

SNOWWEST

Krazy About Klamath County

Maybe Oregon's best kept secret

By Lane Lindstrom

One mountain does not a riding area make.

Or does it?

You could make a pretty good argument for Pelican Butte, perched on the western shores of Upper Klamath Lake in southwest Oregon. It's only one mountain. But who knew you could have so much fun on just one mountain.

Pelican Butte could well be considered the centerpiece of snowmobiling in Oregon's Klamath County, partly because you can see this 8,036-foot volcano from just about everywhere in the county but mostly because it's one of the few big mountains still open to riding in this area. Either way you shouldn't miss it.

But don't think Pelican Butte is the only place to sled in Klamath County—there's plenty of good riding in the northern three quarters of the county. We spent two full days covering a lot of territory but still couldn't take all of Klamath County in. There's just too much country for two days.

A SECRET

Those two days convinced us Klamath County might be Oregon's best kept snowmobiling secret—maybe even the Pacific Northwest's.

We managed to use up at bit more than a half-day on Pelican Butte (we could have spent more time)—that after riding on Brown Mountain, west of Lake of the Woods, earlier in the day.

Day two took us farther north, where we rode out of Annie Creek Sno Park, 5.5 miles north of Fort Klamath on Oregon Highway 62. We didn't even touch all the riding areas farther north, above Scott Creek. The Diamond Lake trail is the main path through this area and connects with its namesake, the Diamond Lake system. Much of the riding there hugs the east edge of Crater Lake National Park. There's still more snowmobiling in the Chiloquin area, which is north and east of Upper Klamath Lake along the Chiloquin Ridge.

While we put a full day of riding in when we hit Brown Mountain and Pelican Butte, at the day's end, when we looked over the trail map of the southern part of the Jackson-Klamath Winter Trails Guide, it was obvious we barely scratched the surface. Nevertheless, we were after some of the highlights of the area and we definitely weren't disappointed.

We staged out of Lake of the Woods Resort on our first day, shooting across the lake on our way to Brown Mountain (7,311 feet). The lake sits at 4,963 feet and by the time we reached

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the summit of Brown Mountain and were gawking at 360 degrees of sheer Cascade Range beauty, we had gained more than 2,300 feet. One of the goals of reaching the peak of Brown Mountain, in addition to the obvious of playing in the snow and boondocking through the trees, was to catch a view of Mt. Shasta. That's some mountain when you can be 70 miles away and it still tower over you. That's what 14,162 feet will do. Unfortunately, after we reached an excellent view point on the south side of Brown Mountain, all we could see was the bottom half of Mt. Shasta as the top was socked in with clouds. Mt. Shasta did poke its lofty head out while we were in Klamath Falls, but it was never while we were on a snowmobile.

LOOKIN' AROUND

While on Brown we did catch some great views of Mount McLoughlin (9,495 feet), in the Sky Lakes Wilderness, and several peaks in the Mountain Lakes Wilderness. You can look, you just can't touch, at least on a snowmobile. We were also able to see Lake of the Woods, and farther to the north, Pelican Butte.

As with many mountains along this stretch of the Cascades, Brown Mountain is a volcano and, aside from its elevation and drainages, presents some interesting challenges on a snowmobile. We were told to watch out for "hot spots" on the mountain. These hot spots are some kind of a vent from within the mountain that emit steam and are evident as spots where there's no snow. Some are big enough that, well, it could make things interesting on a snowmobile.

The other volcano we climbed on the first day was Pelican Butte, a definite highlight of riding in Klamath County and a near 20-mile trail ride from Lake of the Woods. At 8,036 feet, Pelican Butte is another 725 feet higher than Brown Mountain. According to the USGS, Pelican Butte's original volcanic shape is largely preserved. Glaciation carved a steep canyon and broad cirque in the northeast flank.

The mountain is loaded with fun, from top to bottom. There is a trail from the base to the top, where there is a tower usually encrusted with layers of wind-blown snow. We used parts of the trail to access the summit but mostly weaved through the trees where the powder was deep and challenging. Once to the top we again got a great 360-degree view of everything in the surrounding area. Looking north you can see Crater Lake National Park. Look east and you see Upper Klamath

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Lake and Chiloquin Ridge. Looking south there is the Mountain Lakes Wilderness, Brown Mountain, Lake of the Woods and farther south, Mt. Shasta. Part of the reason the views are so spectacular from the top of Pelican Butte is because, as the USGS points out, the mountain is "detached from the axis of the Cascades." All that means is that you're a bit away from the rest of the range, allowing some great views.

