

VISITING THE FORMER SITE OF A FOREST SERVICE GUARD STATION



Lisa Britton / For the EO Media Group

A sign marks the former site of the Forest Service’s Porcupine guard station. The building was removed in June 1971, according to the sign, but a largely intact concrete foundation remains. The site is beside Beatty Creek.

If You Go...

If you’re coming from North Powder, Baker City or points south, drive on Tucker Flat Road to Pilcher Creek Reservoir, west of North Powder near the Elkhorn Wildlife Area headquarters. From La Grande or points north, exit Interstate 84 at North Powder and drive west on River Road to Tucker Flat Road. From the reservoir, continue west into the mountains on the road, which becomes Forest Road 4330, for 3 miles to the junction with Road 7312 (marked by a sign “Anthony Lakes Hwy. 9.” Continue straight, uphill, still on Road 4330.

Road 4330 climbs, steeply in places, for about 2 miles along Dutch Creek, which is dry now. The road crosses a couple of cattle guards in a logged area that produced a bumper crop of huckleberries in July (and perhaps still is). Just beyond the logged area the road crosses Wolf Creek and meets Road 4316, which leads north (right).

Stay on Road 4330, which veers left and continues climbing for 3 miles to its intersection with Road 43, the well-maintained gravel Ladd Canyon Road.

Turn right onto Ladd Canyon Road. The easier of the two roads to find is the 4300-301 road. It branches off to the left (west) just a few hundred yards from the 43-4330 junction. There’s a graveled turnout here and a fence gate.

Hike west on the road to the quarry, which is less than a tenth of a mile away. The road turns right (north) just before a pond. The route is a bit sketchy but once you enter the denser woods the path is obvious. Follow it for about half a mile to a clearing where the 4300-300 road comes in from the right (east). Hike west for about three-quarters of a mile to the meadow along Beatty Creek and the former site of the Porcupine guard station.

Hiking Into Forest History

The word “Porcupine,” printed on the map in bold black letters, piqued my curiosity.

Or perhaps prickled is the more apt verb.

The word sat snugly beside a symbol that I took to denote a structure of some sort.

Exactly what sort I couldn’t tell, although it looked to me rather like a lean-to that Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Pa might have thrown together.

The map lacked a legend, in any case.

We were planning to go camping in the mountains above Pilcher Creek Reservoir and I was perusing the map looking for places to hike.

Which is to say I was looking at roads, as there are few trails in that part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The “Porcupine” and its symbol were only five miles or so from our intended campsite, and much closer than that to the thoroughfare of the Ladd Canyon Road, Forest Road 43.

My knowledge of the Wallowa-Whitman is hardly encyclopedic.

But I am pretty familiar with the forest’s complement of buildings — guard stations, most of them — and I had never heard of one called Porcupine.

The map showed a road — albeit one denoted by the dashed lines that usually suggest something more akin to a deer trail than to a freeway — leading to the place.

The structure was just inside the La Grande Watershed, a parcel of public land in the Beaver Creek drainage that was the city’s primary water source until 1991, when La Grande started relying solely on wells to slake its thirst.

(The city maintains the forested watershed, and specifically the La Grande Reservoir at the north end of the area, as a backup source. La Grande’s watershed, unlike Baker City’s, which is also managed by the Wallowa-Whitman, is open to public entry.)

We left on the first day of August. This was the day after the temperature reached 105 degrees at the Baker City Airport, the fourth-hottest day there since World War II.

August 1 was about a dozen degrees cooler but it was still pretty toasty, even in our campsite that was well-shaded by thick Engelmann spruces and Douglas-firs. We decided to put off the hike until after dinner.

We drove up Road 4330, which crosses Wolf Creek and then climbs to a junction with the Ladd Canyon Road near Bear Wallow Spring,



ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

a place I have visited but where I have never seen a bear wallowing. Or doing anything else, come to that.

From the intersection it’s just a mile or so north to the road leading west to Porcupine, whatever that might be. I figured the road ought to be easy to find, as it branches off where the Ladd Canyon Road veers sharply to the northeast.

We found the veer easily enough.

But I didn’t see anything that resembled a road, even accounting for the likelihood that there wouldn’t be an offramp or an exit sign.

My wife, Lisa, who generally prefers that I focus on not driving into the barrow pit and instead leave the spotting to her, said there was no apparent gate or breach in the old drift fence that parallels the Ladd Canyon Road.

