

STRAWBERRY

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Here the highway briefly veers from west to south, and the mountain suddenly looms in the windshield. I have seen it from here, whizzing along at 55 mph, dozens of times, mantled in snow and barren in summer, and it never fails to impress, as a proper mountain should.

Strawberry Mountain's prominence has much to do with its singularity.

Unlike its taller neighboring ranges, the Elkhorns and the Wallawas, Strawberry Mountain is isolated, aloof. Although the peak is part of a larger chunk of elevated ground — the Strawberry Range — no other summit approaches its lofty position.

By contrast the Elkhorns, and even more so the Wallawas, constitute a series of major ridges, each capped with multiple high points.

Both ranges are indubitably impressive.

But the sheer expanse of their topography, the multitude of summits, denies any individual peak the prominence that distinguishes Strawberry Mountain.

A man who's seven feet tall doesn't exactly stand out when he's mingling with an NBA team.

But put the same man on the court with a bunch of middle schoolers and his height will be magnified.

So it is with Strawberry Mountain.

In this sense the peak has more in common with Mount Hood, Mount Jefferson and the other great volcanoes of the Cascades than it does with the Elkhorns and the Wallawas.

Nor is this the only kind of kinship.

Strawberry Mountain's origin, as mentioned, is volcanic, unlike many of the rocks in the Elkhorns and Wallawas, which are sedimentary.

The rock that became Strawberry Mountain belched out of volcanic vents about 15 million years ago, according to geologists.

This would have been an unpleasant time to be living in proto-Oregon.

During that era, part of the Miocene geologic epoch (24 million to 5 million years ago), lava in volumes unimaginable spewed forth in many parts of what would become our state.

The biggest of these, contemporaneous but unrelated geologically to the Strawberry volcanoes, were the "flood" basalts that flowed, like hot soup, down what would become the Columbia River Gorge.

Many millions of years later, Ice Age glaciers gouged at the mountains, grinding away volcanic and sedimentary rocks with equal aplomb, forming the great U-shaped canyons so conspicuous in the Elkhorns and Wallawas and at Steens Mountain.

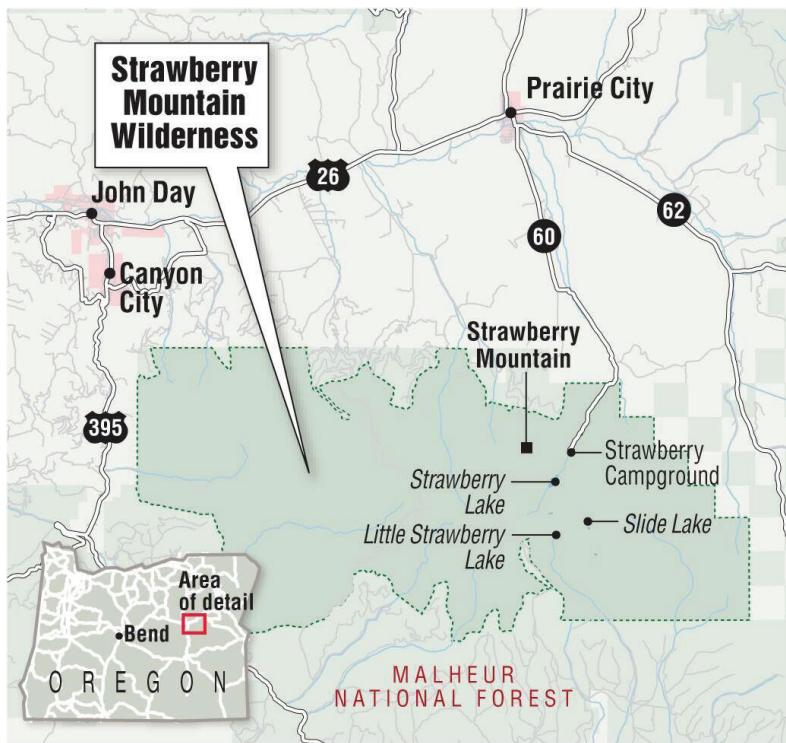
Glacial ice sculpted the Strawberry Range as well.

