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The joys of isolation at nearby Berryessa Snow Mountain monument

By Andy Murdock

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The **historic Tallman Hotel in Upper Lake** is one of the few nearby lodging options.

The **top of Snow Mountain** was the last place I expected to find anything resembling a traffic jam.

The declaration signed by President Obama in July, making Berryessa Snow Mountain California's newest national monument, noted that almost half of the state's 108 species of dragonflies and damselflies are found in the area, and every last one of them seemed to be whizzing about in the clearing in front of me. The air was so thick with dragonflies that they occasionally collided with a crunchy thwack.

There was no way around, and I wasn't turning back, so I shielded my eyes from incoming dragons and ran.

Berryessa Snow Mountain doesn't have an iconic postcard-worthy feature like many national monuments; you won't find anything like the tower of Devil's Tower or the bridges of Natural Bridges here. What you will find is biodiversity. If that sounds unexciting, try having biodiversity dive-bomb your face in a high-speed blur of wings.

One animal, however, is conspicuously absent from Berryessa Snow Mountain: people. On a midsummer weekend, high season for California camping, I arrived at Bear Creek Campground in Snow Mountain Wilderness anxious that I might not snag a prime spot. The national monument had been declared just a month before — surely others would also be exploring what the area had to offer.

The campground was empty.

There were ancient oaks draped with fragrant lichens, yellow-legged frogs along the creek that shot away at my approach, a dusk sky alive with big-eared bats and dragonflies, and me. It took a few long, twisty dirt roads and a creek crossing to get there, but it's worth a little dust on your bumper to have a canyon to yourself in the land of the dragonflies.

A park is born

Exploring Berryessa Snow Mountain, I often found myself wondering whether I was in the national monument or not. There are no signs yet, and only a basic map on the [Bureau of Land Management](#)'s website.

“Where’s the visitor center?” is the most common question we get,” said [Sara Husby](#), director of Tuleyome, the Winters (Yolo County) conservation organization that led the push for the new national monument with a coalition of partner organizations and local politicians. There will be one, but the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, which are jointly managing the national monument, have yet to decide where it will be.

I did discover a handy rule of thumb: If you’re on a smooth paved road, you’re probably not in Berryessa Snow Mountain. Other than a short stretch of Highway 20 that cuts across the narrow middle of the monument and Knoxville Road, a back-road-lover’s dream that runs north from Lake Berryessa, Berryessa Snow Mountain is mostly a realm of dirt roads and off-highway-vehicle trails — or no roads at all. There’s much to be seen in Berryessa Snow Mountain, but you have to work for it.

“I think of Berryessa Snow Mountain as California’s undiscovered landscape,” Husby said.

Less than two hours from San Francisco, covering a 100-mile-long stretch of land touching seven counties, how could it be anything but discovered? Yet Berryessa Snow Mountain sinuously threads among places most Californians know — it’s what you see to the northeast of Napa, east of Clear Lake and north of Lake Berryessa. If you’ve ever looked to the west from Interstate 5 and 505 and wondered what’s up in those enticingly rugged mountains, now it has a name.

The name, Berryessa Snow Mountain — after Berryessa Peak in the south (not Lake Berryessa, excluded from the monument to avoid a showdown with boaters) and Snow Mountain in the north — frames the lay of the land and gave me a mission: Visit both peaks to see what Berryessa Snow Mountain has in store for a curious visitor before any park infrastructure is in place.

Snow Mountain

Shortly after Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument became official, it was on fire. Summer's Rocky Fire and Jerusalem Fire tore through the middle of the national monument, burning through nearly all of the Cache Creek Natural Area and lands along Highway 20, and the Valley Fire in September crept up to the western border. Wilbur Hot Springs, the well-known hot spring retreat on the eastern edge of the monument, escaped the fires; Harbin Hot Springs, on the west, did not.

In the winter, the BLM leads bald-eagle hikes along Cache Creek. The fires may have blackened the landscape, but the nesting pairs of eagles are expected to return, as they do every year.

Snow Mountain itself was spared this year, but fire is an inescapable part of the landscape here even in non-drought years. Near the summit, I saw evidence of a recent fire in a eerily beautiful stand of blackened firs surrounded by a sea of towering yellow mullein flowers that had sprouted from the charred soil.

The first question most people ask about Snow Mountain (after "where?") is: "Does it actually snow on Snow Mountain?" It does indeed. **At 7,056 feet, Snow Mountain's eastern summit is the highest point in the national monument**, and a few brave locals have managed to get up to the summit and ski it in snowy years.

Even in summer, getting to Snow Mountain is a challenge. The first obstacle is the allure of the Tallman Hotel and the Blue Wing Saloon in Upper Lake (Lake County), where I stopped to have lunch in the cool shaded patio that separates the two. The second obstacle is **the road from Upper Lake**, mostly a well-graded dirt road, but one that crosses the Rice Fork, a large tributary of the Eel River. In springtime, even with a four-wheel-drive vehicle you may find yourself stuck by high waters, never able to reach Snow Mountain at all.

The trail to Snow Mountain's summit — or, in truth, the twin summits of the ancient upthrust seamount — is a **moderate day hike starting at the Summit Springs trailhead**, climbing through vast manzanita hedges, serpentine barrens and fir forests with corn-lily-lined meadows reminiscent of the High Sierra. Anywhere else, this would be a popular hike, but only a handful of people have signed the trailhead logbook this year. More people may come, but for now dragonflies outnumber people here roughly 5,000-to-1.

Berryessa Peak

Near Snow Mountain, I saw people only when I pulled into Letts Lake Campground and found a few families camped along the edge of the lake. Berryessa Peak was immediately different: There were cars at the trailhead, and an actual person pulled up in a big white pickup and leaned out the window to chat.

