

The Self-Guided Hunter...

RESEARCHING TROPHY AREAS

Eighth in a series...

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It is said that the three most important factors affecting the value of real estate are "location, location, and location." Likewise, in hunting, three of the most significant considerations may be "research, research, and even more research." Investigating a trophy area for any species takes time, determination, and dedication. After one hunting season ends, I immediately begin planning and researching my next year's hunt, and continue to gather information throughout the year. This article lists the many sources of information I have used, and describes the type of data that each provides.

Record Books and Magazines

Whether a hunter draws a premium tag or hunts a state with an over-the-counter tag, he or she must put in the same amount of time and effort to study a hunting area. The first item to research is which areas produce trophy animals. Record books are a good place to start, particularly those published by the Boone and Crockett Club, Safari Club International, Pope and Young Club, and Longhunter also produce record books, as do some states, such as Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona. Analyze this information by score to know where the largest animals are coming from. Then, when you have obtained a tag or chosen a state, pick two or three counties' that have produced record-book animals in the last few years. Although there is some

consistency from year to year, the areas that produce trophy animals can change rather quickly due to winter kill and fawn recruitment.

Other good sources of information are hunting magazines, such as *Eastman's* and *The Trophy Hunter*, which describe recent hunts for many species. *Hunter Services* puts out an excellent monthly newsletter with information about last year's hunting success rates, drawing odds, and areas in the western states with the greatest trophy potential. The *Rocky Mountain Newsletter* and the *U. S. Hunting Report* also publish very helpful tips. For the most part, these publications are accurate, but you cannot depend on this information alone as things can change drastically in one year.

Whenever you read an article in a magazine about an area in which you are interested, make a copy and file it under the name of the trophy area. The file should also have the names and telephone numbers of everyone you have spoken to about that particular area. Update this file yearly, and add or subtract as you get more information. It is amazing how much information you can gather on an area and have it readily available.

Government Contacts

With several trophy-hunting areas in mind, begin to work on gathering biological data. The first source is the annual big game herd reports, which are created by each state's wildlife biologists. These reports provide the most up-to-date information on the condition of the deer and elk herds and other species in a particular unit. Especially interesting are buck-to-doe ratios, fawn recruitment, and the harvest statistics from the previous year. When you find an area that has a ratio of 30 bucks (or bulls) to 100 does (or cows), you have found a trophy area, but there are very few deer and elk herds that

Forming a network with other trophy hunters is a real asset—once you form a circle of fellow hunters who trust each other and share information, you are well on your way to finding great trophy areas.

Stacy

Willoughby with a black bear from Tuolumne County, California, scoring 21 points.



Investigating a trophy area for any species takes time, determination, and dedication.