Among the most notable glacial features is the valley of Strawberry Creek, a bit east of



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Strawberry Lake was formed when moraines from an Ice Age glacier blocked Strawberry Creek.



(Greg Cross/Bulletin graphic)

Strawberry Mountain itself.

This is also the site of the most popular trail in the 68,700-acre Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, Strawberry Basin.

This is, among much else, the route to the top of Strawberry Mountain, an ambitious goal involving about 13 miles of hiking and, more notably, an elevation gain of about 3,300 feet.

But you needn't invest nearly so much time, or toil, to appreciate the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

On the last Saturday in September, my wife, Lisa, and I, and our kids, Olivia, 14, and Max, 10, hiked the trail to two of its standout spots — Strawberry Lake and Strawberry Falls.

We covered a little more than six miles, round trip, and gained about 1,200 feet of elevation.

It was the quintessential day during that period when neither summer nor autumn is completely in charge.

There were no clouds. In

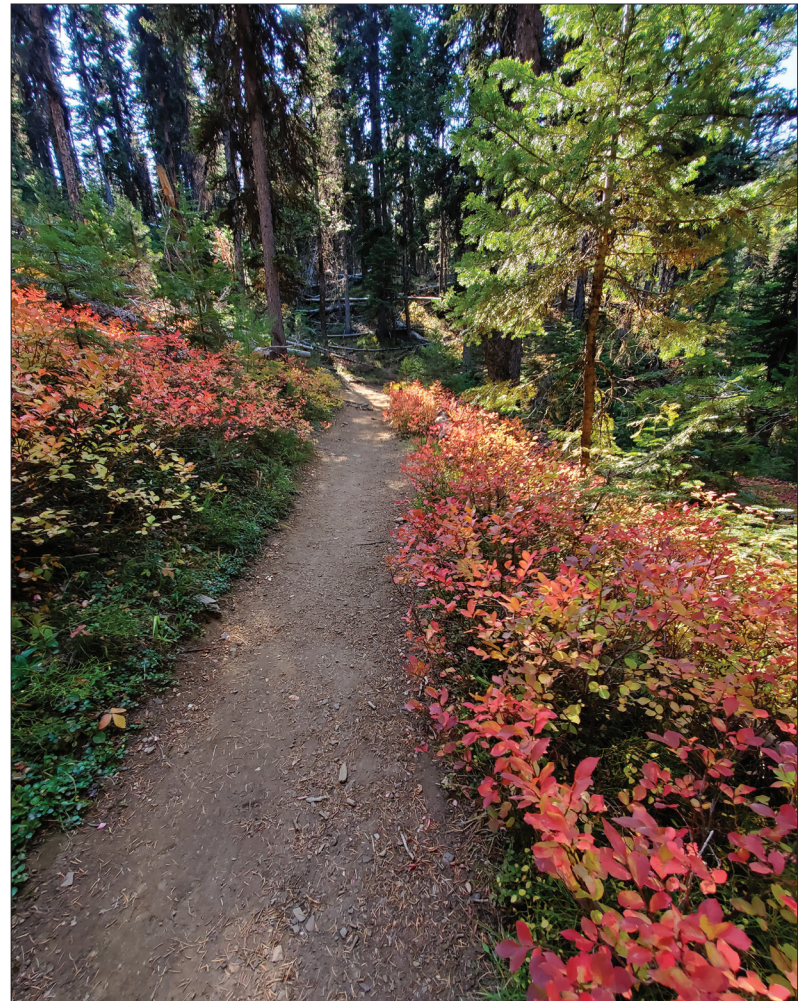
full sunshine the air might have been mistaken for July, but at the instant we reached a patch of shade cast by a tall trailside tamarack, the illusion was gone and the coolness carried the essence of October.

