

## Ruby Mountains: Nevada's rugged gem Alpine vistas, lush fields amid isolated cowboy country

Camille Cusumano, Special to The Chronicle  
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**(04-06) 04:00 PDT Lamoille, Nev.** -- He told me

his name was Johnny and he'd lived his whole life here, except for "the two years I gave to Uncle Sam." I didn't ask which two years. It was the lifetime in a place like Lamoille that brought my imagination to the brink.

What had I missed by not waking up every day in a village at the mouth of a canyon, with a cottonwood-shaded park and a white steepled church? Lamoille (rhymes with "the coil") still had groomed dirt lanes, some of which found their vanishing point toward the snow-streaked peaks of the Ruby Mountains. With Swiss Alp lushness, the Rubies frame a hamlet that seemed as unspoiled as Johnny.

Under a sign at Pine Lodge that advertised "Hangovers installed and serviced," he tended bar, fielding requests for cocktails and dining tables even as he checked in guests, like me, whose eyes were full of question marks.

I asked point-blank, "Who did the killing?"

Johnny's pale eyes made a cursory arc of the exquisite corpses before he was distracted by a request for another Merlot. The wild plunder was not just affixed to the blond walls of this 1940s hunters' lodge. The bears, bighorn sheep, mountain goat and badger were propped in their requisite habitats in museum-quality dioramas overlooking the diners obliviously chowing down on well-marbled steaks and seafood.

"Oh, never mind," I mumbled. I watched smoke curl from cigarettes held by men in billed caps, their girth overhanging their belts. "All but the bears are from the Ruby Mountains," said one of the younger men.

A mining expo in Elko, 20 miles northeast of here, had packed this rural watering hole, its adjoining restaurant and next-door hotel with mineral experts. I'd be leaving in the morning for my own gems -- backpacking in the Rubies with a Sierra Club group I'd met only through e-mail, that miracle of an information age that had yet to sully the likes of Lamoille or Johnny.

Johnny was backed up with orders, so I left to check in with my as-yet- faceless fellow hikers. I found my way past the hitching post and the candy- apple shine of pickups.

Halfway up the 13-mile scenic byway of Lamoille Canyon, I pulled into Thomas Canyon Campground. The late light, just days before the summer solstice,

was clear and warm. It gossiped 11,249-foot Ruby Dome and the triangle peaks over our creek-riven campground. It helped mitigate the news: We weren't going backpacking.

Our leader, former Lamoille resident and Ruby Mountain habitue Allen Tatomer, had found the snow in the high country to be too deep for us to negotiate passes and ridges. The Rubies get as much as 400 inches annually; in fact, they're renowned among a well-heeled set as one of two heli-ski venues in the West. But our technical gear stopped at crampons and walking poles.

A veteran backpacker, I'd come to be initiated into the terrain of this 100-mile-long range. The Rubies are unique among Great Basin ranges in Nevada (the most mountainous state, with 314 individual ranges). Misnamed for garnets found there by soldiers in the late 1800s, the Rubies have 10 glaciated peaks topping 10,000 feet. They are honeycombed with broad canyons and hanging valleys and scored by cascades that end up in the Humboldt River, northeastern Nevada's largest. They are so wet and verdant, it's easy to forget you're in the Sagebrush State.

And there were those four syllables uttered by my writer friend, Lynn Ferrin. "Flutes on the wind" was how she described the song of the shy Himalayan snowcock that nests high in the Rubies, its only habitat outside of central Asia. I hoped not so much to spot the rare game bird (introduced by hunters in the 1960s) as to be in a rocky place brushed by its dulcet tones.

I listened to Tatomer's Plan B. The group would car-camp at this sun-blessed site and day-hike on the less snow-laden trails. (I would camp with them one night and stay three nights at Pine Lodge.) Over the next four days, I could discover the high country, visit the town and find a Pleistocene memory called Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

The good chemistry in our group of three women, eight men and one 12-year-old boy was further compensation. Our first hike, to Island Lake, began at the top of Lamoille Canyon, near ponds dammed by beaver lodges. Along the 2-mile trail, we passed corn lilies, bluebells, wallflowers and swamp onion, the warm air redolent of mint and sage. After passing a fallen bristlecone pine and a swift, tumbling stream, we were at the snow-rimmed lake near 10,000 feet.