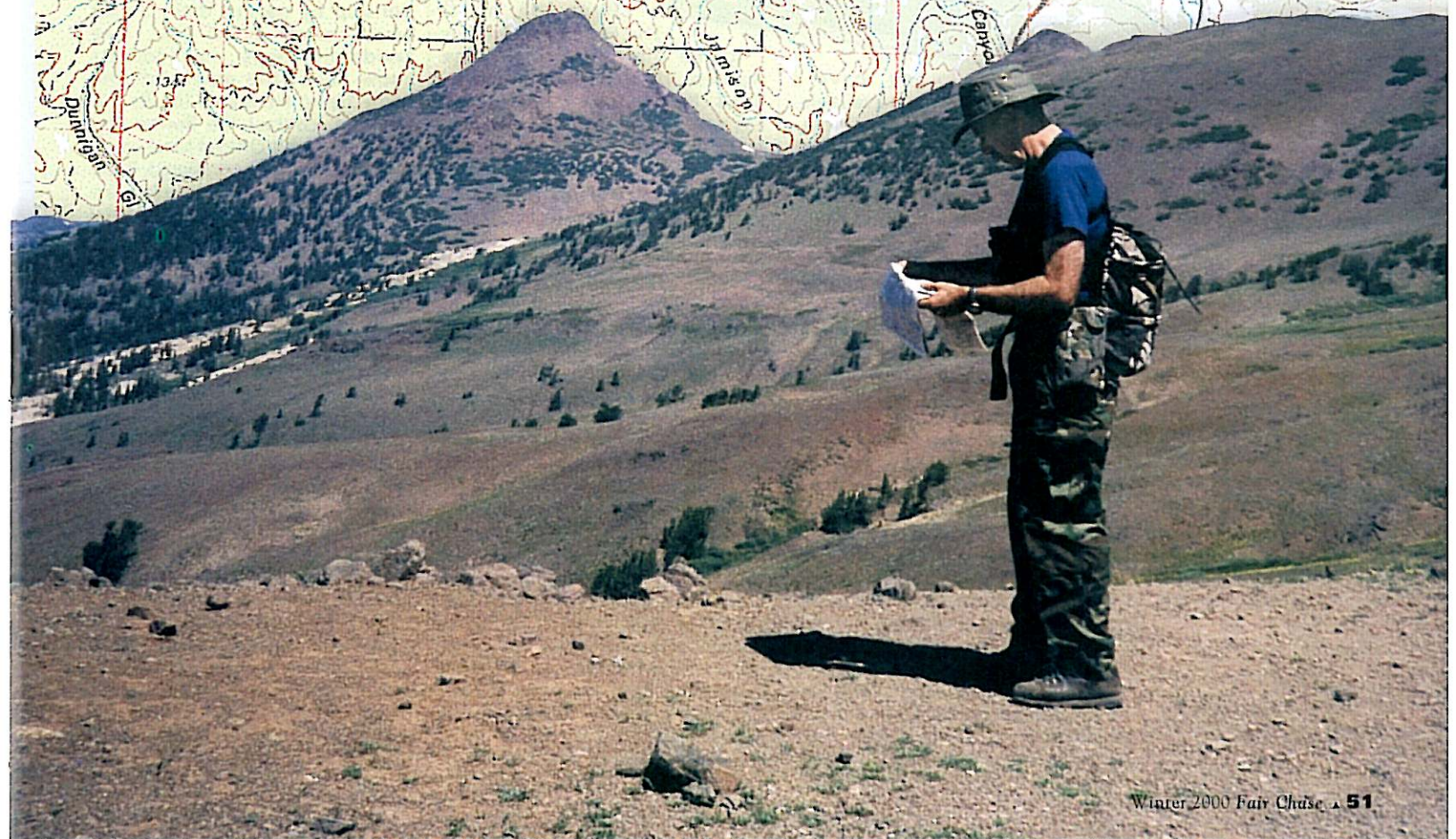
Paul Fieber on a scouting trip at 10,000 feet on Sonora Pass in California

BLACKFOOT

WILDLIFE MANAG

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produce these numbers. The next step is to talk to the biologist that has written the report. These individuals usually spend a lot of time in the field, and will give you good basic material.

Contact the game manager or warden for a particular area to learn about the quality of deer and elk being validated in the field. Most states also have check stations on the opening weekends of the hunting seasons. From these harvest statistics, a hunter can see the type and trend in animals being taken on an annual basis. One of the most important parts of obtaining information is keeping some kind of notebook or journal. Anytime you talk to some-

In researching an Idaho hunt a few years ago, I contacted the contractor and asked to speak to some of his sheepherders. One of the sheepherders told me of a huge mule deer buck that he had been watching all summer. The area was a draw area only, and I was not successful drawing the tag. But the next winter, one of the trophy magazines had a picture of the buck exactly as the sheepherder had described it—38 inches wide with two 12-inch drop tines.

It is also useful to talk to local government trappers and individuals that conduct game surveys for the state or federal wildlife agencies. These people are in the mountains all spring and summer, and see a tremendous amount of game. Some also are pilots, and regularly fly over winter ranges. A government trapper that is now retired once gave me information on a small area in which three 40-inch mule deer had been harvested in the last ten years.

Having obtained all of the biological reports and harvest statistics, it is time to learn as much as possible about other elements that may affect the hunt.