If you've hiked much in the Elkhorns or the Wallawas (or the Greenhorns, for that matter), the Strawberry Range will seem familiar.

The forests are the typical mixture of lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir and tamarack, with copses of willow in the wet spots and aspen groves, some burnished orange, brightening the rockslides.

Spring-spawned brooks trickle across the trail in places, their water having the customary chill of high places.

Strawberry Lake, about 1.4 miles from the trailhead, is a classic alpine lake, fringed by forest, its blue surface rippled by the breeze and by the leaps of brook trout.



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Autumn-tinted huckleberry bushes brighten the Strawberry Basin trail.

A trail encircles the lake. We took the more heavily traveled east fork, which climbs gradually through mostly lodgepole pines to Strawberry Falls, about a mile past the head of the lake.

The 70-foot falls splash onto mossy boulders just to the right of the trail.

From there the trail climbs more steeply, with a few switchbacks, to a bridge across Strawberry Creek just above the top of the falls. We hiked a bit farther, passing the junction with the trail that leads about a third of a mile to Little Strawberry Lake.

You have to hike another half a mile or so, on an increas-

ingly steep grade, to get a view of Strawberry Mountain itself.

We headed back down. A little ways below the falls, Max exclaimed as the bright red head of a bird zipped across the trail.

It was a pileated woodpecker, the first I've seen in the wild. We all watched the bird for a few minutes as it hopped along logs and sampled a few lodgepoles, apparently not finding any easily accessible insects to make up its lunch.

We, on the other hand, had beef chunks and Sour Patch Kids. Which, if I may be so bold, are tastier than bugs.

Although probably not as nutritious.

ELEPHANT

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Refusing to be seduced by the sight of the first pool I encounter, I wade shock-cold water in old tennis shoes and jeans, favoring a flannel shirt to ward off the chill. New-spun spider webs and overhanging alder restricts casting yet I remain hopeful for a chance at one last trout before the season closes.

The author-naturalist Roderick Haig-Brown wrote, "Fall fishing is a revival after the quieter times of summer." This change in season leads to aggressive feeding in response to declining water temperature. As if sensing the need to load up on high-calorie morsels, rainbow trout are attracted to oversize fly patterns that resemble the flopping action of October caddisflies. Showcasing vivid parr marks on silvery flanks that flash iridescent purple, native trout are too beautiful to remove from the water. I carefully release them so that others might also thrill to their aggressive strike.

Light is fading after a brief sojourn up the North Fork Wilderness trail. I motor down River Road,



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

A rustic Adirondack chair sits empty when maple leaves yellow and begin to fall.

park my truck on a narrow shoulder, and clamber up the steep slope to where Elephant Rock stands tall on a narrow grassy bench. Its presence provides permanence in a world where seasons change in response to an evolving space-time continuum. The purple fruit of elderberry hangs like

clusters of stunted Concord grapes from tangles of brush crowding the roadside tugs at tired leaves that cling tenaciously to streamside alder; their stored-up chlorophyll has long since faded to unmask pigments of yellow and orange. Further upslope, sumac glows



Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photo

Declining water temperatures make trout hungry for oversized fly patterns.

blood red in low light.

Leaning into the hillside to maintain my balance, I work up a slanted deer trail lined with lichen-scarred rocks. Elephant Rock appears much larger when viewed up close, stretching nearly 10 paces long and towering twice as high as this 6-footer (in cowboy boots, anyway) can reach. Closing my eyes as if in silent prayer, I run my hand across the craggy surface of its rounded rump and take delight in the hush of a river trapped in the narrow canyon below.

This column is an excerpt from Dennis Dauble's newest book, "Chasing Ghost Trout," to

be available in November from Amazon.com, Keoke-

Books.com, and the website DennisDaubleBooks.com.



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