



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald

Dick McClarin's cutter uses a diamond-studded blade to shave layers off rocks. He says you never really know what you're going to get from each cut or from any rock.

ROCKS

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"The word 'club' sounds exclusionary," McClarin said. "It's so fun to say that I belong to a rock group."

A Facebook page — Baker Rockhounds — is the online gathering place and forum for the group.

They had their first rock swap on Sunday, and McClarin said she was pleased with the turnout at the Northeast Oregon Compassion Center at the Baker City Nazarene Church, 1250 Hughes Lane.

The group also meets there on the first Sunday of each month at 3 p.m. The next meeting is this Sunday, Feb. 3.

As much as Stafford and McClarin relish meeting with other rockhounds to admire each other's collections, and potentially swap items, they're equally excited about the onset of spring weather.

Rockhounding, it goes without saying, is problematic when snow covers the rocks.

"It's so fun to say I belong to a rock group."

— Jarri McClarin,
Baker Rockhounds

"Winter is when you polish your rocks, and get together to talk about them, and summer is when you go out and get them," Stafford said. "We have fun year round."

As a third-generation rockhound who has been involved with multiple groups both in Idaho and Oregon, Stafford said perhaps the most common complaint from rockhounds is that they don't go on enough field trips.

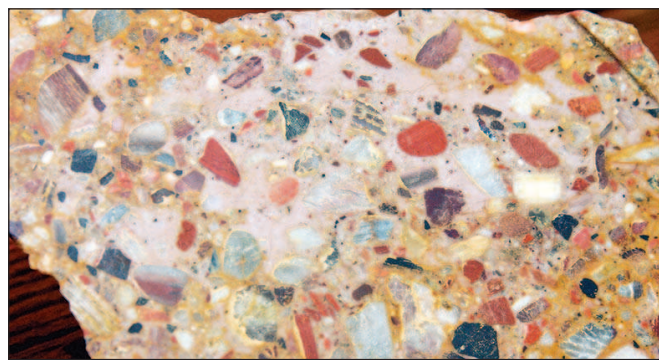
She and McClarin and other Baker Rockhounds hope to satisfy the demand by scheduling regular trips, ranging from half-day excursions in Baker County to multi-day trips to prime rockhounding destinations elsewhere in Oregon and in adjacent states.

"Part of being a rockhound is just in the exploration," Stafford said. "We want



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The thunderegg is Oregon's state rock, and the McClarins have a wide variety.



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Dick McClarin says he can only tag the name of this peculiar rock as "fruit cake."

people to experience more of our beautiful state."

Stafford said that since she started the Facebook page late last fall she's come to realize that there are quite a few rockhounds in Baker County.

"There's a lot of knowledge when we get together in a room," McClarin said.

But both she and Stafford

emphasize that Baker Rockhounds welcomes everyone — from people who can discuss geology and mineralogy at a Ph.D. level, to kids who just like to wander around and grab any rock that catches their eye — neophytes whom Stafford considers refers to as "pebble pups."

"Kids are easy," Stafford said. "They love anything that's sparkly and shiny."

Notwithstanding the common term "rockhound," Stafford said Baker County offers more than just rocks.

There are also gemstones, such as various types and colors of jasper and agates, waiting to be discovered, as



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Amethyst, a crystallized quartz, is Jarri McClarin's favorite stone with its purplish hue.

well as petrified wood, to be found on public land within the county.

Elsewhere in Oregon, the Glass Buttes west of Burns are renowned for obsidian, Succor Creek Canyon south of Ontario is a popular place to hunt for thundereggs — Oregon's state rock — and a site near Plush, in Lake County, is rich in sunstones, the official state gemstone.

"Oregon is considered the holy grail of states for rockhounds," Stafford said. "And it's free."

Neither the Forest Service nor the BLM, the federal agencies that manage most of Oregon's public land, requires rockhounds to have a permit to gather rocks, including semiprecious gemstones, fossils and minerals, for non-commercial purposes.

(This does not apply, how-

ever, to active mining claims on public land. On active claims only the claim holder is authorized to remove or prospect for precious metals such as gold and silver.)

Although the agencies set weight limits on how much material people can remove, those thresholds, generally 25 pounds per person per day (plus one additional piece) and 250 pounds per year, generally don't pose any impediment to rockhounds.

Stafford said the leaders of Baker Rockhounds field trips are responsible for making sure participants follow any particular guidelines, including avoiding private land unless the owner has given permission for rockhounding.

"Most of the places we go it's wide open," she said. "Everybody looks for something different."

Stafford, who is a licensed arborist and retired paramedic, said she could scarcely have avoided becoming a rockhound, as both her parents and grandparents were avid collectors.

Her grandparents, who lived in LaPine near Bend, lined their walkways with rocks from all over the country.

"From the time I was tiny I remember tackle boxes full of rocks," Stafford said. "They would let us take one home whenever we visited."

She joined her first rockhounding group when she was 18 and living in Douglas County, where she attended Umpqua Community College.

"I love teaching everything I know, and I love to learn," Stafford said. "And I love to be outside."

McClarin said she and her husband, Dick, took up the hobby about four years ago when her daughter, Rachel Copley, bought them memberships to the Owyhee Gem and Mineral Society in Caldwell, Idaho.

McClarin said she appreciates how willing most rockhounds are to share their knowledge with newcomers.

"They're just good, down-to-earth people," she said. "And I appreciate knowing what the name of a rock is."

Both McClarin and Stafford hope to encourage more families, especially parents with young children, to try rockhounding.

"What more perfect family activity could there be?" McClarin said.

Stafford then offered what might be the clincher.

"And the kids fall asleep in the back seat on the way home."



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