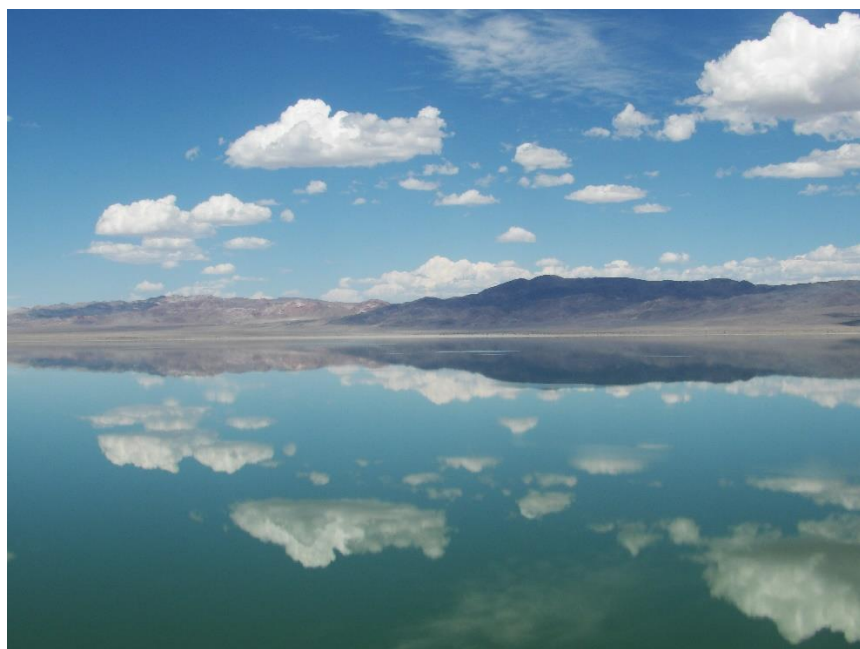




Owyhee Road Trip (O26A)

Owyhee Country is a remote region of southeast Oregon, southwest Idaho and northern Nevada centered on the volcanic Owyhee Plateau and the deep canyons carved by the Owyhee River. Most people have never heard of it, few visit and few live there.

If you say Owyhee out loud, you may think that it sounds a lot like Hawai'i. There's a reason for that. Owyhee is the early English-language spelling for what is now Hawai'i. The old North West Company in 1819-1820 sent trappers to explore the area around what is now called the Owyhee River for possible fur trapping operations. About a third of the men in the expedition were native Hawai'ians. Three of these men were sent out to trap along the then-uncharted river, but they were never seen again. It is believed that they were killed by a band of Bannock Native Americans in the area. The Owyhee name began appearing on maps of the river as early as the 1820s.



I hit the road, and made the 400-mile drive to Fallon, Nevada, stopping for photos along Walker Lake.

When I entered the Carson River valley as I approached Fallon, I stopped to check out the corn and hay fields, both of which primarily support local livestock feedlots and dairy operations. More than half of the water in the Colorado River is used to grow alfalfa, much of which is then exported to countries like China and Saudi Arabia (and prompting the question of why we're effectively exporting so much

Colorado River water). But almost no one was living in southern Nevada when the Colorado River's water was allocated to the different states, so Nevada's allocation was too small to support the development of significant agriculture in southern Nevada. But this far north, the Colorado River isn't a factor. The Carson River and related aquifers support agriculture in this part of the state.



If corn, hay, dairy farming and livestock feedlots strike you as being a little out of place in Nevada's Great Basin Desert, I'll also note that Fallon is also home to a Navy base, the Naval Air Station Fallon. Since 1996, Naval Air Station Fallon has been home to TOPGUN, the U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School (made famous in the *Top Gun* movies).

I've driven through Fallon a number of times, and even spent a night here once, but I never took a look around. Fallon is the last of the big cities you encounter as you head east along Highway 50, the so-called Loneliest Road in America, at least until you get to Ely after about 250 miles. I took a short walk around downtown Fallon, although much of its retail has sprawled out along Highway 50.



