



Photos by Ethan Shaw

There are many types of edges. Above, lingering July snowdrifts in the Wallowas link winter and summer, while at right a talus slope borders a subalpine fir forest.

Examining the ‘edge effect’

■ Edges, whether the boundaries between rock and forest, or water and land, can be areas rich in ecological diversity

Not long ago I was hiking up a timbered slope in the Wallowas to a big field of talus I’d noticed on satellite imagery. “Ground-truthing,” you might say, something I often do when I spot an intriguing feature on an aerial photo or topo map — or just want to finally see for myself what an eccentrically named place looks like.

To get to the talus, entirely encircled by forest, I worked my way up through stands dominated by grand fir. I knew roughly where to go — no need for a bearing — but kept scanning uphill for the first sign of the break in the woods to direct me. That sign ultimately came in the form of a vague brightness, then a vague motion: the quivering, as I soon realized, of aspen canopies up in the rockpile.

Soon I hit a jungly thicket of maple and bitter cherry — a gateway marking where the conifer canopy opened up, torn by the great tumbledown sweep of blue-gray boulders and chips. Stirred by a mounting morning breeze, the scattered talus aspen kept up a steady rustling.

The margin between the forest and the talus field was pretty much knife-sharp, though the wooded slope I’d climbed was sprinkled with cobble that preluded the bouldery domain above. There was another sort of bridge between the two realms — one shadowy, one sun-blasted — at the upper edge of the talus, where a tall Douglas-fir snag along the forest front had toppled down out into the rocks.

Trekking around the rubble, I dipped occasionally into the fringing timber, intrigued by the



THE LAY OF THE LAND

ETHAN SHAW

contrast: the cool shade of grand fir with lush beds of meadowrue, pathfinder, and thimbleberry, then back out to the sunny talus and its aspen “whitewood,” bluebells and raspberry creeping out into the rocky crevices amid the plentiful debris of long-fallen aspen skeletons.

Looking into the fir forest from the aspen rocks, and vice versa — light to dark, dark to light: part of the allure of the edge zone, the “ecotone,” the boundary between two ecosystems.

Think of the first ponderosa you hit ascending from sagebrush terraces into the foothills. Think of how the closed mountain forest breaks up into parkland as you climb, then to the dwindling copses and wind-punished stragglers of timberline.

Think of the sedge glade ringed by thick woods, the brushy draw folded into bunchgrass uplands, the rough line where pine savanna butts against tight-ranked mixed-conifer depths.

Lakeshores, riverbanks, grain-fields sliced by shelterbelts: Edges are all around us, at every imaginable scale. (To an ant, a log looming from forest-floor herbs makes a great habitat frontier.)

Of course, these edges aren’t always so clean-cut as the talus/forest border. Whitebark pines dribble down into the subalpine fir and lodgepole woods below timberline; ponderosas may scabble high up on south- and west-facing moun-

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tainsides. Trees invade meadows and steppes, risking fire and drought and browsers to advance the front lines of the woods.

Large-scale transitions between floristic provinces are called “tension zones” suggesting the competition and conflict that, at least on some level, define them.

(“Ecotone” comes from “ecology” and “tonos,” Greek for “stress” or “tension.”)

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We humans are among the species that especially key into these natural frontiers. Hunters know the border between forest and meadow is a good place to find deer and elk that cycle between open feeding grounds and shadowy deep-timber hideaways. The shrub thickets that often form along such edges are productive gathering places for us. Being drawn to the thresholds between one realm and another — that’s woven right into our makeup. It’s practical and opportunistic; I also think there’s some inherent mystery to these liminal places, too, that beckons us.

Segues between plant communities can reveal other natural transitions, of course: from one soil type or

microclimate or bedrock to another. They also often reflect topographic changes — ridgetop to ridgebrow, say — which may be related to all of the above elements.

Some stark geologic boundaries are well on display in our terrain, not least in those multicolored Wallowas, where rusty-red and chocolate and white and gray peaks snarl up the skyline together.

These are all spatial divides and transition zones, but you can trace thresholds into the dimension of time. That’s certainly true of ecotones, which shift over decades and centuries and millennia: Forests and grasslands advance and retreat, variously invading or yielding ground to the other. Wildfires and avalanches establish fresh edge zones that may ultimately fade away.

