

BLUE BASIN

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Many geology guides are too hefty to haul around while hiking.

An exception is the volume we brought, the second edition of “Hiking Oregon’s Geology” by Ellen Morris Bishop, a Wallowa County geologist, author and journalist who has written extensively about Oregon’s fascinating prehistory.

Bishop recommends hiking the Blue Basin loop clockwise, advice that’s especially appropriate when the trail, as it was on the day of our visit, is by turns slimed with grainy slush and gooey mud.

If your time or energy are limited, forego the loop itself and take the right-hand fork of the trail, the Island in Time path, which leads directly into Blue Basin itself.

The left fork of the loop skirts an alfalfa field then veers east, climbing at a consistent but moderate grade above the dry gorge of Dick Creek.

The strangely sculpted landscape on the right (south) side of the trail is compelling, a badland of spires and fissures where the erosive work of water and wind is obvious.

As is the origin of the basin’s name.

The distinctive color of this volcanic ash — to my eyes it’s closer to green or teal than to blue — comes from the mineral celadonite, according to the national monument’s website.

This formation, though formed from volcanic ash, has the consistency of stone, albeit soft, easily eroded stone. The heat from the eruption that produced the ash “welded” it into solidified layers, hence the term “welded ash tuff.”

In her guide, Bishop writes that these deposits were laid down during the Oligocene epoch, about 28.9 million years ago.

The basin is also known



Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group

Water and wind erosion have sculpted the volcanic ash beds of the Blue Basin.

as Turtle Cove, as the fossils found in this area include many from ancient turtles.

The loop trail climbs a bit more steeply to its high point atop a knoll, where a side trail leads a few hundred yards to a viewpoint of the Blue Basin several hundred feet below.

The main trail then begins its descent to the basin itself. The grade is gentle for the first half mile or so, but then it drops steeply, in a series of more than a dozen switchbacks, to meet the Island in Time trail near the parking lot.

Climbing, rather than descending, these switchbacks, given the slippery surface that prevailed during our hike, would have been a much less pleasant slog. We were glad we heeded Bishop’s suggestion.

We also enjoyed the vista from the loop trail, a much more expansive view than you get from within the convoluted confines of the basin.

The terrain hereabouts, near the boundary between Grant and Wheeler counties, is distinctive, a contorted landscape of buttes and ridges composed of the colorful beds of what geologists call

the John Day formation. Most of the high ground is capped with a veneer of much harder, darker stone, like chocolate frosting topping a cake.

Generally, this top layer is a basalt flow, one of the hundreds of such flows that comprise the Columbia River flood basalts.

In the Picture Gorge area another distinctive formation, the Rattlesnake welded tuff, forms the geologic frosting.

The best view of the Rattlesnake tuff is at the Mascall Overlook, just off Highway 26 before it enters Picture Gorge.

The scenic highlight of Blue Basin, though — the

place that’s likely to gobble the most megabytes on your camera — is the basin itself.

It’s a strange place.

Some writers, Bishop among them, have described it as a “badlands.”

An apt term.

But the starkness that the word implies also can be beautiful — and unlike, say, the namesake badlands of a national park in South Dakota, the Blue Basin stands out for its color.

In places the shade is so bright it might fairly be called garish, although that adjective seems to me more appropriate for something man-made —

the hue of paint slathered on kitchen appliances during the 1970s, for instance — than for a wholly natural formation.

Even the water in the sluggish meltwater stream that trickles through the basin takes on the distinctive tint.

Blue is the dominant, but not the only, color represented.

In places the ashy slopes are bands of red and ochre, resembling the well-known Painted Hills, the namesake of another of the national monument’s units, near Mitchell about 45 miles west.

Many of the myriad gullies that water has gouged into the ash are littered with chunks of basalt that have tumbled off the ridge top rim rock.

We even saw a minor example of the erosion that has sculpted this basin for millions of years, a brief slide of gravely debris, perhaps enough to fill a wheelbarrow or two, at the head of the basin.

It was a palpable reminder that the natural forces that created this place never end. I don’t believe I would feel comfortable standing there during a summer cloudburst.

Fortunately the Island in Time trail is graveled in places, and the brief walk back to the parking lot scuffed off much of the mud that had clung to our boots as we negotiated the switchbacks.

Rather than retrace our route to Baker City, I opted for

another loop of sorts, going by way of Kimberly, Monument and Long Creek before returning to Highway 26 at Mount Vernon.

The detour adds perhaps an hour to the drive.

But I think the scenery, and the near absence of traffic save an occasional ranch truck, offsets the extra investment in time and mileage.

Highway 402, which connects Kimberly and Long Creek, with Monument between, follows the North Fork of the John Day River for about half its length. It’s a charming river in any season. In one of the bare brown fields, where the alfalfa awaits the reviving spring sunshine, we saw a herd of pronghorn antelope bedded down. I remarked that it was rare, at least in my experience, to see this most fleet of Eastern Oregon mammals sitting motionless.

Grant County, with just 7,360 people distributed among its 4,529 square miles, in no place resembles a metropolis.

But this northern section of the county seems to me especially remote. Monument, population 130, and Long Creek, with about 195 residents, boast the only street signs for dozens of miles.

Neither has, nor needs, a traffic signal.



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CROSSWORD PUZZLER

ACROSS

1 Shelley offering

4 J in JFK

8 Totter

12 Very little

13 Bowser’s pal

14 Grow ashen

15 Neutral shade

17 House shader

18 Glimmering

19 Rev the engine

21 Prickly twig

22 Czech capital

25 Teachers’ org.

26 Trick

27 Picked out

30 Football team mems.

31 Skybox locale

33 Deviate, as a rocket

35 “Anyone home?” (hyph.)

37 Ricelike pasta

38 Knows how

DOWN

1 Be in debt

2 Yr. ender

3 Always, to Poe

4 Possibility

5 Brother’s daughter

6 Like some chatter

7 Brokaw of the news

8 Helix

39 Lustrous fabric

41 “People” person

44 South Seas paradise

45 Burglar’s take

46 Kennel sleeper

47 Hunt for

51 Peace Prize city

52 Remnant

54 Once named

55 Animal skin

56 Trillion (pref.)

57 Moon’s place

Answer to Previous Puzzle

S	I	T		C	R	A	B		Z	I	T	I
O	R	O		H	U	G	O		E	R	I	C
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C	O	L	D		T	R	E	E		G	N	U
K	L	E	E		S	E	N	D		Y	O	N

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9 Dry

20 Baba — rum

10 Helm position

21 First name in horror

11 Decade part

22 Without delay

16 Natural impulse

23 Deep red

24 Lhasa —

25 Cell habitant

27 Co. honcho

28 Brontë heroine Jane —

29 Mental fog

31 Jezebel’s spouse

32 Swoboda of baseball

34 Outscored

36 Spotted wildcat

37 Elevator name

39 More prudent

40 Capp of “Li’l Abner”

41 Hew

42 Dexterity

43 Period of quiet

44 Drill a hole

46 Banned bug spray

48 Jr. naval officer

49 Response to a rodent

50 Typewriter part

53 Fla. neighbor

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