By covering so much ground on my first day, it only took me a few hours to get to Winnemucca, Nevada, my stop at the end of the second day. In Winnemucca, I wanted to check out the Humboldt County Museum, home to typical historical displays related to the county, but also displays about the archaeological finds in the nearby Lovelock Cave, an archaeological site I visited five years ago.



Inside Lovelock Cave. The cave had been used as a shelter by early Native Americans, and conditions there helped to preserve thousands of artifacts, including a set of eleven duck decoys that dated back thousands of years.



The actual duck decoys found there are now at the Smithsonian, but this reproduction shows how they were made.

I didn't head directly to my hotel when I reached Burns. Instead, I headed west past Riley, Oregon and then drove off pavement to find an archaeological site. Technically closed to the public (but on public lands) and located off of some unmarked dirt roads (and a short hike), I used published research and an analysis of satellite images to find it.

The Rimrock Draw Rockshelter site was discovered in 2009 when a keen-eyed archaeologist noticed what appeared to be bits of soot on a basalt rock overhang. Excavations unearthed tools and other items, making the site interesting enough. But it turned out that the soil layer where these were found was under a layer volcanic ash that could be identified as having come from a Mount St. Helens eruption 15,000 years ago. Dating of animal bone and teeth fragments found with the tools put them at about 18,000 years old. That would make the site older than the previously oldest known site with evidence of humans in North America (near Cooper's Ferry, Idaho).



At the Rimrock Draw shelter

There wasn't necessarily much to see at the site, as no active excavation was underway, and the dig areas are currently protected with sandbags, suggesting more excavations will be undertaken in the next few years (sites are often re-buried for longer-term preservation). Artifacts collected at the site have been brought to the University of Oregon in Eugene for further analysis, but because they are still the subject of ongoing research, they generally are not on permanent display yet.

Rimrock Draw's claim to the title of site of the earliest evidence of humans in North America appears to have been short-lived, however, given the discovery of preserved human footprints in White Sands, New Mexico that have been tentatively determined to be from about 21,000 to 23,000 years ago. Both discoveries are prompting scientists to rethink the narrative of human arrival in the Americas.

The next day, my exploration of Owyhee Country got underway. I headed east to Rome, Oregon, little more than a small population center along the Owyhee River. I had plans for a few drives out to see various views of the Owyhee River and resulting canyon, all but one new to me.



But first, I checked out the Pillars of Rome, carved in the Owyhee River valley at Rome.

For my first off-highway foray, I crossed the Owyhee River and headed north for 15 miles on an unmarked rock/gravel/dirt road until I reached the side dirt road – Bogus Ranch Road – I was hoping would take me to a cliff edge above the Owyhee River.



The Owyhee River at Rome looks rather ordinary



Alas, with only about a mile to go along Bogus Ranch Road, I was stopped by a gate blocking the road. This was as close as I got after all that driving.

Back in Rome, I headed south on Skull Creek Road, a road that hadn't been part of my original plan. This got me to a point where I had a view of the mouth of Owyhee Canyon, giving me an introduction to what I was hoping to find along two more southward drives. When the Owyhee River leaves the canyon here, it enters the broad valley where Rome is before starting more canyon carving north of town.



Skull Creek Road view of the mouth of Owyhee Canyon.

My next southward trek was along the dirt and gravel Grassy Loop Road. There wasn't a defined destination so much as I noted that the road got somewhat close to Owyhee Canyon, so I just wanted to find a place to park in that area and figured that I'd hike the remainder to the canyon rim.



Looking upstream (south) in Owyhee Canyon near Grassy Loop Road



Looking downstream (north) in Owyhee Canyon near Grassy Loop Road



The drive along Three Forks Road covers about 20 miles of dirt and gravel, but it leads to terrific views of the Owyhee River Canyon, this time a designated site with a parking lot. Looking upstream (south).