You can broaden the outlook, too, identifying stretches of time marking transitions between eras in the way ecotones span habitats. (For instance, we’re technically still in a so-called interglacial period such as separates those intervals of extensive glaciation we colloquially call “ice ages.”)

Then there are the “edge zones” between seasons spread across the elevational gradient in mountainous country such as ours. July is a good month to track down spring and even winter on high, where heavy subalpine forest can still shelter big snowbanks and meltwater pools while down below grasses have cured and foothill gullies gone parched.

Like I said, edges and thresholds and borders everywhere: many seams to be traced on the land and across time.



Photo by Ethan Shaw

The interface between a grassy glade and a forest on the edge of the Hells Canyon Wilderness.

Heading to Texas to hunt hefty wild hogs with an air gun

A few weeks ago a good buddy of mine, Bill Olson, who’s the publisher of Texas Outdoors Journal, lined us up an airgun hunt with Adventures Missions Recreation Properties on one of their ranches in Menard, Texas. I was going to use the new Umarex .50-caliber Hammer on axis deer and then switch to the Umarex Air Saber and hog hunt. The air saber is like an air gun that shoots arrows at 450 feet per second. That’s fast.

The hunt gelled fast due to the quality of people making it happen. Bill called Wednesday and told me to grab a plane ticket and fly into San Antonio the next Tuesday. D-day soon hit and Air Olson (Bill’s truck) picked me up and we were off. We stopped by Uvalde to meet Bob Zaiglin, whitetail deer extraordinaire biologist. I hadn’t been to Uvalde since years ago when right after the bell rung, I got thrown under my horse and he stomped me



BASE CAMP

TOM CLAYCOMB

ard and met our guide, Robert Shipman, and owner Scott Huggins. We sighted in our guns and then jumped in a blind.

We were going to hit the axis deer and Aoudad sheep first and then hogs. We set up a Slow Glow to get the hogs coming in and were going to give it a few days to get hit. But sometimes schedules get changed up when hunting.

Robert and I were doing a spot/stalk hunt for axis deer. If I remember correctly it was the middle of the day and the sun was up and it was warming up. By now the axis would be bedded down under a mesquite tree or live oak. We were creeping along stopping ever so often to glass with our Riton Optics 10x42 binocs. No need for a spotting scope because half the time we couldn’t see 50 yards.

pretty bad. Ended up in the hospital in San Antonio.

The next morning we headed to Menard and met our guide, Robert Shipman, and owner Scott Huggins. We sighted in our guns and then jumped in a blind.

We must have been moving along pretty quiet because we got within 20 feet of a boar on his bed. He shot out of the brush like a bullet and Robert hissed, “hog!” When spotting/stalking I keep my scope cranked down to 4x so I can take a fast shot. If something is way out there you should have time to crank it up.

I threw up my .50-caliber Hammer and hit him in the rear end. The big 350-grain slug flattened him. Impressive. But in a hot second he jumped up and charged downhill straight at us. Robert yelled, “he’s charging!”

I jacked in another pellet and leveled out again. He was coming down the slope at a full charge. The brush stopped about 10 feet from me. I didn’t want to shoot at him in the brush and take a chance of the bullet deflecting so I was going to wait until he hit the edge of the brush.

At 10 to 15 feet he went down. I don’t know if he stumbled and fell or what but I shot him again right fast and ran up and shot him

behind the ear with my .44 mag and he was down for the count. Wow, that was exciting. Don’t even have to go hog hunting in Texas, they come hunt you!

We dragged him down to where we could get the truck to him and took him back to the lodge and hung him up. We took pics and then skinned him out right fast. I had a prototype of the new professional boning knife that Knives of Alaska is just coming out with. I’ve been working with them on developing it so am excited to see it hit the market, probably by the time this article prints.

I whipped out the new knife and in a few minutes we had a pile of meat. Upon getting home I smoked the forequarter and wow, it was the best smoked ham I’d ever had. Katy and I made chopped barbecue sandwiches and the forequarter didn’t last long. Now I can’t wait to go get another hog. That’s the first big game animal that I’ve killed with an air gun. I’m hung.