The Forest Service has game biologists and game wardens that patrol the forest. Road closures, new trails, and areas where quads are allowed will make a big difference on a hunt. Each forest also has a trail foreman. It is extremely helpful to contact this person to see if the trails you are going to use in the fall will be cleared during the summer. The trail crew also sees a lot of game during the summer, and can share useful information—on one occasion, these folks told me that violent windstorms in the spring had caused massive blowdowns resulting in the closing of all trails in the area I had chosen to hunt.

The next person to contact is the Fire Management Officer for the forest or BLM land in your hunting locale. It is very important to find out about all fires that have occurred in the last three to five years. Game is drawn to these areas like a magnet, and a hunter can be very successful hunting burn zones. Ordinarily, the fire management agency will send you a map showing the area and size of all

fires in the last few years.

It is also important to know where the outfitter camps are in these areas; it is best not to directly compete with the professionals and their clients. The Forest Service or BLM can provide this information. Outfitters spend a lot of time researching their areas, and when a hunter finds an outfitter's camp in the general area they have chosen to hunt, it is a good indicator that there are some excellent trophies around.

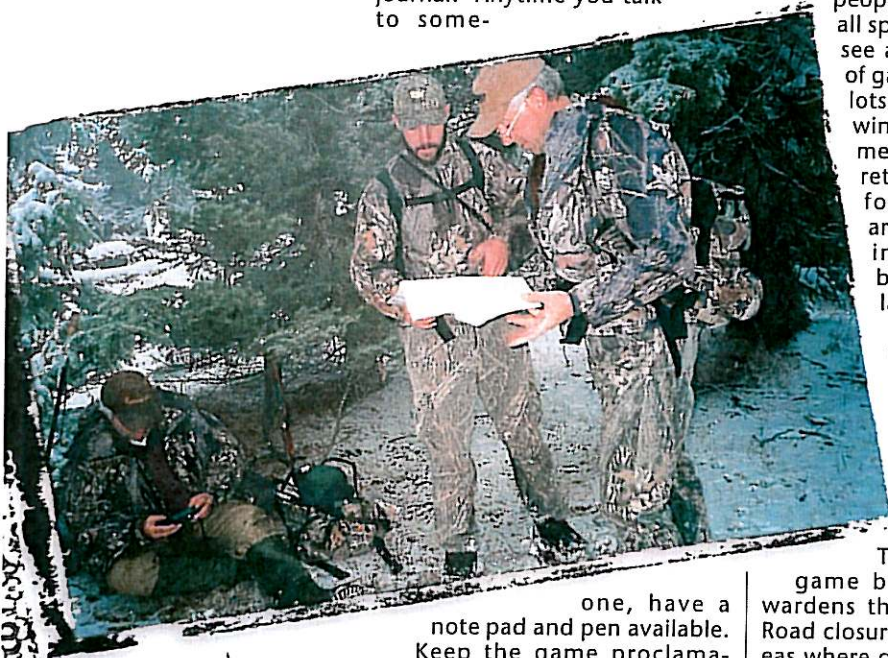
Other Local Resources

Many towns have "big buck" contests each year. Call the person in charge to find out about the biggest species taken. Frequently, the winners are local ranchers, and a quick telephone call to congratulate them has, at least once in my case, led to an invitation to hunt on private land. Sporting goods dealers also will give you information on local trophy hunters. Forming a network with other trophy hunters is a real asset—once you form a circle of fellow hunters who trust each other and share information together, you are well on your way to finding great trophy areas.

Local taxidermists can also furnish knowledge of the quality of animals they are taking in each year. Taxidermists are looking for business, and will usually share good information, particularly if you can develop a personal relationship by paying them a visit when you are in the area. Like taxidermy shops, meat lockers know about the quality of the game being harvested locally. In addition, contact the Boone and Crockett Club's Official Measurers, and Safari Club International, Pope and Young, and Longhunter scorers in your chosen hunting locale—these people score record book animals all year long, and they can give a good indication as to the quality of the game being taken. They also have some great stories to tell!

It is possible to develop a list of the local government (state and federal) trappers, and contact them before the hunt. These individuals are in the woods much of the year, and see a tremendous amount of game. Pilots who regularly fly game surveys may also be a great source of knowledge.

