

SEARCHING FOR ANIMAL SIGN ON THE SNOWY TRAILS NEAR THE SUMPTER DREDGE

TRACKING WINTER

Beavers are reclusive and elusive, but they can't do much about that telltale tail.



ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

The paddle-shaped flap of fat, sinew and muscle will betray the beavers' presence even though the animals spend much of their time in their lodge or underwater.

The appendage leaves especially conspicuous evidence of its passage when fresh snow covers the ground.

The erosive forces of wind and the freeze-and-thaw cycle can obscure or even erase the marks left by beavers' paws.

But the smooth depression made by the tail, reminiscent of a child's toboggan track, tends to persist.

Beavers are nothing like as numerous in Northeast Oregon as they were a couple hundred years ago, before trappers decimated the populations to claim the luxurious, and valuable, pelts.

But the industrious rodents are still around, and the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area — I prefer to just call it a state park — in Baker County is a fine place to see evidence of their

exploits.

Among its attributes, Sumpter is all but certain to have snow throughout winter — and often as not into spring as well.

We stopped at the dredge on Dec. 12 on the way back from a snowshoe hike on a forest road a few miles away.

While I was preoccupied flying our new drone, my wife, Lisa, and our kids, Olivia and Max, went for a short stroll.

The park has about 1.5 miles of routes built among the linear piles of stones and gravel — the tailing piles — that the dredge expectorated in its quest for gold.

They found some intriguing marks beside the Powder River, which flows through the tailings.

We speculated that these zig-zagging trails might have been made by a beaver's tail.

I showed a few photos to Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, but the



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

The 1,240-ton, three-story gold-mining dredge, which last operated in 1954, is the centerpiece of the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area in Baker County.

If You Go ...

The Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area is on the south end of Sumpter, a town of about 210 residents that's 28 miles southwest of Baker City, via Highway 7.

Although the dredge itself is closed during winter, the park is open and visitors can snowshoe around the frozen pond in which the 1,240-ton, three-story gold-mining behemoth rests, and on the 1.5-mile network of trails. Parking is limited in the area but a small area is plowed near the state park office.

photos didn't have enough detail for him to make a definite identification.

Ratliff told me that beavers generally don't walk in the zig-zag pattern of the marks Lisa photographed.

Other possible culprits for trails in the snow at the park include, in addition to beavers, their smaller furbearing rodent cousin, the muskrat, as well as river otters. All of these species, none having a great deal of ground clearance, can impress trails into

snow as they lumber along. Otters, of course, are known for their playful slides down snow slopes.

Tracks, slides and trails aren't the only types of spoor you can see in the dredge park.

You probably won't have to search long to find streamside trees and brush that have been gnawed by beavers. The animals rely on willows and other deciduous trees for food as well as the raw material for their dams and lodges.



Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group

A sinuous track in the snow, possibly made by a muskrat, at Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area.

A couple of years ago the park's beavers, being inveterate dam-builders, inundated a section of trail that's since been slightly elevated. The park is also the birth-

place of the Powder River. The spot, marked by a trailside sign, is where two streams, McCully Fork and Cracker Creek, converge to create the Powder.

Sunset roosters

The sun rested against the crest of the horizon, a massive sphere radiating vibrant magenta. Wind turbines stood solemnly shadowed in the foreground while a rich golden hue settled across the bunchgrass sea laid out beautifully across the hills and swales before us. Yuba trembled in anticipation as the GPS collar chimed and vest straps clicked securely.

Leadership training taught me the most valuable lessons of putting "first things first" and "taking care of myself and others" to maximize effectiveness as an employee and satisfaction with life in general.

Therefore, as the clock struck 2:30 p.m. on this gorgeous afternoon, a run on the Palouse rose to the top of my priority list like the cream materializing in a freshly squeezed jug of milk. Silently, I dropped from my conference call, tossed Yuba in the back seat and made haste for the wind farm.

Hitting the ground running, Yuba bee-lined to the east. But the faint wisp of wind suggested another approach. Whistling her back, we continued south into the swale. The plan was to cross the swale, ascend the far hill, hunt the ridge line east, then circle back to the north in a pattern reverse of how many hunt the property. Roosters up feeding would be preparing to drop into the swale to roost and I wanted to catch them on flanks before they hit the thick cover.

Dense reed canary grass envelopes the swale, providing superb roosting cover



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Brad Trumbo and Yuba revel in the success of an evening pheasant hunt in the Palouse.



