

## BEAUTY *without bugs*

A pleasantly mosquito-free visit to Van Patten Lake in the Elkhorn Mountains



**JAYSON JACOBY**  
ON THE TRAIL

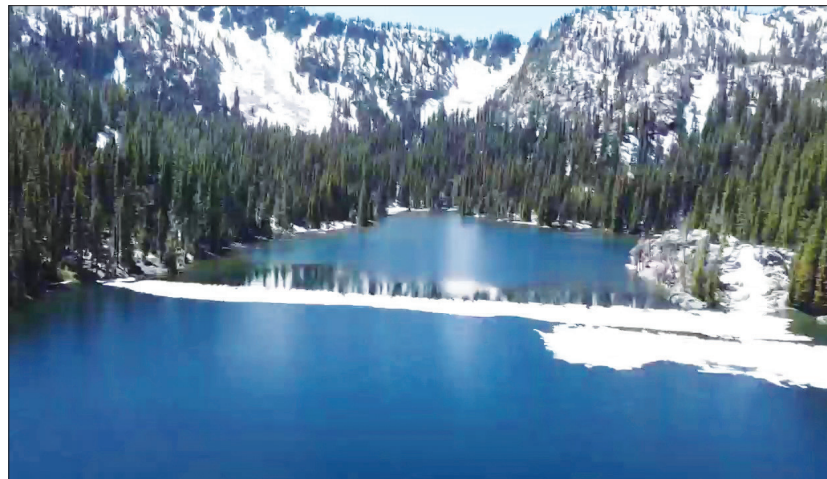
I trust mosquitoes. I don't like mosquitoes, but I trust them.

The bloodsucking bugs, though capable of driving a person to the verge of temporary madness with their incessant insectile buzzing and biting, are nothing if not reliable.

This is particularly so in the alpine country of Northeastern Oregon.

Along about the time the snow is either gone or down to grainy drifts the approximate consistency of snowcones — generally from late June through early August, depending on the elevation — the arrival of the mosquitoes is as predictable as the blooming of the lupine and the paintbrush.

I have come to accept swatting and itching as the physical toll,



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

This image taken by a drone shows an ice bridge across Van Patten Lake, in the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City, on June 26, 2022.

along with the lung-straining challenge of steep terrain, required for entry to such spectacular places.

As such, I especially treasure trips when my worries about mosquitoes turn out to be unfounded.

So it was on June 26 when my family trudged up the steep road, and then the even steeper trail, that lead to Van Patten Lake in the Elkhorns.

Notwithstanding those punishing grades, Van Patten is much more accessible than most lakes in the range.

The round trip is a mere three miles, and the trailhead is just off the paved highway about three miles below, and east of, Anthony Lakes.

Yet although Van Patten is easier to get to than, say, Rock Creek, Summit and Red Mountain lakes, it yields nothing, in general grandeur, to those pools, which require either a torturous drive and a longer walk. Or both, in the case of Rock

Creek Lake.

In common with many lakes in the Elkhorns and Wallawas, Van Patten occupies a basin gouged in the bedrock (granitic, in this case) by an Ice Age glacier. At about 16.5 acres, Van Patten is the fifth-largest lake in the Elkhorns, behind Rock Creek (24 acres), Anthony (22), Pine Creek Reservoir (18) and Summit (17).

Van Patten isn't always quite so big, however. Some of its flow is diverted each summer for irrigation, and by late summer the lake is noticeably shrunken.

But in late June it's about as full as it gets.

And about as deeply blue as water can be — that inimitable shade peculiar to cold, crystalline lakes at high elevations.

My experience with mosquitoes at Van Patten is a long one, marked by much muttering (occasionally profane) and frenzied flailing of arms more commonly associated with seizures.

My wife, Lisa, recalls, with the

sort of hyper acuity reserved for especially unpleasant episodes, a visit many years ago when the bugs seemed destined to craft nests in her hair.

It's a buggy place.

I had, therefore, forgotten to put repellent in my pack.

Lisa, fortunately, had not.

I wasn't certain that mosquitoes would be swarming.

My previous encounters, so far as I can remember, all happened in July, the peak month, generally speaking, for alpine mosquitoes.

There was no shortage of insects, to be sure, as we climbed toward the lake. And each time a tiny dark speck whizzed past my face I winced slightly, anticipating the telltale dental drill whining.

It did not happen.

The DEET-enriched spray can remained in Lisa's pack.