Finally, it is useful to stop and talk to everyone you run into while on a hunt, and write their comments down in a notebook. Some of the best information a hunter may gather comes from other hunters who know the area. Write down names and telephone numbers, so you can



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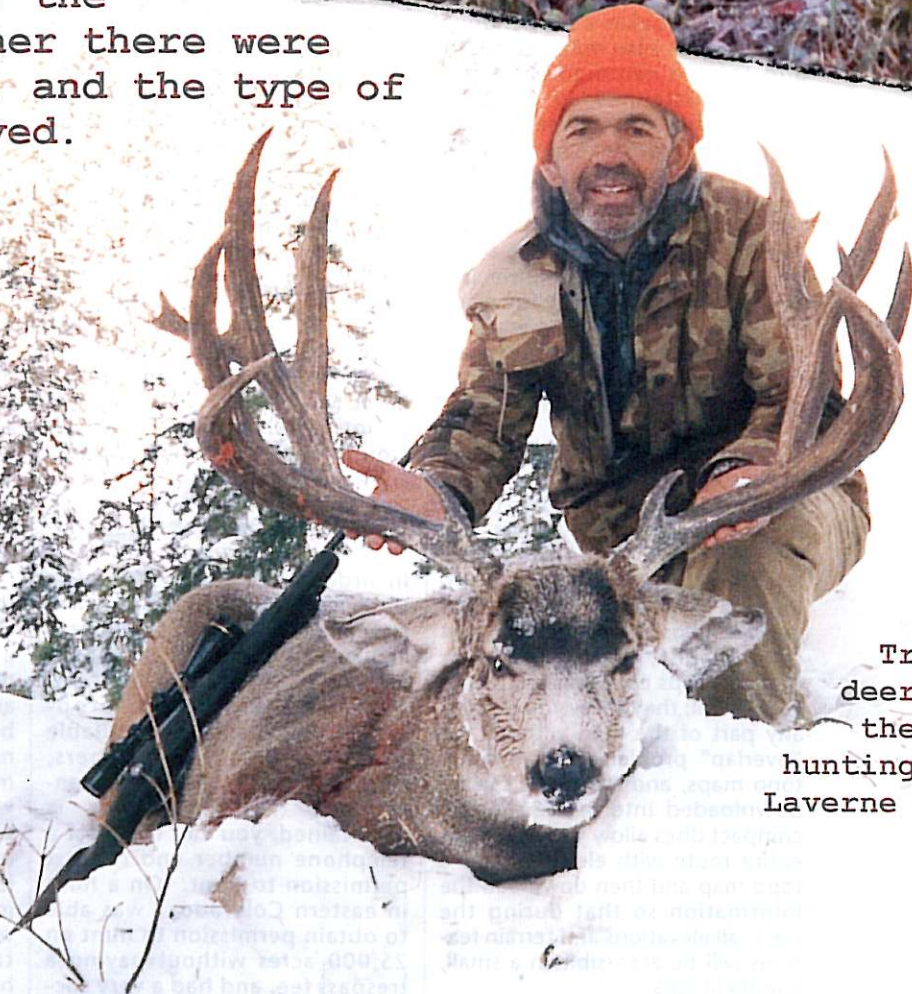
one, have a note pad and pen available. Keep the game proclamations from each state for at least five years. Closed areas may open at any time, and if you do not search through these publications each year, you may not know which areas are closed or open. Using this method, the hunter may discover elk units that had been closed for several years suddenly open for a limited season. These units often produce real quality animals, but usually only for one or two seasons.

If you are collecting bonus or preference points, the drawing statistics from each state will tell you how close you are to drawing an area. Wyoming, Nevada, and Colorado put out excellent demand indexes and drawing results. With this information, it is easier to predict the likelihood that you may draw.

Another method of research that has paid off is to ask the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management to see if they have any contracts for sheep grazing.



Keep a written journal each day that you hunt, including the time of day game was seen, the weather, whether there were other hunters, and the type of terrain involved.