Owyhee Canyon Overlook. Looking downstream (north).



The next day I started my sightseeing several miles downstream from Owyhee Canyon and Rome, instead following the Owyhee River upstream towards the Lake Owyhee Reservoir. Here, a hot springs can be found along the river's edge.



The Owyhee Dam stands 417 feet tall, and was the tallest of its type when it was completed in 1932. The resulting Lake Owyhee Reservoir is 52 miles long. One of the dam's features is this bathtub drain-like "Glory Hole" spillway. You wouldn't want to be in the water near this when reservoir water levels are running high. The dam served as a prototype for Hoover Dam which created Lake Mead.



The dam end of Lake Owyhee is home to a state park with camping, swimming and boat launches.



Succor Creek State Natural Area lies in the volcanic and sandstone landscape of Owyhee Country east of Owyhee Canyon.



Leslie Gulch also is carved in that landscape, although it leads to the upstream end of Lake Owyhee Reservoir.



Lake Owyhee Reservoir at the mouth of Leslie Gulch



The Oregon Trail followed the Snake River to the north of Owyhee Country, where hardship often hit the pioneers heading west. But in the years since, dusty covered wagon travel with the threat of Indian attacks has been replaced by air-conditioned comfort, and dining on the flesh of your travel companions has been replaced by stops at McDonalds. Makes one wonder about old people who reminisce about the good old days.

Time to head east to the part of Owyhee Country in the southwest corner of Idaho.



Heading southeast, I made a stop at Map Rock, a large boulder covered with petroglyphs. It was named Map Rock in the 1920s because a researcher believed that it depicts the Snake River valley. Other researchers have suggested that it may be as much as 12,000 years old, which would make it the oldest known map in the world.

I'm skeptical. Although I haven't read the research used to make those cases, rock art is notoriously difficult to decipher and date. If serious people truly believed that this could be the world's oldest map, I doubt that it would be left unmarked, unprotected and unattended along the side of some road. So, for now I'll just regard it as a cool petroglyph panel.

One of my long-time goals for the southwest corner of Idaho has been making a visit to Silver City, a ghost town some 23 miles off the highway in the heart of the Owyhee Mountains. The town started in 1864 after silver was discovered in the area, and soon grew into one of Idaho Territory's major cities. It had Idaho's first telegraph and daily newspaper. Telephone service reached Silver City by 1880, and it was the first Idaho town to have electricity. But the mines played out, and the people left. Unusual for a ghost town, it was not struck by fires, so dozens of original buildings survive. These include the Idaho Hotel, which was reopened as a summer hotel destination in 1972. With no more electricity, propane is used to run refrigerators and cook meals at the hotel and elsewhere in town during summer months.



The Owyhee Mountains, seen along the dirt and gravel road leading to Silver City. The road actually wasn't too bad, other than narrow in places and often winding with steep drop-offs, but the first eight miles were paved.



The Idaho Hotel. ATVs are a popular means for making the drive to Silver City.

The Owyhee Front follows Idaho Highway 78 between the Snake River and the Owyhee Mountains, and is home to a lot of hiking and off-roading trails. Geologically speaking, an intracontinental rift zone formed here. As the crust thinned here, both the Owyhee Mountains and Boise Front were raised, resulting in a large basin between the two. Eventually filling with water, this became ancient Lake Idaho, about 200 miles long and 35 miles wide. The lake eventually breached a natural barrier and rapidly drained into the Snake River in a flood so massive that it did much to carve today's Hell's Canyon.

But during its lake years, Lake Idaho deposited a lot of sediments, some of which started creating concretions. When I read "concretions", I had visions of something like Anza-Borrego Desert's pumpkin patch, but these concretions were very small, about the size of peppercorns. Called ooids, these cemented together to create a layer of oolite rock in the deposited Lake Idaho sediments. I hiked out to the Shoofly Oolite outcropping to take a look. Between my medical boots and 100+ degree temperatures, I didn't climb up to the top of the formation, where Mother Nature was more creative in how it carved the oolite.