OFF THE BACKSIDE

Once the camera was put away, we baled off the top of Pelican Butte and flew down the mountainside. Locals claim the drop is about 1,100 feet (we have no reason to dispute that) and it's just about straight down (at least the pucker factor feels that way). Once at the bottom (which comes up pretty darn fast), the cirque is wide open for hillclimbing and sidehilling. You don't have to have a big horsepower sled to enjoy Pelican Butte, but it wouldn't hurt, especially if you want to climb back out. We went out a different way, toward nearby Point 76, appropriately named for a peak 7,600-foot tall.

The snow was in great shape, untracked and fairly deep, although the locals will tell you that the depth wasn't what it usually is. Between 125-200 inches of snow falls in various spots in the county and its well documented that Crater Lake National Park, in the north end of Klamath County gets more than 500 inches every winter. The snow was deep enough, though, to provide a workout as we made our way around Point 76 and the east flank of Pelican Butte, stopping to track up an open hillside or boondock through a section of trees every once in a while.

We made a full circle of Pelican Butte at various elevations, coming back out on top near the tower. From there it was bonsai off the mountain through the trees until we came out on the Cold Springs Trail and headed back to Lake of the Woods. Mark it down as one of the best rides of Winter 2006-07.

One of the great features about the trail system in Klamath County is that several trails, much like Pelican Butte, take you to the tops of mountains in the area, including Buck Peak (8,080), Robinson Butte (5,864) and Surveyor Peak (6,300) to name a few.

PINNACLES TO LIARS NICHE

Another one of the best rides came a day later when we went farther north and rode out of Annie Creek Sno Park. We covered a lot of territory that day, from the Pinnacles to Liars Niche.



At 8,036 feet, Pelican Butte is just one of the peaks that dominates the landscape in Klamath County and is one heck of a fun place to sled.



Looking down on Lake of the Woods from Brown Mountain, just one of the great vantage points in Klamath County to see the surrounding Cascade and lowlands.



Looking at Point 76 from Pelican Butte. Point 76 is aptly named—it's 7,600 feet tall.



The cirque on Pelican Butte is a great place to hill climb and side hill. A trail leads to the top of the butte, to where the tower is. The more adventurous will boondock through the trees to get to the top and then bale off.



The snow was sweet on Pelican Butte. You can spend lots of time on that mountain, climbing, boondocking, trail riding, picking through the trees, it has it all.

Liars Niche is just a few miles north of Pelican Butte but we approached it from the north, out of the snow park.

This area is closest to Crater Lake National Park, with some trails leading up to the edge or going along the boundary of the Park. Of course, riding in this part of the Park is off limits to snowmobiles but you can ride up to the boundary.

Our first destination on day two was the Pinnacles, really cool and unique geological features that are visible from just off the Pinnacles snowmobile trail (whoever named the trails in Klamath County didn't complicate a thing), along Sand Creek. The Pinnacles were sculpted by volcanic gasses and then erosion. Spires are all that are left from the hot gasses which spewed out of vents, which solidified the rock. Erosion then took over, cutting away the softer outer rock.

From there it was south to Sand Ridge, a fun play area with some open hillsides and lots of trees. On Sand Ridge (6,300 feet), we left the snowmobiles for a short hike through the trees to an open hillside on the south side. Once out of the trees, we could see Pelican Butte, the mountains in Sky Lakes Wilderness, Klamath Point and a peak named Goose Nest (7,249). There are a few markers on trees letting you know where the CLNP boundary is, but you still have to pay attention so as to not wander inside the boundary.

Some of the best snow of the two days of riding was at Liars Niche. We found some ridges to play on and pounded on a hillside for quite a while before it was time to head back to the truck. Along the way, you'll hit Dwight's Flight, a fairly steep section of trail that is groomed. You just have to ride it to appreciate how on earth a groomer smoothes that section out.

NO, REALLY? POWDER?

We were surprised at how much powder there was in the mountains, thinking that because Klamath County is so close to the ocean that the snows would be wet and heavy, which it was down lower. But once you gained elevation, like on Brown, Pelican Butte and Liars Niche, it was powder bustin' time.

There are two snowmobile clubs-Klamath Basin Snowdrifters and Chiloquin Ridge Riders-that groom 300 miles of trails in the county but you can tack on another 100 miles of groomed trails from the Rogue Snowmobile Club. Add to that what Diamond Lake grooms and you've got nearly 1,000 miles of trails in this corner of Oregon.

