



The Elkhorn Mountains from Sumpter Valley, about 25 miles southwest of Baker City.

Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group

# WINTER WANDERLUST

The malady afflicts me every January, as certain as the handful of fir needles the vacuum cleaner fails to inhale after the Christmas tree has been dragged to its ignominious end. Wanderlust. A fine word, that. “Lust” expresses the powerful nature of my desire to leave the house, which felt so cozy and welcoming during the holidays but now seems more like a comfortable yet confining prison, as stale as the mounds of icy, dirt-streaked snow that line the driveway. The lure to explore the outdoors, a place which even in its most familiar guise still retains an endless capacity to surprise and delight, is closer to a compulsion than a gentle tug. Usually I satisfy this craving on foot. But occasionally I have an urge to see considerably more country than I can at the modest pace of my own locomotion. And once this idea lodges in my mind its stubbornness is formidable, as difficult to prise off as beggar’s lice that latches to a bootlace. I satiated my appetite for adventure on Saturday, Jan. 9, with a road trip that includes an eclectic mixture of the Blue Mountains’ diverse scenery, along with a dollop of history and even a bit of poignancy. The 215-mile loop, all on paved



ON THE ROAD  
JAYSON JACOBY

roads, is perfectly suited for a one-day trip, even accounting for the likelihood of snow and ice through the half-dozen passes, and the abbreviated daylight of midwinter. Starting from our home in Baker City, my family and I drove the route clockwise, in part because we planned to get dinner in La Grande and because I preferred that the only extended freeway stint would also be the final leg. If you embark from La Grande the opposite direction might be more attractive, taking you up the Grande Ronde River initially rather than along 43 miles of I-84 to Baker City. We started by following a different river — the Powder — via Highway 7, which traces the Powder’s course upstream to near its source in Sumpter. The night before we left, the skies cleared after a stormy stretch. As we passed Phillips Reservoir and had our first unobscured view of the west side of the Elkhorns I told my wife, Lisa, that I didn’t recall ever seeing this range — our backyard mountains, literally — look quite so pristinely white. The coating of new snow was so thorough that trees high on the ridges had lost the

green tint that even heavily snow-laden conifers usually have. The mountains might have been dipped in marshmallow cream. Our kids, Max and Olivia, seemed more concerned that the old man keep his eyes on the road, a frequent admonition from the back seat. We navigated the two passes along Highway 7 — Larch and Tipton summits — then turned right at Bates, the erstwhile sawmill town, onto the two-lane county road that follows the Middle Fork of the John Day River west for 40 miles to Highway 395. The Middle Fork Road is among my favorite drives. It’s especially beguiling in winter. Oftentimes, as was the case on Jan. 9, the route begins in undistilled winter, with snow a couple of feet deep (including a few fresh, unplowed, inches on the road from the previous day’s storm). Yet as the river makes its gradual descent, as all rivers must, the snow depth diminishes and eventually disappears but for scanty patches in the most protected glades. As the elevation dips from 4,200 feet at Bates to 2,900 at Highway 395, the terrain steadily sheds its typical Blue Mountains mixture of pine, fir and tamarack, replaced by grass, sage and an occasional clump of western junipers.



Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group

The historic Galena Cemetery is in Grant County, near the old gold-mining town of the same name. The immaculately maintained cemetery is on a knoll in a forest of second-growth ponderosa pines.

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# The Devil Birds

■ The sometimes painful challenge of hunting chukar

Carefully picking myself up from the edge of a jagged, ice-covered, granite face, I grimaced at the sharp pain in my right hip. My setter, Finn, was entangled between intense interest in a lone sagebrush in which a brace of chukar had just departed, and passing sidelong glances of puzzlement at me as I stretched, groaned, cursed, and struggled to remain upright. Although furious and frustrated, I gazed in awe at the high bluffs above the Columbia River, covered in a fresh blanket of light snow.



UPLAND PURSUITS  
BRAD TRUMBO

The water was glass-slick, reflecting perfectly the contours of the shoreline. Wincing again, I recovered the new Browning pump that my wife recently purchased as her upland bird gun. I decided I would “break it in,” and did a fine job by the looks of the fresh and excruciatingly deep gouges in the sleek walnut stock.

The chukar pair young Finn had busted were the cause of the fall. Reacting in panic as they careened across canyon, my footing failed on the iced-over, near-vertical slope. “The fall didn’t kill me, but Ali might,” I explained to Finn as she wagged, blissfully ignorant. “I am done with chukar!” was my next utterance. Like most of the prairie birds we upland hunters are so fond of, chukar are not native to the U.S., initially introduced from Pakistan in 1893. Wild populations presently thrive in 10 western states (California, Idaho, Nevada, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Wyoming), and British Columbia, Canada. Chukar can also be found on the main Hawaiian Islands. If you’ve ever been to Kauai, ponder running the rim of Waimea Canyon as the chukar bail over the edge, laughing heartily. Would you shoot? I am far too excited about hunting again tomorrow to even consider recovering a bird in such exaggerated, death-defying terrain. For the record, I never saw or heard chukar in Waimea Canyon (the habitat is all wrong). In my early upland days, I remained in the dark about areas like the Owyhee and Steens where birds can be



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

A hard-won chukar of the sagebrush steppe.

found along rimrock and out in the sagebrush. Rather, I traveled to the upper Columbia, scrambling up scree and clinging to the faces. The “Chukar Palace” was a place my buddy Chas introduced me to. Dog-less, he climbs the slopes, taking limits, and never returning with less than a couple of birds a day. With or without a dog, I have never even gotten a shot at chukar while hunting the crags with Chas. Holding

true to my word, I haven’t returned to the Chukar Palace. Chas’s dog-less success comes from knowing the habitat and reading the bird sign. And I am not convinced that a strong element of luck doesn’t factor into the equation. Sagebrush and cheatgrass are important food sources and water is critical in the early part of the season.

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Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

The dreaded ascent to the “Chukar Palace.”