UPLAND PURSUITS
BRAD TRUMBO

from predators and cold temperature. It also prevents a pup with bad hips from hunting efficiently, sapping stamina.

Hence, I waded quickly through and across the mattress of bent, swishing grasses with Yuba in tow to keep her from expending too much energy in the impossible cover.

Emerging at the toe of the hill, a few colossal tufts of Great Basin wild rye stood clustered along the outskirts of the reed canary tangle. Strolling past, Yuba encircled a cluster of bunches and failed to reappear. Peering around a nearby tuft, Yuba's breathtaking point offered an eyeblink's notice before the rooster exploded nearly under my right foot.

Amid the startling heart palpitations, my practice

of quick target acquisition instinctively kicked in, securing the roost with an instantaneous burst from the cylinder-choked barrel. Most upland birds begin entering roost covers approximately one hour before dark, and this guy was just on the edge, about to dive in for the night.

Yuba rushed in, securing her prize and whining excitedly as we marveled over the bronze, bared tail and brilliant iridescence of the overall plumage. The Palouse landscape against a gorgeous fall sunset presents a stunning watercolor painting. Throw in the varied tones and flashes of setter and rooster to orchestrate a unique masterpiece worthy of marvel and never to be seen quite the same again.

While those clear, crisp evenings along thick drainage cover are ideal, draw-bottom grasses on higher ground can serve as sufficient roost cover as well.

Outdoor gift ideas abound

I had COVID-19 in April and didn't recover until May 6. For six weeks prior to that I was helping a buddy over in South Dakota. I left there and it was pretty much still winter and by the time I got well, spring was in full swing, crappie fishing was on the tail end slide and the mushroom season was over. When I went to sleep it was winter and when I woke up it was almost summer. I felt like Rip Van Winkel.

I got to make the most of summer but still, even now I feel a little time disoriented. And suddenly it's almost Christmas and here I am writing my annual Christmas list for the outdoorsman article. Wow. Well, here's a list of some of the cool items that I got to test out this year and some that are old-time favorites. I say something to this effect every year but if you take time to investigate what your little outdoor honey wants/needs you can really rack up some points. Most of our outdoor endeavors are pretty specific so investigate before you make a purchase.

I've never thrown this angle in before but with the COVID-19 panic ravaging businesses in America try to shop in your community if at all possible and keep the dollars at home. That way your friends and neighbors can maintain their jobs and businesses. If your health is compromised then yes, you can probably almost do all of your shopping online. I just wanted to remind everyone that local businesses are what supports the community that you live in.

If you buy a unique or much needed item, you'll sweep your outdoor lover off their feet. And you don't always have to spend a lot of money. Well, let's get started.

HUNTING

- SneakyHunter BootLamps
- Smith's folding limb saw
- Knives of Alaska professional boning knife
- Umarex airguns. Check out the Gauntlet, Origin or the Yukon Magnum break barrel
- mytopomaps. They will make a map



BASE CAMP
TOM CLAYCOMB

of wherever or however detailed that you want. I use them.

- Hi Mountain seasoning to make your own jerky and sausage

- I just got a Chard Pro Former Jerky Gun. Can't wait to use it.
- .511 makes some cool tactical pants that are great for hunting
- Spyderco makes a cool little hunting knife called the Bow River knife
- Scopes/binoculars, there's an up-and-coming new company called Riton Optics. Check out their offerings.
- For shooters, Caldwell makes a lot of must-have items. Shooting bags, Hydro-sled and their Stable Table. These items help you have a stable rest when sighting in your rifles.
- Otis Elite Range Box. This is a great help when mounting scopes or cleaning your guns.

BACKPACKING ITEMS

- Alps Mountaineering Dash chair
- Alps Chaos 2 tent
- Alps Nimble pad
- Camp Chef Stryker 200 stove
- Aquimira filtered water bottles and straws
- Adventure Medical Kits duct tape, mole skin
- Irish Setter Canyons hiking boots.
- Hiking socks. These are worth their weight in gold.
- Eating utensils. Outdoor Edge Chopal. Collapsible cooking utensils.
- Uberleben Stoker Flatpack is a cool little collapsible stove.
- Smith's Consumer Products offers I don't know how many folding knives that are great for backpacking.
- Backpacking meals

FISHING

- Heybo makes some cool fishing shirts.
- Mister Twister plastics. I like their tube jigs for crappie fishing.
- I've been using a Honda BF 2.3 motor to fish with this summer. I like it better than my trolling motor.