Fortunately my map showed an alternate route, a road that starts a half-mile or so to the south and connects to the road we searched for in vain.

We found the second road easily enough.

Although I gashed the leg of one of my favorite pair of shorts while trying to get through the aforementioned fence, a futile attempt that was a clumsy combination of the limbo and electrocution.

The fabric, to its credit, sacrificed itself and left my skin, which is more problematic to sew shut, unscathed.

The map, which frankly I had begun to feel less than confident about, redeemed itself almost immediately. It bore the crossed shovel and pick symbol that means a rock quarry, and sure enough the quarry, and a great pile of crushed basalt gravel, was right where I expected to find it.

The surprise — to us, at least, as its presence was not hinted at on the map — was the pond.

It was a trifling body of water, covering probably a few hundred square feet, but my son Max, who’s 9, was entranced.

The pond teemed with tadpoles and actual frogs, and in my experience there are few things in nature more appealing to a small boy than slimy amphibians and the potential to fall into a pond and get muddy.

Also there was a dead snake beside the water.

And Max is fascinated with snakes of all sorts, regardless of



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Beatty Creek, a tributary of Beaver Creek, runs through a meadow dotted with false hellebore plants.

their respiratory state.

The gravel-making operation and its associated heavy equipment had obscured the route of the road but we eventually found the way.

The dashed lines on the map turned out to be appropriate. Once the road entered the lodgepole pine forest it ceased to resemble a route that had been traveled by any wheeled vehicle since maybe the Reagan administration.

But the clearing through the trees was obvious, and there was a narrow but well-trodden trail meandering in the right-of-way. Although it appeared to me that most of the feet doing the trotting were not feet at all but the hooves of elk and deer.

The junction of this road and the other was a conspicuous open area, and the new road — the one we were searching for initially — was obvious. Most of the width was overgrown with juvenile lodgepoles, and every few hundred yards or so the old roadbed had been gouged to create a “tank trap” — a deep divot sufficient to turn back most vehicles. But there was a fine trail — indeed, it was in better condition than many official paths I’ve hiked.

The road descended gently, and with the sun low on the western horizon it was quite pleasant strolling along, the day having shed the worst of its cloying heat.

After half a mile or so the slope steepened slightly and we could see, not far below, the green swath of a

meadow through which flows, according to the map, Beatty Creek.

We had just reached the meadow’s edge, where the lodgepoles give way to the hip-high grass, when I saw the concrete foundation.

It was a curious sight — a symbol of human habitation in an otherwise wild setting.

The foundation had tilted slightly in a few places but seemed otherwise quite sound. The building it supported had obviously been gone for a considerable span, as the interior — where the building would have stood — had several 20-foot lodgepoles growing in it.

Max saw the sign first.

It was even more incongruous, in its way, than the foundation.

The brown sign, which was bolted to a stout post, had “Wallowa-Whitman National Forest” etched into the bottom, but it was the script on the top that if anything deepened the mystery.

“Removed June 1971.”

It was obvious enough that what had been removed was a structure, but I found it passing strange that the sign didn’t so much as give the name of that structure.

I’ll concede it’s possible that a thief is responsible for the ambiguity.

There are a couple of round holes in the sign that suggest it might originally have had another part, perhaps one that told the complete story of the erstwhile building.

Regardless, we were all amused

that the Forest Service deemed it necessary to erect a sign to memorialize the removal of a building that could hardly have been terribly significant.

I later talked with Bruce McMillan, a retired Forest Service employee, and he recalled the Porcupine guard station. He later called me back and said he had spoken with a former colleague who also knew of it.

It’s an excellent spot for a guard station, to be sure.

The Beatty Creek meadow is the epitome of a mountain field, neatly bordered by dense forest. It’s the sort of place where you expect an elk to emerge from the woods at any time, or perhaps see a bear.

We retraced our route to the clearing where the two roads meet. Then we continued east, curious about whether the junction with the Ladd Canyon Road was as obscure as we thought it was, having missed it the first go round.

We didn’t feel too badly about our gaffe.

There was nothing to distinguish the junction, although, having finally recognized it, I suspect I wouldn’t drive past it a second time. There was no sign, but a pair of orange diamonds — markers to guide snowmobilers — serve as a substitute.

Also I managed to get through the fence without any further damage to any garments.

Even Max and his older sister, Olivia, seemed impressed.