Klamath County is an easy place to get to, not too far from the I-5 corridor, but it's far enough off the beaten path that you can have the riding all to yourself as we did. And with the amount of country available

for riding and the high mileage of groomed trails, any crowds there are easily dispersed in the backcountry.

You've got the complete snowmobile package when it comes to Klamath County-snow, backcountry riding, plenty of trails (groomed and ungrounded), a variety of services, a place that actually welcomes snowmobiles and enough country that you don't run out after a day of riding.

And, of course, Pelican Butte.

KLAMATH COUNTY

Elevation 4,600-8,000 feet
Snowfall 125-200 inches
Miles of Groomed Trails 400 miles
Full-Service Town Klamath Falls (pop. 19,785)
Nearest Airport Klamath Falls
Getting Started Travel Klamath (800) 445-6728 or www.travelklamath.com

GETTING THERE

Klamath Falls is about an hour east of Interstate 5 but there are numerous access points to the county, depending on where you want to end up. U.S. Highway 97 is the main north/south highway through the county while Oregon Highways 66, 138 and 140 all provide access. Klamath Falls is 280 miles south of Portland and 300 miles north of Sacramento. Horizon Air provides air service to Klamath Falls Airport.

GETTING AROUND

Arctic Cat, Polaris and Yamaha all have dealers in Klamath Falls. The closest Ski-Do dealer is in Medford (80 miles)

BEDDING DOWN

There are several motels, hotels, lodges and resorts right in town or not far from town. We tried three different locations during our trip to Klamath Falls. First was Lake of the Woods Resort (866-201-4194 or www.lakeofthewoodsresort.com), which is 32 miles northwest of Klamath Falls off Oregon Highway 140. The resort sits among tall pines on the banks of Lake of the Woods and is a mile or so off the main highway. There are several cabins (the oldest cabin dates back to 1922) to choose from but don't expect TVs or phones in the cabins (although there is a phone at the marina). The cabins are all cooking cabins, have been remodeled and sleep anywhere from 2-8 people. The cabins are cozy, clean and warm. Staying at Lake of the Woods is all about quiet and one of its big advantages is that you can ride right from the resort. The Marina Bar & Grill are open weekends and there is a store at the resort. And, more than likely, you won't have too tough of a time convincing resort general manager George Gregory to go out riding with you.

Our next night was spent in town at the Best Western Olympic

Inn (800-600-9665 or <http://klamathfallshotelmotel.com>) in Klamath Falls. The Olympic is very nice, is non smoking and offers all the amenities you'd expect in a modern hotel. Hot soup and freshly baked bread are served every day, as is a hot breakfast. The hotel also has some really cool photographs of Crater Lake. The Olympic is close to several restaurants and offers easy access to the highways that lead to the riding areas.

Then there is the Lonesome Duck Ranch and Resort, owned by Steve and Debbie Hilbert, located on the banks of the Williamson River off Highway 97 in Chiloquin. The name of the resort even has a story. The Hilbert's are big fans of the series Lonesome Dove and both also went to the University of Oregon, where the mascot is the Ducks-hence the name Lonesome Duck. Steve also played football for the Ducks.

The setting is really something else, on the banks of the river with the Chiloquin Ridge looming large to the east. The Lonesome Duck sits on 200 acres and has 2.5 miles of river front and offers lots of quiet in this stunningly scenic setting.

The main house utilizes some lumber from the premises' original barn and there are three homes for rent: Eagles Nest (sleeps 6-8); Rivers Edge (sleeps 6-8); and Arrowhead Cottage (sleeps 1-4), one of the original ranch houses. All three have fully equipped kitchens and are modern in a rustic kind of way. If you want to be pampered, the Lonesome Duck is your place. And the rates are very reasonable (check the website) during the winter.

Eating Out Klamath Falls has just about every kind of eating establishment you can think of from chain restaurants to locally-owned and operated eateries.



Pausing near Point 76 to look at the valley below.



From just about anywhere on the east side of the Cascades you can see Upper Klamath Lake, which stretches several miles north to south in the county.



Looking at Brown Mountain from Lake of the Woods Resort with the lake in the foreground. Brown Mountain is a great playground with several challenges, including "hot spots."



The Pinnacles, easily accessible from the snowmobile trails are quite a sight. These geologic features are a result of erosion over years and years and are located on both sides of the Crater Lake National Park's eastern boundary along Sand Creek.



Even though it's more than 70 miles away, Mt. Shasta looms big.