Our 12-year-old pulled out his fishing pole and worms -- and in less than an hour caught three trout (which he grilled and downed that evening before I could beg for a taste). I followed a few of the guys who were ascending a ridge, cross-country. But when they said they were going to glissade down the snow (which meant butt-sliding in some cases), I decided I was in the wrong huddle. I went for solitude on boulder outcroppings amid fragrant stands of limber pine and marveled at how fast one could penetrate deeply into the backcountry here.

I walked the five miles down canyon to the campground, noticing a marshy meadow, an avalanche chute and a hanging-valley overlook. I regretted arriving too late to glimpse the mountain goats that peer down from rocks above Thomas Canyon. It would have been much grander than seeing their trophy counterparts.

Lamoille is just a 20-minute drive from the campsite, so I drove to town and ran into Johnny in his Stetson, heading to breakfast. He agreed to sit and tell me about Lamoille -- on Sunday -- and I went on

to the little square park called the Grove. I had the two wooden footbridges, picnic tables and tranquility to myself. No wonder emigrants had detoured from the Humboldt and followed an old Shoshone trail to this valley to rest their livestock. It still has power as an antidote to parched desert or city life.

Aimless wandering took me to the Gallery of Lamoille (which, along with O'Carroll's Bar & Grill, is the town's only business besides Pine Lodge). The gallery holds an array of Early American antiques, some saddles and the work of local artists. Co-owner Mike Barstow also builds functional oak furniture. His collection of restored buggies outside the shop further enhanced the romance of this cowboy country.

What romantic notions inspired Richard Gere and Ted Nugent to slip into Pine Lodge last year? Owners Todd and Dina Schwandt, who bought the 1948 lodge four years ago, couldn't tell me even if they knew. They were too busy operating the hostelry and their high-country outfit. As locals who know the Rubies' year-round recreation intimately, the Schwandts have led guests from around the world on horse pack trips, wild game hunts, into canyons to view the historic Basque tree carvings and up peaks to find the snowcock.

Todd said the hotel (separate from the lodge proper) was actually built in the early 1950s to be a brothel: "The gals around town threw a fit." And that was that until the 1970s, when it opened as a respectable enterprise.

Because I had reserved late, I was put in the guest cabin out at the Schwandt's outfitting headquarters, Jaz Ranch, about three miles away from the lodge complex. This was no hardship. Each morning, sipping coffee I'd brewed in my room, I'd gaze over the valley that spread before me and the Ruby foothills rising behind me and wonder how a rancher got any chores done.

Instead of taking the next day's hike with my glissading colleagues, I headed out Highway 229 over Secret Pass for Ruby Lake, a 65-mile pastoral drive. The wide-open range and rolling sage, flanked by the eastern side of the Rubies, was balm for anyone with city blues. Livestock and weathered homesteads punctuated land of the most passionate shades of green. Fields were dotted with occasional wildflowers -- rabbitbrush, jimsonweed, wild rose, iris and droopy mule's ears. A cowboy waved to me from his saddle, and that melted the last of my melancholy.

I loved the route to the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge (some of it on well-graded dirt) as much as I loved the sprawling wetland oasis, a rare find in the Great Basin. The 37,362-acre refuge's marsh, meadows, grasslands and shrub-steppe uplands surrounded me with a mosaic that supports thousands of nesting and migrating waterfowl and songbirds.

Water flowing from more than 160 springs under the Rubies nourishes the marsh that lies along migration corridors for the Pacific and Central flyways. Commonly sighted birds include coots, grebes, sandhill cranes, great blue herons, black-crowned night herons, white-faced ibis and marsh wrens.

