

SNOW STILL BLOCKING SOME HIGHER-ELEVATION ROADS



Snowdrifts blocked the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway near Anthony Lakes on Thursday.

Lisa Britton/For the EO Media Group

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

Dan Story was just trying to make it easier for drivers to see approaching cars as they steered through the serpentine Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway west of Baker City. He ended up thwarting blizzards.

Sort of. Story, who is the road manager for the Whitman District of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, can't actually divert the storms that slather many feet of snow every winter on the Elkhorn Drive, the second-highest paved road in Oregon.

(Not that snow is confined to the coldest season — high in the Elkhorns snow fell just this week, and earlier in June a storm dropped close to a foot above 7,000 feet.)

But a project four years ago, which Story undertook for a completely different reason, seems to have had the unexpected benefit of shrinking the period when snow blocks a section of the two-lane paved highway that circles the Elkhorns over its 106 miles.

The actual purpose was “brushing.”

Story hired a contractor to cut trees with a diameter of less than 9 inches growing within 6 feet of the shoulder of the byway between Crane Flats, a few miles north of Granite, and the Elkhorn Summit.

Snowplows don't ply that roughly 17-mile section of the byway, so it's generally closed to vehicles, except snowmobiles, for more than half the year.

Elkhorn Summit, at 7,392 feet, is about 2 miles west of Anthony Lakes. The only paved road in Oregon that reaches a higher point is the Rim Drive in Crater Lake National Park, which tops out around 7,900 feet.

Those roadside trees, which in places grew thickly, extended branches far enough to impede drivers' views on some of the dozens of sharp curves on that section, Story said.

Removing the trees had the intended effect of improving

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

the sightlines, Story said. But since the brushing was done he's noticed that snow melts sooner in late spring and early summer than it did earlier in his tenure.

“Last year it was open on June 11, the earliest in my 10 years of doing this,” Story said.

The explanation seems simple to Story.

The trees removed during the brushing project, in addition to obscuring views, also cast shadows over the pavement.

With the trees gone, the sun shines longer on the roadway each day.

Story also noticed that a short section near Elkhorn Summit, where an especially deep drift usually formed each winter, hasn't accumulated in the past few winters since the brushing work.

“I have to assume I've changed the wind pattern,” he said. “It's kind of a quirky thing. I was really surprised.”

Last year Story extended the brushing project to include the Elkhorn Drive between Granite and Crane Flats, as well as short sections of Forest

Road 52, which starts at the North Fork John Day River, and Forest Road 51, which branches off Road 52 and heads north to the Grande Ronde River and Starkey.

Besides speeding the snowmelt, the brushing has reduced the number of trees that topple across the roads each winter and spring, Story said.

But no amount of brushing can influence weather trends.

And Story said conditions this spring — in particular the series of unseasonably strong and cold storms over the past month or so — have kept some higher-elevation roads blocked by snow.

That includes a short section of the Elkhorn Drive. Lingerin snow still blocked the road Thursday about one mile west of Anthony Lakes Ski Area, and in places over the next 4 miles or so.

With warmer weather forecast for the next several days, the byway could potentially open within the next week.

The higher sections of the Ladd Canyon Road — Forest Road 43 — which leads from



Wallowa-Whitman National Forest photo

Boulders on the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road north of Halfway earlier this spring. The rocks have been removed and the popular route between Halfway and Joseph is open.

Grande Ronde Lake to Interstate 84, are also still blocked by snowdrifts, Story said.

The Marble Creek Pass Road, which connects the Baker and Sumpter valleys, is blocked by drifts near the 7,542-foot summit.

“This has been a strange year,” Story said. “A couple of roads opened earlier than usual.”

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Wallowa-Whitman National Forest photo

A contractor grades the Empire Gulch Road near Eagle Creek this spring.



Wallowa-Whitman National Forest photo

These rocks were moved off the Eagle Creek Road, in the southern Wallowa Mountains, earlier this year.