

Hiking The John Day Fossil Beds National Monument



Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group

Looking down on Blue Basin in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument in Grant County.

BLUE BASIN BEAUTY

■ A short hike in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument in Grant County tells a colorful tale about Oregon’s ancient origins

Like to read about geology, but the story of the ground beneath our feet is much more visceral when it’s smeared all over your clothes. It’s one thing to learn about the Oligocene epoch. It’s quite another to vacuum its remnants from your car’s floor-mats. Few places in our region are better suited to both types of education — the clean lesson of the geology book and the messy experience of the muddy trail — than the John Day Fossil Beds. This national monument, which is divided into three units spread across two counties, Grant and Wheeler, tells the tale of the animals that roamed and the plants that grew in this part of Oregon dating back about 50 million years.



ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

The chapters of this story, as it were, are the fossils, both floral and faunal. They are preserved in rocks and ash flows that erupted from a series of volcanoes far to the west, eruptions that predated the current Cascade Mountains. Paleontologists who have examined these fossils over the decades describe a land very different from what we see today. Millions of years ago, before the Cascades rose and began to intercept most of the moisture from storms that swept in off the Pacific Ocean, this part of Eastern Oregon had a much wetter, more temperate climate than today’s arid sagebrush steppe with its scorching summers and chilly winters. The wildlife was vastly different in the ancient past, as well. Where today mule deer and bighorn sheep browse, three-toed horses and sheep-like oreodonts walked. These mammals were preyed on not by cougars and coyotes and bobcats, the primary predators these days, but by bear-dogs, pig-like entelodonts and cat-like nimravids. It requires a rather expansive imagination to conjure such scenes while hiking through the fossil beds, even on a late January day when the ground is much more moist than usual. No matter how soft and damp the soil during a midwinter thaw, the sharp scent of sage and juniper is redolent of desert rather than of savannah. And instead of the varied forests of oak, sycamore and maple that prevailed here so many millennia distant, the vegetation today is sparse, and the dominant color the dull tan of dormant winter grass.

On the penultimate day of January we left Baker City and headed for the Sheep Rock unit of the John Day Fossil Beds. This unit is not only nearest our home — about 122 highway miles — but it includes the monument’s longest trail. That’s the Blue Basin loop, which covers about 3 1/2 miles. Add the out-and-back trail into the heart of the basin itself — the most interesting part, geologically speaking, and the most photogenic — and you’ll end up covering close to 5 miles. I told my wife, Lisa, and our kids, Olivia and Max, that although I couldn’t guarantee an absence of mud, I thought it possible that the trail would be in decent shape. All three, having followed my crud-coated boots on other days, looked skeptical. Rightfully so.



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A trail through the heart of Blue Basin, in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, passes the bright hues of the volcanic ash beds that give the basin its name.

The most direct route to Blue Basin is Highway 7 to Austin Junction, Highway 26 through Prairie City, John Day, Mount Vernon and Dayville to Picture Gorge, then north on Highway 19,

beside the John Day River, for about 4 miles. The paved parking area is just east of Highway 19. Although the monument’s Thomas

Condon Paleontology and Visitor Center is closed due to the pandemic, trails and other outdoor areas are open.