

# Eastern Oregon Bike Weekend

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## The Register-Guard

October 17, 2017

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Peering out of our hotel window on the first morning of a four-day bicycle ride in Prairie City, we congratulated ourselves on hitting the weather's sweet spot in late September. After weeks of heavy smoke from forest fires around the state, and a week of rain and cool temperatures in mid-September, we were hoping to catch the last of



summer's warmth for our ride in the upper John Day Basin—and at first glance, it looked like we'd scored. We high-fived the morning's cloudless skies and gentle breeze.

But then we noticed the coating of frost on the cars and sidewalk outside. The thermometer registered a brisk 26 degrees, and the mercury wasn't expected to rise above 50 until mid-day.

As we contemplated our options, the snow-capped Strawberry Mountains glistened to the south. Since none of us had ventured into that storied wilderness, we made a hasty decision to hike that morning and leave our first ride for the afternoon.

The three of us hadn't brought much in the way of hiking gear, and we looked like an aging frat party on a beer-fest as we hiked up the trail. I slung a nylon grocery sack over my shoulder tied with a loop of webbing. Reed stuffed his camelback water bladder with snacks and fruit, and Bob carried his bike's water bottles as his "gear."

The trail up to Strawberry Lake was crusted with frost as we trudged uphill in the nippy air. But our abrupt decision was rewarded when we reached Strawberry Lake—a pristine tarn at the base of 9,000 foot peaks dusted with snow. The morning sun crested over the mountains as we reached the lake, and the solar warmth buttressed our decision to hike instead of ride.

Prairie City is a hub for a number of rides in and around the upper John Day River basin. Bicycle touring blogs list rides in the area as “extreme” because of their 85-140 mile lengths. We had decided, however, to avoid riding on Highway 395 with its busy truck traffic and narrow shoulders, and ‘sag’ our rig by taking turns driving as the other two rode their bikes. Our plan was to begin the rides on secondary or forest service roads with less traffic, slower vehicle speeds, and fewer total miles.

Over the next three days we rode along all the major forks of the Upper John Day River—the main stem, the Middle Fork and the North Fork. Our first ride started in the town of Seneca, and we began the 45-mile ride with a climb up to Summit Prairie. Although the blue skies of the morning had succumbed to clouds and overcast in the afternoon, the eye candy of our surroundings was stunning.

We passed through miles of lush, alpine meadows where Black Angus cattle stood knee-deep in grass. The meadows were separated and rimmed by mixed stands of conifers. Douglas Fir, Grand Fir, Engelmann Spruce, and Ponderosa Pine created a carpet of green spires along the slopes and ridges. The ground cover hinted at the coming fall, with Cezanne-like hues of magentas, yellows, and oranges mixed in with the greens.

The climb out of Seneca crested at 5900 feet. We chugged over the pass north of Summit Prairie and braced against a head wind blowing off the snow-capped Blue Mountains as we raced down the ten-mile descent to Prairie City.



On our second day, we started from our hotel and humped ten miles over Dixie Pass. I was tearing down the backside of the pass when a big buck jumped out onto the highway and stopped in front of me. I hit the brakes as the buck stared at me like I was some intruding challenger. Thankfully, the

buck sprinted off before I had to choose between T-boning it or attempting some harried evasion move.

At Austin, a wide spot with a truck stop and restaurant, we turned north onto a two-lane backcountry road and began a 41-mile glide down the Middle Fork of the John Day River. In the mid-1800s, the Middle Fork was subjected to heavy mining. Miners had straightened the river and eviscerated the flood plain looking for gold. But as we rode along the upper river, we could see the results of a consortium of federal and state agencies, tribal nations, universities and other groups that had completed watershed and in-stream restoration projects. We rode past long reaches of the upper river that were restored into a sinuous stream flowing through a fecund, functional, flood plain.

On our third day, we planned to ride along the North Fork, and after looking at the maps, Bob complained that the day’s ride looked to be “mostly flat.” We started the

ride in the town of Long Creek, and I pedaled over a series of rolling prairie hills that gradually climbed out of the Middle Fork drainage and crested near the settlement of Hamilton.

Bob and I swapped riding for driving, and after I slid behind the wheel, I followed Bob and Reed as they dropped into the North Fork drainage down a grin-busting, six-mile romp to the town of Monument. Bob was treated to expansive views of the river valley as he bobbed around tight turns and swooped down steep pitches on the way to Monument.

When we stopped for lunch at a wayside in Monument, Bob's Cheshire grin and twinkling eyes belied his prediction of a "flat"—and boring—ride. Without a word, we both knew he had probably ridden the most thrilling and beautiful section of the entire trip.

We took turns riding through the North Fork valley past verdurous fields of alfalfa. The mercury had risen to the mid-70s, and we passed ranch hands working the last cut of alfalfa, readying it for bailing before the weather turned. We felt blessed to pedal through the high-desert beauty on such a warm, late summer afternoon.

On our last day, we decided to hike back into the Strawberry Mountains. The temperatures had climbed to the upper 70s, and we packed plastic grocery bags with sandwiches, power bars, and water bottles before we trekked 3.5 miles past Strawberry Lake to Little Strawberry Lake.

We ate lunch by the lake, and as we munched on Cliff Bars and sandwiches, we spotted seven mountain goats grazing on the precipitous cliffs hundreds of feet above us. After lunch we made our way up the Strawberry Mountain trail and soaked in majestic views of the surrounding wilderness before we trekked back to the trailhead.

Between our first and last day's hike, the fall colors had exploded across the landscape. Larch trees showed glimpses of their golden, autumn mantle, and aspens quaked with the hints of fall. The huckleberry ground cover had taken on a richer chroma, creating a Persian carpet of reds, oranges, yellows and greens that blanketed the hillsides.

As we drove home toward Eugene the next day, we reveled in how the trip had evolved. We didn't clock as many miles as on past rides, but the combination of riding along the forks of the John Day River, combined with the hikes into the Strawberry Mountains, left us feeling like we'd stumbled onto one of our finer outings.