

Jarbidge

– Dan Styer

Where am I?

I sit atop a ridge. The sun is bright in a sky scattered with puffy cumulus. The wind is constant, with gusts that threaten to take away my hat. The trees nearby are scattered gnarled Whitebark Pine. The ground is red gravel dotted every yard or so with tufts of wildflower. At present only one tuft is in bloom: a wildflower like Queen Anne's Lace, but only half an inch high and with a flower disk smaller than a dime.

To the north is a canyon walled with conifers and meadows and orange cliffs. Many miles distant, part of the horizon is a flat plain. To the south are jumbled peaks and rocks and meadows and snowfields and conifers and aspen stretching ridge after ridge to a distant craggy horizon. Because I've just walked through, I know the south is rich in wildlife: I saw half a hundred elk in one meadow. To the west the ridge rises steeply among red rock and snowfield to a summit. To the east it ascends gradually. And in all this vast scene of canyon and cliff and summit and wood – surely more than one hundred square miles – I see only two signs of humanity: A pile of stone to mark the trail that led me here (the trail itself is so faint as to be invisible) and a pair of cowboy boots that some wag has tied together with bailing string and flung over a branch of a dead pine.

My question for you: In which state am I?



The popular image of Nevada – showgirls and sagebrush – is so distant from the scene I’ve described that your mind might rebel, but in fact I am one mile west of Marys River Peak in the Jarbidge Wilderness of the Silver State.

Motivation

On 30 April 2013, I got a note from Craig Bohren, book review editor for the *American Journal of Physics*. Would I be interested in reviewing a certain new book on statistical mechanics for AJP? I told him that ordinarily I would say yes, but that I was departing soon for a backpacking trip of many hundreds of miles on the Idaho Centennial Trail. It turns out that Craig is also a backpacker, and soon we were exchanging notes about trail plans rather than physics books. On the very next day he wrote “There is a superb wilderness area in northern Nevada, near the border with Idaho, the Jarbidge Wilderness. We have backpacked for weeks there without seeing another human. It is (or was) the most isolated Wilderness Area I know about.” We continued corresponding about trails for a week or so, and I kept trying to keep the conversation on the Idaho trails ahead of me, while he kept drawing back to his beloved Jarbidge.

And on 21 May 2013, when I reached the Idaho-Nevada border where my Idaho Centennial Trail hike began, there on the southern horizon stood the Jarbidge Mountains – snowy and mysterious. For one hundred miles I walked through Idaho sagebrush deserts. When I was hot I would look south and there they stood, looking cool and refreshing. I wondered what was up in those mountains.

For my 2014 backpacking trip, I decided to find out.

Day 1: Tuesday, 10 June 2014

The Jarbidge is far from the largest Wilderness Area in the United States, but it’s exceptionally remote because it’s a long trip to even reach its edge. I flew to Salt Lake City, rented an SUV, visited two colleagues at the Weber State University Physics Department, then drove west on Interstate-80. I got off at exit 333, Deeth, Nevada, population 28. From Deeth it’s a 60 mile, three-hour drive on poor gravel road just to reach the Jarbidge trailhead at Camp Draw.

Fascinating drive. The remote Nevada sagebrush deserts were dotted with wildflowers and with wetlands. Gradually the land took on swells and swales, the road took on curves and inclines, and patches of woods appeared. The meadows began holding vast swaths of bright yellow-orange sunflower-like flowers with shiny green leaves (Bolander’s *Wyethia*) and a yellow and blue lupine (Spurred Lupin). The road was so intimate, so slow, so scenic, that I thought of driving it as “almost like hiking.”

But when I reached the trailhead and actually started walking, I saw how wrong I had been. From the car I noticed two species of wildflower. While walking I noticed dozens.

Some of these I recognized from previous trips west, some were new to me, but I didn't try to either recall the names that I knew or key out those I didn't – I just reveled in their beauty and variety. There were two elk! I crested a rise, then found a campsite protected from the wind in a spruce grove. I could see a snowfield from my bed.

Day 2: Wednesday, 11 June 2014

My plan was to make a vast circle within the wilderness area. I was starting in the southwest. I would loop around south, then cross the main ridge of mountains to the east. I'd walk far north – if things went well, I'd even walk outside the wilderness area proper to find that same point where I had set out on the Idaho Centennial Trail a year before. Then I'd walk back south, recrossing the ridge to the west, near Emerald Lake and Jarbidge Lake, and coming back to my rented SUV at Camp Draw Trailhead.