I drove the levees and stopped near bulrushes to see an avocet take flight and red-winged blackbirds land. The piping and chirping from unseen fowl in the rushes recalled a jungle's sounds. The marsh supports the largest population of nesting canvasback ducks west of the Mississippi (outside of Alaska). I thought I had spotted canvasbacks gliding across the navy blue water through grassy islands, but they turned out to

be a family of scaups with 10 fuzzy ducklings.

The visitor center, a cool respite from the blazing sun, held stuffed fuzzy things and a history of the marsh, which is the remains of ancient Lake Franklin. I asked wildlife biologist Jeff Mackay where all the humans were -- I'd seen fewer than a dozen. "We get under 40,000 people a year, with most coming mid-June through September for bass fishing," he said. "We're so far from anywhere, it's a drawback for many."

One era's drawback is another's homestead. In 1880, Jacob Bressman and family left Pennsylvania for this area. His grave site and the sun-bleached skeleton of his cabin are historic sites on the refuge.

Back in Lamoille, I persuaded my fellow hikers to join me for a full-body immersion in the bracing snowmelt of Thomas Canyon, which I needed after a day of driving in the area's hotter reaches. We shared a last supper in Elko at a Basque restaurant and promised to have a reunion in the Rubies -- with a real backpack trip.

Sunday morning, I looked for Johnny at O'Carroll's, where we were going to have breakfast after he lit the candles for service at the Little Church of the Crossroads. He never showed up, and I'm sure he had his reasons. In searching for Johnny under his white Stetson, though, I did find Lamoille. I saw the bright and simple interior of the Presbyterian church and found the comfort of a country brunch.

On O'Carroll's plush lawn, in sun-dappled shade next to Lamoille Creek, I ate my biscuits and sausage gravy, bacon, eggs, hash browns, pancakes and fruit. What, I asked myself as I sat back contentedly under the fat, old cottonwood, could that cowboy have told me anyway? If I listened to the loquacious creek, it spoke volumes plenty.

## **If you go**

### **When to go**

The Ruby Mountains offer four seasons of recreation. Best time for hiking and backpacking is late June through September. Best time to look for the Himalayan snowcock is July-September, above 10,000 feet, on rocky ridges. Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge offers good birding May through September, with some fall migrations into October.

### **Getting there**

Lamoille is about a 5 1/2-hour drive from Reno (8 1/2 hours from San Francisco) along Interstate 80. The Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge is 65 miles from Elko/Lamoille.

### **Where to stay**

Pine Lodge, P.O. Box 281550, Lamoille, NV 89828; phone, (775) 753-6363 (lodge and restaurant), Web, [www.usa-lodging.com](http://www.usa-lodging.com). \$65 per person.

Thomas Canyon Campground, 140 Pacific Ave., Wells, NV 89825; (775) 738-5171,

[www.reserveusa.com](http://www.reserveusa.com). One-car site, \$14 a night.

### What to do

Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge, HC 60 Box 860, Ruby Valley, NV 89833; (775) 779-2237, [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).

Nevada High Country Outfitters, the Jaz Ranch, P.O. Box 281388, Lamoille, NV 89828; (775) 777-3277; [www.nevadajazranch.com](http://www.nevadajazranch.com). A three-day, two-night packing trip runs about \$500.

Gallery in Lamoille, 742 Country Lane, Lamoille, NV 89828; (775) 753-6871, e-mail them at [lamoille@ctnis.com](mailto:lamoille@ctnis.com) or go the Elko Chamber of Commerce for more information.

### For more information

For information on recreation in the Ruby Mountains, contact Humboldt- Toiyabe National Forest, Ruby Mountain Jarbidge Ranger District, P.O. Box 246, Wells, NV 89835; (775) 752-3357, [www.fs.fed.us/htnf/h-trec.htm](http://www.fs.fed.us/htnf/h-trec.htm).

For information on Lamoille and Elko (Elko has a variety of lodgings, restaurants, and attractions), contact the Elko Convention & Visitors Authority, 700 Moren Way, Elko, NV 89801; (775) 738-4091, [www.elkocva.com](http://www.elkocva.com).

Camille Cusumano is a senior editor at Via magazine. This is her first story for the Travel section.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/04/06/TR28548.DTL>

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