Trophy mule deer taken by the author's hunting partner, Laverne Caldeira.

reach them again if necessary. Also, keep a written journal each day that you hunt, including the time of day game was seen, the weather, whether there were other hunters, and the type of terrain involved. Don't be surprised when patterns begin to develop. Although it seems like a lot of work at the end of the day when you are tired, it is worthwhile for remembering the details of the hunt. In order to keep all this information accessible and organized, file your notes, articles, reports, and other written materials by state and hunting area.

The Internet

The Internet is a great resource for researching weather. There are several different web sites for weather, and hundreds of stations providing data so that the hunter can usually find a weather station close to a hunt location. Look at the weather records spanning several years—you will usually get a fairly good idea of the temperatures and amount of rain or snow you are likely to encounter. Especially important are the highs and lows for the day, as this makes a tremendous difference in how much clothing and food is required, and the type of shelter needed.

Another great weather resource are "weather cams," which are live remote cameras operated by solar power that will sometimes show an entire mountain range. The hunter can actually see snow on the ground, and confirm the information provided by the nearest weather station. The weather cams update their photos every one to five minutes. You cannot get any better real-time information than this.

The Internet also provides many sources for maps that can be downloaded at no cost. Two of the best web sites for maps are www.cis.ksu.edu/~dha5446/topoweb and www.topozone.com. Several companies offer topographic maps for an entire state on compact disc. Purchasing topographic maps on compact discs is very useful; they allow you to print any part of the map without the "overlap" problem of traditional topo maps, and the maps can be downloaded into a GPS. Some compact discs allow you to plot an entire route with elevations on a topo map and then download the information so that during the hunt, all elevations and terrain features will be accessible in a small, handheld GPS.

Incidentally, in addition to

weather and terrain data, proclamations, hunting statistics, and drawing odds are available on many state fish and game department web sites.

Aerial Photos

Obtaining aerial photographs of a proposed hunting area is another good way to research terrain. The entire United States has been photographed from the air, and most areas in the National Forests are in color. You can request a flight index of the area you are interested in and then order the appropriate maps. Usually six to eight photos will cover an entire hunt area (each photo covers an area 2.5 miles on a side). The photographs can be viewed in 3D with a stereoscope (stereoscopes come in pocket models to large viewers, and can range in price from \$25 to \$2,000).

Because of the 3D view, you see the landscape as if you were in a helicopter hovering over the area. All creeks, meadows, trees, boulders, and trails are visible. Occasionally, game is visible in these photos with a magnifying lens. When I was studying aerial photos for an elk hunting trip several years ago, I noticed rust-colored treetops, which usually indicate excessive water. The area was near a large meadow in a stand of timber. Once I was able to match this area on the aerial photos to my topo map, I downloaded the coordinates into my GPS. Upon arriving in my hunt area, I simply hit "GO TO" on my GPS and was directed to within 20 yards of the spring. I then found several wallows that were heavily used by game. I set up on these wallows and took a great 6x6 bull that first evening. If not for the aerial photos, I would never have known this spring existed.

Land Ownership Plats

In order to determine whether there is any private land in a proposed hunting area, the hunter can research plat maps that list all parcels of private land and the owners of these properties. Plat maps are available from Western Cartographers, (402)494-8300. Once the identity of the landowner is ascertained, you can then get a telephone number and request permission to hunt. On a hunt in eastern Colorado, I was able to obtain permission to hunt on 25,000 acres without paying a trespass fee, and had a very successful hunt.