The Shoofly Oolite layer between layers of sandy sediments from ancient Lake Idaho.



After I finished that hike, I headed south on the Owyhee Highlands Back Country Byway, taking the scenic drive as far as Poison Creek, noting this sign along the way.

Then it was off to Mountain Home, Idaho for my hotel and dinner. Shortly after I returned to my room after dinner, the whole area lost electricity. It finally came back on around 11:30PM.

The next morning, I made a return visit to Bruneau Canyon before starting home. The Bruneau River starts in northern Nevada and flows north to the Snake River. Like the Owyhee River, it has carved a canyon through a thick layer of basalt rock. Bruneau Canyon is about 40 miles long and is as much as 1,200 feet deep.



Bruneau Canyon is not part of Owyhee Country, but it is similar to Owyhee Canyon.

I stopped for gas and fresh pop in the Duck Valley Reservation town of Owyhee on the Idaho-Nevada border, and then continued south. Just outside of town, I once again picked up the Owyhee River.

Much of Nevada lies in the hydrographic great basin, a 200,000-square-mile region where precipitation ends up evaporating or soaking into the ground – there are no rivers that eventually lead to the ocean. It includes most of Nevada and parts of California, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. An area around Las Vegas drains into the Colorado River, and a bit of northern Nevada is home to the headwaters of the Owyhee and Bruneau Rivers that drain into the Snake River.



Map of the hydrographic great basin

Here the Owyhee has carved a pretty canyon although not as impressive as the one I saw in Oregon.



The Owyhee River, along Nevada Highway 225



The Wild Horse Reservoir captures the Owyhee's water from upstream snowmelt, and the reservoir's dam then controls the release of it downstream.



I noticed some green algae in the shallow waters of the Wild Horse Reservoir along the highway. No doubt the fault of Antifa, which is famous for such shenanigans.



This is the southern end of Owyhee Country. This part of Nevada gets a fair amount of snow in the winter. As the snow in this valley melts, the water heads downhill and starts carving a small channel, the start of the Owyhee River, that flows towards Wild Horse Reservoir. The hydrographic great basin starts on the far side of those mountains.

And with that, the Owyhee portion of my trip was over. I still had to get home, but I made only one significant sightseeing stop the rest of the way – a return to the Ruby Mountains, just south of Elko, Nevada. Reaching upwards of just over 11,000 feet, they get a lot of snow in winter, which supports the Humboldt River that crosses much of the Great Basin Desert from east to west, creating a travel corridor first for wildlife and Native Americans, and then for pioneers heading to California, early trains and now modern interstate travelers. In the heart of the Rubies is Lamoille Canyon, which was carved by glaciers about 250,000 years ago. A 12-mile scenic drive leads to camping and picnic areas and hiking trailheads. I made several photo stops along the scenic drive, enjoying the range's cooler temperatures, just in the mid-60s during my visit.



Lamoille Valley was previously filled with large glaciers. Glaciers generally carve U-shaped valleys. Rivers cutting through rock carve more V-shaped canyons, although the type of rock and subsequent weathering can have a lot of effect on that.

Glaciers are long gone from the Ruby Mountains, but there is one surviving small glacier in Nevada, that one at Wheeler Peak in Great Basin National Park.



The road ends at this valley in the Ruby Mountains. Several trails originate here, including Ruby Crest National Recreation Trail. With mild mid-July temperatures, it is a nice place for Nevada summer hiking.



I spent the last night of my trip in Ely, Nevada, leaving 250 miles to drive on the final day of the trip. On the drive home, I finally stopped at Wayne E. Kirch Wildlife Management Area, home to the Hot Creek Springs and Marsh, a National Natural Landmark. After a short hike there, I finished the trip.