

BOUNDARY BECKONS

■ Borders between counties sometimes are just straight lines drawn on a map, but in some places the boundary is defined by a natural feature that makes for a compelling hiking destination

Maps fascinate me, and because they do I harbor what's probably an abnormal interest in boundaries.

Political boundaries in particular.

Physical borders can be compelling too — the Cascade Mountains, for instance, which divide Oregon and Washington into their wet and arid sides, or a great chasm such as Hells Canyon. But these natural boundaries generally are not so distinct, or anyway not so easy to define with specificity, as the lines we draw on maps to separate counties, states and other delineations of human construction.



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

Of course we often borrow natural features to serve such functions.

Waterways, both great and small, commonly fill this role, creating conspicuous, if rather squiggly, borders.

In our region the Snake River and its reservoirs form the boundary between Oregon and Idaho for more than 100 miles.

(This stretch starts just north of Adrian, in Malheur County. From that point south, in what has always struck me as a curious deviation from cartographic

conformity, the Snake for several miles flows wholly within Oregon, this being the only area where it doesn't form the border. From the spot where the Snake begins as the state border, the boundary to the south is a ruler-straight line that continues to the so-called "triple point" where Oregon, Idaho and Nevada meet — a sort of ersatz, rarely visited version of the famous Four Corners, where New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona come together.)

The border between Baker and Union counties, meanwhile, is formed for many miles by either the North Powder River or Anthony Creek, two streams that drain from the east slopes of the



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Rock Creek Butte, tallest peak in the Elkhorn Mountains at 9,106 feet, from a forest road near the Baker-Grant county border northwest of Sumpter.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Mount Ireland, a western extension of the Elkhorn Mountains, is topped by a fire lookout that's staffed each summer. The mountain, which rises to 8,321 feet, is on the hydrologic divide between the Powder and North Fork John Day rivers, which also serves as the boundary between Baker and Grant counties. The lookout itself is in Grant County, just a few hundred feet or so east of the Baker County line.

Elkhorn Mountains.

But the people who made these geographic decisions don't always rely on rivers.

I find it passing strange, for instance, that the Minam River, the biggest river flowing from the northwest side of the Wallowa Mountains, doesn't mark the border between Union and Wallowa counties.

Those two counties indeed meet in the Minam River Canyon, but the division is a series of straight lines rather than the meandering river itself.

In many cases when water itself doesn't conform to a political boundary, natural drainage patterns fill that role.

Geographers, and others interested in such matters, sometimes call such a feature the "hydrologic divide." Typically ridges or shoulders of mountains, these are elevated country that stands between two creeks or rivers.

As with waterways themselves, hydrologic divides span a spectrum from a minor

eminence that separates two trickling tributaries, to America's most famous such division, the Continental Divide.

The latter, which is marked prominently on many maps and given much attention in the form of roadside signs and scenic vistas — the divide coincides in places with highway passes — is the narrow point on the ground where water flowing west eventually reaches (in theory at least) the Pacific Ocean, and water heading east winds up in the Atlantic (by way of the Gulf of Mexico in some significant cases, including the mighty Mississippi).

In Northeast Oregon, hydrologic divides most often serve as boundaries between hunting units, national forests or ranger districts.

But occasionally these natural features also separate counties.

If You Go ...

From downtown Sumpter, continue northwest on the Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway toward Granite for about 4.7 miles to the junction with Forest Road 900. The junction is at a sweeping curve in the byway.

From the byway it's about 2.2 miles to the top of the ridge, which marks the Baker-Grant county border. The elevation gain is 700 feet. From the border (which is not marked), Road 900 continues for 1.3 miles where it rejoins the Elkhorn Byway. You could do a loop hike, but that would require walking for 2.7 miles on the shoulder of the Byway to get back to the junction with Road 900.

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Spring in the Northwest: crappie, morels and whistle pigs

The other Friday night Katy and I were running to buy a pair of boots and then I was going to take her out to dinner. I was thinking about how magical the Northwest is in the spring (I know, I know, I say that every spring). Suddenly I was singing "It's the most wonderful timeeee of the year. There'll be whistle pigs flipping, the crappie will be nipping, the mushrooms will be growing and the turks will be crowing, it's the most wonderful timeeee of the year!"

OK, I'm not a songwriter, but springtime is magical in the Northwest and lest we get tied up mushroom hunting, turkey hunting, bear hunting and crappie fishing, don't forget whistle pig hunting. It's one of the highlights of the year. It provides for high-speed shooting and is a great hunt to break kids in on.

There are plenty of them and they are in no danger of being overhunted. They've been shot for centuries and are doing fine. In fact, if they are thinned out, they'll do better because the plague won't run through their colonies as fast and wipe them out. Farmers will gladly welcome you because they devastate crops. They can wipe out a field of alfalfa in a short amount of time.

So, what is a whistle pig? They are



Tom Claycomb/Contributed Photo

The equipment for hunting whistle pigs is pretty simple: Umarex airgun. Ruger 10/22. Riton Optics 4-16 scope and 10x binoculars. Shooting sticks.

a unique animal. Their official name is Townsend ground squirrel. They emerge and mate in January and February. Although everyone thinks of them as appearing in mid-March, I've had good hunts in early March. When it gets warm, they are out in full force.

Gestation is only 24 days and they'll have six to 10 young in April. Their eyes open in 19 to 22 days and

are weaned muy pronto. This seems to be their system to me. As stated above, they come out in late January/February and go on a breeding frenzy. Then they go on a feeding frenzy until the end of May/June when it gets hot and the grass dries up. Then they go back underground and that's the last that you see of them for the year.

Some people think that they go underground and eat plant roots for

the next seven or eight months. Some people think that they hibernate. What they actually do is called estivation. Sort of a summer hibernation.

You may be fooled into thinking that they are cute little furry creatures but make no mistake, they are a prairie rat. Adult squirrels have been known to cannibalize unweaned young. And while hunting you'll frequently see them run out and eat their fallen comrades.

Enough of the scientific angle. What will you need to hunt them? Some people use a .223 but most people use the lowly .22. Most shots will be within 100 yards so a .22 is the perfect gun. And the Ruger 10/22 is the most popular model. Since they are small, you'll need to use a scope. I put a Riton Optics 4-16x on my 10/22 and a Timney Trigger and a Boyds' Stock to make it super classy.

But the .17 HMR is also a popular rifle. It is faster, has better results and reaches out a little further. But the past 10 years I've mostly been using air guns. They're a lot cheaper to shoot and with ammo being so scarce air guns might be the only option for you. Plus, since they're quieter they pop back up faster.

I've been using the Umarex

.25-caliber Gauntlet and the .22-caliber Synergis. They are both super good choices in the air gun realm. For pellets use JSB Dome pellets if you want supreme accuracy. But JSB just came out with a pellet named the Knockout pellet that looks like a good hunting option. I went out shooting yesterday but the wind was blowing so bad that I can't testify one way or another as to their accuracy. You'll also want a good pair of binoculars to find the little elusive creatures. I use a pair of Riton Optics 10x42 binoculars.

I think that the high deserts are beautiful in their own forlorn way. Hunting whistle pigs gives you a good excuse to go out and see them. Plus, there will be unique wildlife viewing opportunities. You'll see badgers, which I think are beautiful (but the kings of bad attitudes). Once I shot a whistle pig and suddenly a badger ran out, grabbed it and ran back to his hole. Another time my old buddy Roy Snethen shot one. He flipped twice and I said "You got him!" Suddenly a hawk swept down and grabbed him and I said "You had him!"

So, before they go underground for the year you better grab a kid and run out and have some fun!