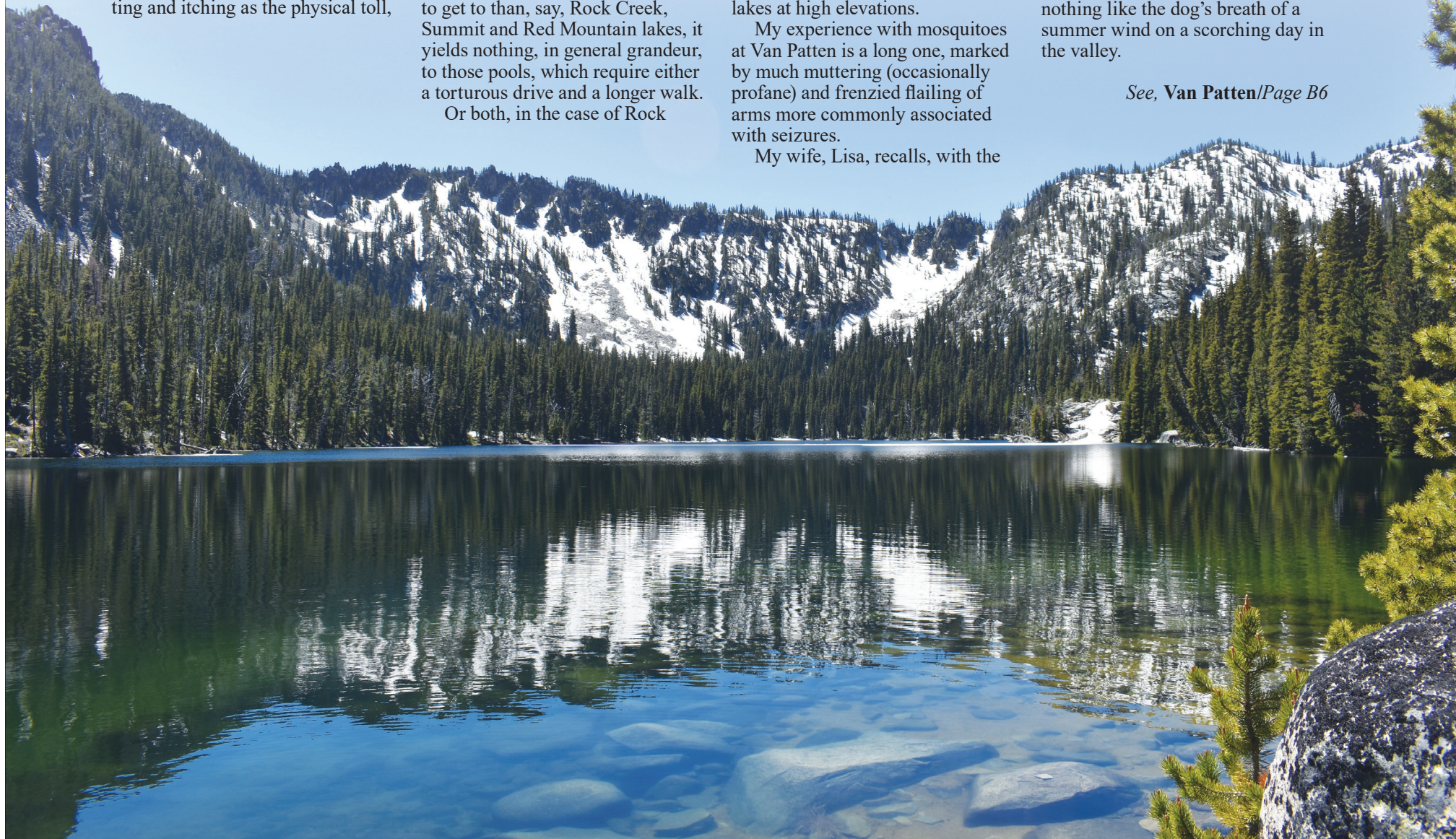
We hiked a short way along the northern shore of the lake, which is shaped rather like a lance, much longer than it is across.

The ice was nearly gone but there was a curious bridge of white spanning the lake near its west end. I piloted our drone on a brief flight, and it captured some intriguing photos of the ice bridge, which was riddled on its edges with fissures that reminded me of a river delta.

It was a brilliant day, and pleasantly warm even at 7,400 feet.

There was a breeze, though, and as always seems to be the case in such elevated places, it was refreshing, nothing like the dog's breath of a summer wind on a scorching day in the valley.

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Van Patten Lake in the Elkhorn Mountains on June 26.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

## Between fungi and friends: to share or not to share?



**DENNIS DAUBLE**  
THE NATURAL WORLD

One week into the bloom of lowland peas and I am on my way to a ridgetop near Spout Springs, Oregon. Sagebrush country in the rearview mirror. Guitar licks on satellite radio. Sack of doughnuts in the shotgun seat. I would be casting flies for wild trout, but not during this unsettled weather year, when Blue Mountain streams still run high and roily.

Halfway down a state highway crowded with farm equipment, I dial up my brother to report I am going mushroom hunting.

"Likely the last time this year," I say.

"You heading out by yourself?" he asks.

"I've got a cell phone."

"Do you have provisions in case you get stuck?"

"Sure," I say. "A pocket knife, two water bottles, matches, a chicken salad sandwich, and a bag of chips."

"Good luck with that," he replies.

It's nice to know my big

brother, whose favorite childhood joke was to stretch soiled underpants over my head while I slept, still cares.

Stream fishing aside, it has been a good spring. Mushroom hunts started at 2,200-foot elevation on May 20. The Umatilla Forks Campground, shaded wil-

derness trails up Buck Creek, and searches around our cabin failed to produce. However, the following day yielded a robust family of corals near Lick Creek, proving that persistence pays off.

The next sojourn took place in a blackened landscape on the east slope of the Cascade Moun-

tains. This one led by two friends who grew up in Yakima and find excuse to travel that direction for recreation whenever possible. I'm OK with sharing their venue as long as I don't have to drive and we stop at a brew pub on the way home.

The first search area, at elevation 3,000 feet near Little Rattlesnake Creek, reminded, "never stop at the first fishing hole you encounter by the side of the road because it will yield nothing." In other words, the warmup hunt was a waste of time. A gentle draw where fire burned hot across the base of living ponderosa pines eventually validated the experience. Following a string of footprints left by others, we collected a few dozen morels, a spring bolete, and two large puffballs. The latter mushroom is said to taste "just like tofu."

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**Black morels fill your bag quickly when you find two large ones together**

Dennis Dauble/Contributed Photos



**Coral mushrooms grow up to a pound or more in size and are best harvested when they first push up through damp soil.**



**White morels are easily spotted against a background of conifer needles and wild strawberry plants.**