He motioned off to the fields to the west. "Did you see that fool out there just shooting at nothing? Wasn't even hunting."

I hadn't seen or heard a thing.

"Weekenders," he said, shaking his head in disgust before driving off.

Thankfully, I didn't encounter the fool with the gun. There were a few cars, but weekenders like myself weren't exactly clogging up the trails.

Standing just over 3,000 feet high, Berryessa Peak is neither huge nor well known, but it does have something most mountains in California don't: a new trail to the peak. The Berryessa Peak Trail was completed in 2014, but it already fits right in with the flavor of the rest of the national monument: It's empty, it's ruggedly beautiful and it makes you work.

The trail starts slowly, following old ranch roads along a creek valley in rolling oak woodland, but the middle section of the trail is forced to trace the property lines of private inholdings. If you don't want the trail to go straight up a very steep, crumbly knob, traverse a slippery hillside or make you climb over a fence (albeit on a handy wooden stile), too bad — that's where the trail has to go. The upper half of the trail is so recently dug out that the dirt is still soft, and the track is far from level and at times resembles little more than a cow path. By the end of the day, my ankles were ready to file formal protest.

The view from the peak — in fact, the view from the ridge long before you reach Berryessa Peak — over Lake Berryessa toward Mount St. Helena is the payoff. I sat on the ridge eating lunch and wondering if the trail was really ready for prime time. At 14 very sweaty miles round trip, it's never going to draw big crowds — but that's why you come here in first place.

Easy come, easy go

The nearness of Berryessa Snow Mountain to both the Bay Area and Sacramento is perhaps its most striking feature. Putah Creek in the south, less than a two-hour drive from San Francisco, is renowned for trout fishing. Cache Creek, running southeast from Clear Lake, is home to the closest whitewater rafting to the Bay Area.

It's easy to forget how close you are to cities and interstates. Driving from Lodoga to Wilbur Springs in Colusa County, 22 miles of crisp dirt road through Bear Valley, I encountered no other cars and no people, only two turkey vultures skulking on a barbed-wire fence and a roadrunner wheeling away down the road.

The one time I had driven this road before, a mountain lion loped across the road without a glance in my direction. Modernity seems light-years away, and yet I momentarily came into range of a cell tower, my phone buzzed and I pulled over next to a pasture. It was my wife at home in the Bay Area texting me that our daughter had to come home early from school with a fever.

"I'm on my way," I texted back. "I'm not far away."

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If you go

GETTING THERE

The southern end of Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument is less than a two-hour drive from San Francisco; the northern tip is roughly a four-hour drive. Highway 128 from Napa Valley or from Winters provides access to the southern end of the monument. Highway 20, from Williams to Clear Lake, takes you through the middle of the national monument. The most direct route to Snow Mountain Wilderness is through Upper Lake along Elk Mountain Road and Forest Road M10. Detailed maps and vehicles with high clearance or four-wheel drive recommended.

WHERE TO STAY

Tallman Hotel: 9550 Main St., Upper Lake, (707) 275-2245, www.tallmanhotel.com. Lovingly restored historic hotel with modern additions in the rear, including garden suites with private Japanese soaking tubs. Rates start at \$159 per night.

Rumsey House Bed & Breakfast: 2996 Rumsey Canyon Rd., Rumsey (Yolo County), (530) 507-8811, www.rumseyhouse.com. A small three-room B&B, with easy access to Cache Creek. Rates start at \$139 per night.

Bear Creek Campground: Bear Creek Road in Mendocino National Forest. 16 sites with tables and fire rings. No water; garbage must be packed out. No reservations, first come, first served, closed when you can't get there, free.

Letts Lake Campground: Forest Route 17N02 in Mendocino National Forest. 42 shaded sites along the shore of Letts Lake. A quiet, family-friendly camp with swimming and non-motorized boating. No reservations, first come first served, open May-October, \$12 per night.

WHERE TO EAT

Blue Wing Saloon Restaurant: 9520 Main St., Upper Lake, (707) 275-2233, www.tallmanhotel.com/blue-wing-saloon-cafe-restaurant. Wood-paneled saloon with leafy patio adjacent to the Tallman Hotel, featuring local wines and microbrews and lively, seasonal spins on pub fare. Live blues on Mondays. Open daily for lunch and dinner, brunch on Sunday.

Guinda Commons: 7624 Highway 16, Guinda (Yolo County), (530) 796-0758, www.guindacommons.com. Comfy, family-friendly joint with barbecue, sandwiches and soups, with a large selection of beers and a spacious back patio. Lunch and dinner Wednesday-Saturday, closes at 6 p.m. on Sun.

WHAT TO DO

Snow Mountain hike: Summit Springs trailhead is at the end of Forest Road 17N06, accessible from Forest Road M10 near Bear Creek Campground.

Berryessa Peak hike: Trailhead is at the 20-mile marker on Knoxville Road, north of Lake Berryessa. Trail heads east from the road. Details and maps at www.tuleyome.org/index.php/berryessa-peak-trail.

Cache Creek Bald Eagle Hike: Saturdays in January and February. Limited to 25 people, reservations required. Call BLM Ukiah Field Office at (707) 468-4000 in late December to reserve a spot.

Cache Creek whitewater rafting: Whitewater Adventures, (800) 977-4837, www.gotwhitewater.com. Trips offered on selected dates through the summer, one- or two-day trips, starting at \$59, meals included.

Wilbur Hot Springs: 3375 Wilbur Springs Road, Wilbur Springs, (530) 473-2306, www.wilburhotsprings.com. Day use of hot springs starts at \$55 per person, with massage and other spa treatments available.

MORE INFORMATION

Bureau of Land Management:

www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/prog/nlcs/Berryessa_Snow_Mountain.html.

Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument campaign:

www.berryessasnowmountain.org.