

BACKYARD BEAUTY

Relishing the proximity of the Mount Emily Recreation Area



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

If you live in La Grande, I'm jealous. And if you live in a northern neighborhood, say around Greenwood Elementary or Riverside Park, I'm really jealous.

The source of my geographic envy is Mount Emily.

Not the mountain itself, although it does make an iconic backdrop not only for the city but for the Grande Ronde Valley.

I'm referring here rather to the Mount Emily Recreation Area — MERA.

This network of trails — 45 miles each of nonmotorized and motorized routes wending among the ponderosa pines and wildflower meadows on the mountain's southeast shoulder — would be a treasure no matter its location.

But its proximity to La Grande lends MERA a level of accessibility that seems almost unfairly generous to people whose addresses aren't so accommodating.

Mine, for instance.

I don't mean to imply that Baker City, where I live, is some urban wasteland.

Quite the opposite, of course.

Baker City is nearly as close to the Elkhorn Mountains as La Grande is



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Views from the Mount Emily Recreation Area extend east across the Grande Ronde Valley to Mount Fanny, Point Prominence and other high points in the western Wallows.

to Mount Emily. And the Elkhorns, which top out at 9,106 on the sedimentary summit of Rock Creek Butte, are notably more imposing than Mount Emily's 6,063-foot apex.

The view of the Wallowa Mountains from Baker City is expansive, too, compared with La Grande's vista of that range, which takes in just a few prominent summits including Mule Peak and China Cap.

Yet even though I can see the triangular tip of Elkhorn Peak, second-tallest in the range, from my living room — and better than a dozen of the Wallows' eminences from my driveway — there's nothing like MERA nearby.

I had hiked at MERA a couple times before, but the last time was probably at least five years ago.

I got reacquainted with the area this month because my daughter, Olivia, was playing summer volleyball at La Grande High School on a few evenings.

While Olivia was spiking and bumping on June 20, the day before the solstice, my wife, Lisa, and I took our son, Max, up to MERA to see what the soggy spring had done for this year's

crop of lupine and paintbrush and camas.

(Quite a lot, it turned out, as all the foliage was lush and healthy. So, unfortunately, were the mosquitoes, although the insect population at MERA was modest compared with the veritable swarms that infest places in the Wallows and Elkhorns during the unpleasant period soon after the snow has melted.)

I knew, of course, that MERA was no great journey.

But it wasn't until I saw the pizza delivery car that I realized just how near the place is — almost literally in some backyards, as the saying goes.

We followed the car up Owsley Canyon Road for a mile or so. As I watched the delivery driver start down a lengthy driveway bearing an undoubtedly delectable cargo, it struck me that MERA is close enough to town that probably you could even cajole Domino's into bringing a large pepperoni right to the trailhead parking lot, which was little more than a mile farther.

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A bridge on a trail at the Mount Emily Recreation Area near La Grande on June 22, 2022.

Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

PLANTS OF MOUNT EMILY RECREATION AREA

near La Grande

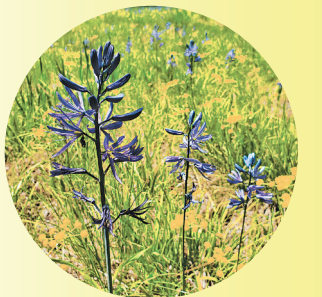
Photos by Lisa Britton, Baker City Herald



Columbine blooms beside a trail.



Redstem ceanothus is in bloom in June.



Camas blooms in a meadow.



Ninebark blooms in June.



Yellow lupine in bloom beside a trail.

Everyone benefits from a healthier Klamath Basin



LUKE OVGARD
CAUGHT OVGARD

It's probably selfish of me to complain about the wettest April in Portland history and one of the wettest in Oregon's history — especially in light of the perennial drought that's plagued us for much of my adult life. OK, it's definitely selfish of me.

Still, the constant barometric upheaval, unrelenting flow of chilled precipitation and clarity-destroying windstorms absolutely killed the trout fishing this spring. In the very short term, it's beneficial for all affected fishes, including the popular redband trout that usually capture my every spare moment in May, but it's also beneficial for all three endemic suckers in the Upper Klamath Basin and the salmon populations downstream. Long-term, much less so.

Unlike snowpack, rainfall is a short-lived benefit to the watershed. It can wash out built up bacteria, algae and reduce parasite loads, but as temperatures heat up



Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo

The author had to work harder to catch a fish in May 2022 than ever before, but in the eleventh hour, he managed to land nine about this size.

and the rains slow or stop entirely, we'll find ourselves in the same position we've seen every summer in recent years and be forced to watch the slow death of what is still, despite little effort to keep it in this position, the best wild native rainbow trout fishery on earth.

Foreshadowing

It wasn't until Monday, May 30 that I finally caught a big redband.

It was the slowest May I've had in the lake since I began fishing it as a kid. In a normal year, I'll catch 25 to 50 big fish each May. If not for a last-minute trip with my friends Tim Cleland (Redband Becoming Guide Service) and Nick Mitchell where I landed nine fish in an afternoon, I would've been skunked in the month of May for the first time in my entire life.

It was a chilling look at what the future of the Klamath Basin

trout fishery could be in the very near future if we don't rapidly curtail habitat degradation upstream.

Documentary

Though it was released almost a year ago, I just watched the "Killing the Klamath" documentary for the first time. It was hard for me to watch because I'd seen exactly what was shown through my own eyes: the slow decline of my favorite fishery on earth.

As a lifelong advocate for the Basin and someone obsessed with fishing its waters, I care deeply about this place. When I tell people this, they automatically assume it's just for the trout. Don't get me wrong, trout are my favorite fish here. Like most local anglers, I spend more time fishing for trout (everywhere) and perch (Rocky Point and a few other places) and crappie (Topsy) than anything else, but it's safe to say I'm probably one of the only people who also routinely fishes for our endemic blue chubs, slender and marbled sculpins as well as the native tui chubs. With the exception of the Klamath Lake sculpin, I've caught every fish found in Klamath County (careful

to release those protected fishes caught incidentally), and I appreciate the breadth of diversity here.

I feel privileged every time I hook into a pre-spawn buck dark and fat en route to spawning grounds in the Sprague River or Sevenmile Creek. I marvel at shortnose suckers grazing on algae-coated rocks in their pristine spring habitats or see the brilliant blue of a Lost River sucker in the Williamson River while drifting jigs or streamers for trout. And despite their diminutive size, I still love grabbing a headlamp and catching sculpins at the margins of the lake.

Nonetheless, I am terrified of the day when our native fish are gone. Suckers might not have the sporting appeal of trout. Though I find them uniquely charismatic, they are not beautiful and struggle to gain the following I think they deserve, but they are dying out rapidly, and they are an integral part of the ecosystem. They keep algae at bay, clean the water and provide food for trout, eagles, otters and historically, people. When suckers go, water quality will decline even further, and it's

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