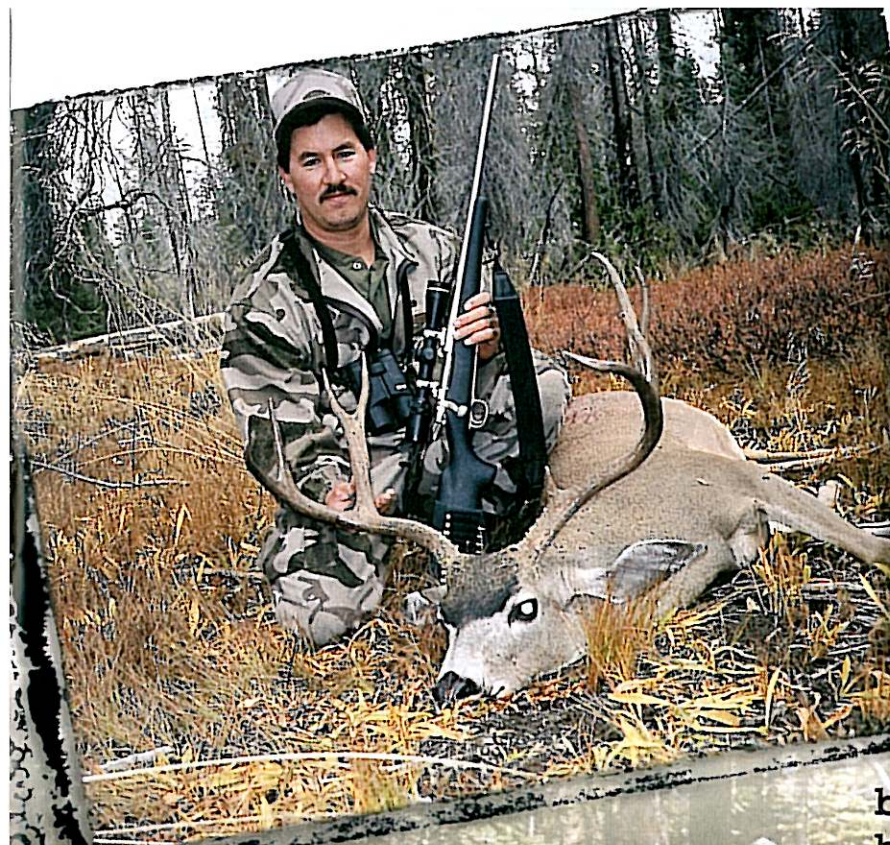
Putting It All Together

Last fall, months of research resulted in one of the best self-guided, backpacking hunts I have been on in years. I hunted for mule deer in an open unit on a general tag. My research indicated that a high number of trophy bucks had been taken in the area in the last ten years. The herd report disclosed a buck to doe ratio of 30 to 100, and the game warden informed me that, the prior year, the check station tallied more large 4x4 bucks than ever before. The local government trapper told me he had seen a good number of mule deer while flying the area.

In preparation for this hunt, I downloaded the appropriate topographic maps off the Internet into my GPS, and purchased the necessary aerial photos so I could study the area all summer. I found meadows and springs that did not show on any other map. The Forest Service trails foreman stated that the trails would be open in my area, and I learned that there had been a fire in this area within the last five years. I monitored the temperatures and precipitation all summer from home, and found out about avalanches in the area. All these factors indicated that this hunting locale would be a great place to find trophy animals.

One week before I left on my trip, a weather station near the hunting area indicated a storm had dumped six inches of fresh snow. I was able to verify this by accessing a weather cam that overlooked the mountain range where the hunt would take place. Due to information I received from a backpacking e-group I joined during the summer, I was able to go on a five-day, four-night hunt with all food, clothes, and hunting equipment at a total weight of 28.5 pounds. This included my pack frame, GPS, and a cell telephone. This was a significant reduction from my normal pack weight of 40 pounds.

I saw more game on this hunt than I had ever seen before, including several small herds of elk, a dozen Rocky Mountain goats, two bighorn sheep, a black bear, and 33 bucks, ten of which were between 22 and 30 inches. I was not successful in taking a trophy mule deer buck on this trip, but it was not due to lack of preparedness. Lots of research at the front end does not assure success, but it always makes a hunt more enjoyable and satisfying, regardless of the final outcome. More importantly, it guarantees that the hunting soul stays active all year long. ▲▲▲



With several trophy-hunting areas in mind, begin to work on gathering biological data. The first source is the annual big game herd reports.

Blacktail-mule deer cross and black bear taken during the 2000 season by Stacy Willoughby.



Bull elk taken in Idaho by Paul Fieber.