I set out early in the morning. Several aspen trees were marked with the names and dates of (presumably) shepherds who summered near that tree. One tree held a sketch of a voluptuous woman. I paused and a green-tinted swallow flew to within a yard of my head. Once I saw a hummingbird. I forded the West Marys River – despite the name “river,” it was just three yards wide and shallow – and found Dwarf Waterleaf in bloom. Wrote to my wife Linda and a Golden Eagle flew overhead. Cusick's Primrose, six adult elk plus one fawn, Alpine Phacelia, a flicker. Set up camp on a sand bar by East Marys River. While making dinner, heard a snort and turned around to see four elk who appeared to want their river access back!

Day 3: Thursday, 12 June 2014

From a letter to Linda:

“I'm sitting cross-legged in a field of Spurred Lupine. The flower spikes are about six inches high, violet at the top of the spike, yellow in the middle, violet at the base. The spike immediately in front of me holds a ladybug. Ahead of me along the ridge are big, bold yellow Arrowleaf Balsamroot. To my left is a sagebrushy basin dotted with aspen. A moment ago there were twenty-six elk in the basin, but they've moved on. To my right is pure drama: a crumpled landscape of sagebrush, aspen, conifers, red rock scarps, snowfields, and row upon row of summits ranging off to the horizon.”



Above Marys River Basin: Arrowleaf Balsamroot and Spurred Lupine, Marys River Peak

From that site I walked up, up until I reached the ridge, where I wrote the “Where am I?” essay. According to my plan, this is where I would “cross the main ridge of mountains to the east.” The ridge crest was clear of snow, and all looked good for my plan. I walked 200 yards into the East Jarbidge River basin. The trail disappeared into a huge, steep snowbank. A snowbank very much like the one in the Sawtooths where I sprained my ankle last year. I pondered. I turned back.

Camp was below the brow of a ridge, near a snowbank. It was so windy that I didn’t dare light a fire, so I had a nut bar for dinner.

Day 4: Friday, 13 June 2014

Two Mountain Bluebirds, Sierra Crane Orchid. Pleasant day retracing my route. When I set up my tent, it starts to spit snow!

Day 5: Saturday, 14 June 2014

My revised plan has been to push up to the other pass – one western one, the one near Emerald and Jarbidge Lakes, the higher one – and just see how far I can get. I walked over the ridge that holds Norman Mines. Two Cassin’s Finches! Five-point Bishop’s

Cap. Hairy Woodpecker (Interior West variety). A thrush with a necklace of breast dots [Hermit Thrush (Interior West variety)] flew up closer to me! It's a good sign when birds fly toward you rather than away. Set up camp a bit above a waterfall on the Jarbidge River.

Day 6: Sunday, 15 June 2014

Walked up into snowbanks, and eventually one was so big and steep that I dared not cross it. Walked back down, then back across the ridge that holds Norman Mines. As I walked back to the West Marys River, the place where I saw the eagle, I saw two first-year Golden Eagles soaring. It was sleeting and I turned back toward the Camp Draw trailhead. Camped on the right bank of West Marys River. Hermit Thrush and Western Tanager at camp.

Day 7: Monday, 16 June 2014

Had a good night, my knee was feeling good, and I awoke to good weather. So I decided to give the walk to Jarbidge Lake one last shot. I probably won't make it, but I'll enjoy the attempt. Ate breakfast, left my tent set up, packed a day bag (using one of my food stuff sacks) and set off. Found Oregon Saxifrage. Climbed higher. Golden Eagle! Climbed higher. It started to snow (lightly) and I considered turning back, but I climbed higher. Achieved the crest! No view down to Jarbidge Lake, unfortunately. Due to the snow, it looked like this:



Returned to camp and ate lunch/dinner. Tuna! While I'm eating, an Oregon Junco creeps up the river bank to check me out. It starts to sprinkle and I duck into my tent.

Day 8: Tuesday, 17 June 2014

Spent much of the afternoon and all night in my tent. I'm colder than expected. When day brightens, I peek out and see why: There is snow on the ground.

I walk out to the Camp Draw trailhead a day early. Cassin's Finch. Red cliffs delicately laced with a dusting of snow. Mountain Bluebird.

The summit view from the last rise is stupendous: Writhing cloud wraps snowy mountains, with mixed sagebrush meadow, aspen grove, and conifer forest. For the first time in my life, I wish for a 360 degree panorama camera – but even that would be inadequate. I think about what's behind this hike and this wilderness: the birds and beasts, the trail builders, the shepherds, the wilderness advocates, the rangers, the AJP book review editor, and I say aloud "Thank you." My own voice startles me, because – having not met any people – I hadn't said a thing since setting out seven days earlier.

I pass over that last rise and see again all the floral diversity that had impressed me on entry: Bolander's Wyethia, Arrowleaf Balsamroot, Nuttall's Violet, Shooting Star, Wild Geranium, Forget-me-not, Larkspur, many more. I remember that on entry I had seen two elk, so I look over toward the same spot. An elk! Then another. Then a third. And they are walking *toward* me.