

PHILLIPS RESERVOIR

Anglers have been fishing through the ice in the cove at the southeast corner of the reservoir, near Mason Dam.

MINAHA RIVER

Some reports of steelhead being caught but overall fishing has been slow. The daily bag limit of one hatchery steelhead will continue through the end of the season on April 30, 2019.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A road winds between snow-draped trees in the southern Elkhorn Mountains near Baker City on Christmas Eve.

ON THE TRACK OF... MYSELF

I clambered up the snow slope onto the road, saw the line of my own fresh tracks pressed into the powder, and for the first time I began to mistrust the internal compass that has served me so faithfully over the decades.



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature, which was perhaps a few degrees below freezing on this fogbound Christmas Eve afternoon in the southern ramparts of the Elkhorn Mountains near Baker City.

This was the unsettling sensation that slinks into the mind of a person who has detected the initial onset of a physical or mental malady which to that point had been wholly theoretical.

Which is to say, not real.

Except the tracks from my snowshoes were absolute and undeniable.

I had made them scarcely 30 minutes earlier.

The reason I was puzzled — and not a little disoriented — is that I never expected, or intended, to see those tracks again.

I set out to hike a loop. I would twice cross Blue Canyon, the only stream of significance in the area, the first time while heading north, the second time, on the return part of the loop, traveling south.

It was a fine day for snowshoeing.

The ponderosa pines and Douglas-firs were draped with fresh snow, my exhalations wreathed my head in miniature clouds, and the scenery all but overflowed with Christmas spirit.

I am quite familiar with this corner of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. It's just a 15-minute drive from my house, and I've hiked most of the ground, in all seasons, many times.

The topography is modest by the standards of the Elkhorns, Wallowas and Hells Canyon, but our forebears rearranged it in interesting ways. Henry Griffin panned gold flakes several miles to the northeast on Oct. 23, 1861, a discovery that started the Eastern Oregon gold rush and led, just 11 months later, to the creation of Baker County.

Auburn, the first county seat, was founded less than a mile down Blue Canyon from where I leaped across the water in the awkward way which is the only way I can leap when I have 22-inch long rectangles of plastic strapped to my boots.

Nothing remains of that town, which in Oregon's adolescence (its statehood happened on Feb. 14, 1859) was the second most populous city in the state, behind Oregon City.

The hundreds of miners who followed Griffin thoroughly revamped the landscape. Blue Canyon and the minor gulches that connect to it, most of which bear water only during the spring runoff, don't follow their natural courses but instead are guided by the sinuous mounds of waste rock the argonauts stacked as they sought their glittering fortunes.

After crossing Blue Canyon I made a meandering climb to a road that roughly parallels the stream. This is a spur off the Forest Service road that connects the Old Auburn and Elk Creek roads. My plan was to follow the spur for half a mile or so to the west, then veer south, recross Blue Canyon and hike the Old Auburn Road back to my rig.

This was the general idea. I had no specific, detailed route in mind, nor did I think one was necessary. I have covered most of the area anyway, as I mentioned, and in any case the entire trip took place within a single square mile, scarcely enough space to blunder about for long.

I left the spur about where I had planned to and started descending toward Blue Canyon, moving generally to the south.

The fog obscured the sun, of course, but I thought I was sufficiently acquainted with the lay of the land that I hardly needed a solar backup, as it were, to confirm my bearing. Regardless, I knew that wherever I recrossed Blue Canyon I needed only walk downstream, to the east, to complete the loop.

All seemed to be going well, although the tailing piles, some of which are a dozen feet or taller with precipitous sides, forced me to zig here and zag there.

Still and all, the ground I was tromping across seemed to agree, generally speaking, with my internal compass.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

I was further assured when I reached the bottom of a draw where a sluggish stream of water flowed between snow-encrusted stones.

I stepped across what I believed to be Blue Canyon and started climbing the steep slope. After ascending 50 feet or so I saw above what was obviously the edge of a road.

I had a brief sense that something was amiss, as I knew this couldn't be the Old Auburn Road, which was built near the top of a ridge rather than midslope.

But I convinced myself that there was a segment of an old road between Blue Canyon and the Old Auburn Road, and that this was the

road I was approaching.

But a couple minutes later the sight of my own footprints put paid to that idea.

In certain stories of the outdoors such a moment is reason for celebration, of course — a hiker who has been wandering aimlessly, lost and afraid, happens upon his own tracks, which lead him out of his potentially dangerous predicament.

But what I felt mainly was confusion.

I knew immediately where I was.

What I couldn't figure out was how I had ended up there.