

News from Nan

TRAVEL

SNAKE RIVER PLAIN, IDAHO 2008

SEPTEMBER 30, 2008 | ANNA



Flaming Gorge

Starting on August 31, 2008, we drove our RV “up and over” the Rockies of Colorado, through the north-east corner of Utah, and along Idaho’s Snake River to Jerome for an Elderhostel (Road Scholar) trip hosted by the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of the Ascension.

Flaming Gorge

We spent our first night in Vernal, Utah, contending with a furious thunderstorm. The next morning we drove through Flaming Gorge where the temperature dropped to 34 degrees and the rain turned to slushy snow. However, by the afternoon more mild weather prevailed, and we had nearly clear skies by the time we arrived at the monastery.



Geography and Economy of the Snake River Plain

The Monastery of the Ascension sits on an old shield volcano (probably 400,000 years old) in the Snake River plain, which used to be grazing land but is now farmed with the help of irrigation. The monastery buildings and a working garden and orchard sit on about one-third of the property; the rest is a working farm leased and operated by nearby farmers. Corn, wheat, and sugarbeets are common in the area, and one rather new phenomenon is hundreds of dairy farms and cheese factories. (Although potatoes are still grown in the area, they are not the phenomenon they used to be.)



Shoshone Falls

The dairies look like feed lots with the cows kept in pens and fed rich food and chemical supplements to keep them at top production, and milked three times a day. They are “milked out” in about three years, and turned into hamburger for the fast-food industry. Water comes from the river, springs that flow into the river, and underground wells. The fields are sprinkled rather than irrigated, and many farmers still “throw the water into the air” rather than more efficiently “pushing the water down toward the plants.” Whatever the method, the water seems to run all day (and maybe all night?) — or that was the case while we were there and observing.

Monastery of the Ascension

St. Benedict lived in what is now Italy in about 530 AD. The Benedictine order began in about 1120, and the first monasteries in the U.S. came to Missouri from Switzerland in about 1880. The Jerome

monastery is an offshoot of one first established in Oregon. They tend to be located in formerly German-speaking areas of the country.



The monastery population peaked in about 1965 and has been declining since then. The monks are considering ways to keep the monasteries alive and true to their roots and traditions. A possibility that was interesting to us, since we are also currently living in an intentional community, is to open the monastery to non-monks. This new population might include writers, artists, or anyone looking for ways to deepen their Christian faith or simply to live in a quieter and more contemplative atmosphere. We enjoyed a discussion with Father Boniface (the prior) about our recent community living experiences.



Dick at Craters of the Moon

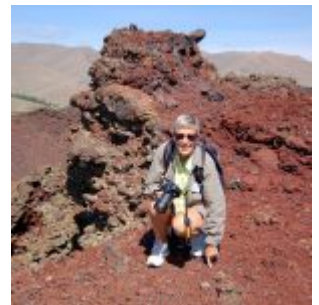
The Benedictines are known for their hospitality activities, and they have set up the monastery not only for religious events, but also to house meetings, retreats, and to host groups like ours who are there to enjoy and learn about the area. The conversations were pleasant and stimulating (as always, in our experience, with Elderhostel trips), the monks were interesting to talk to and learn from, and the food was delicious! We had lots of fresh fruits and vegetables grown on site or locally. We ate breakfast and dinner in the monastery, and packed our own lunches for the daily hikes.

Craters of the Moon National Monument



Craters of the Moon National Monument

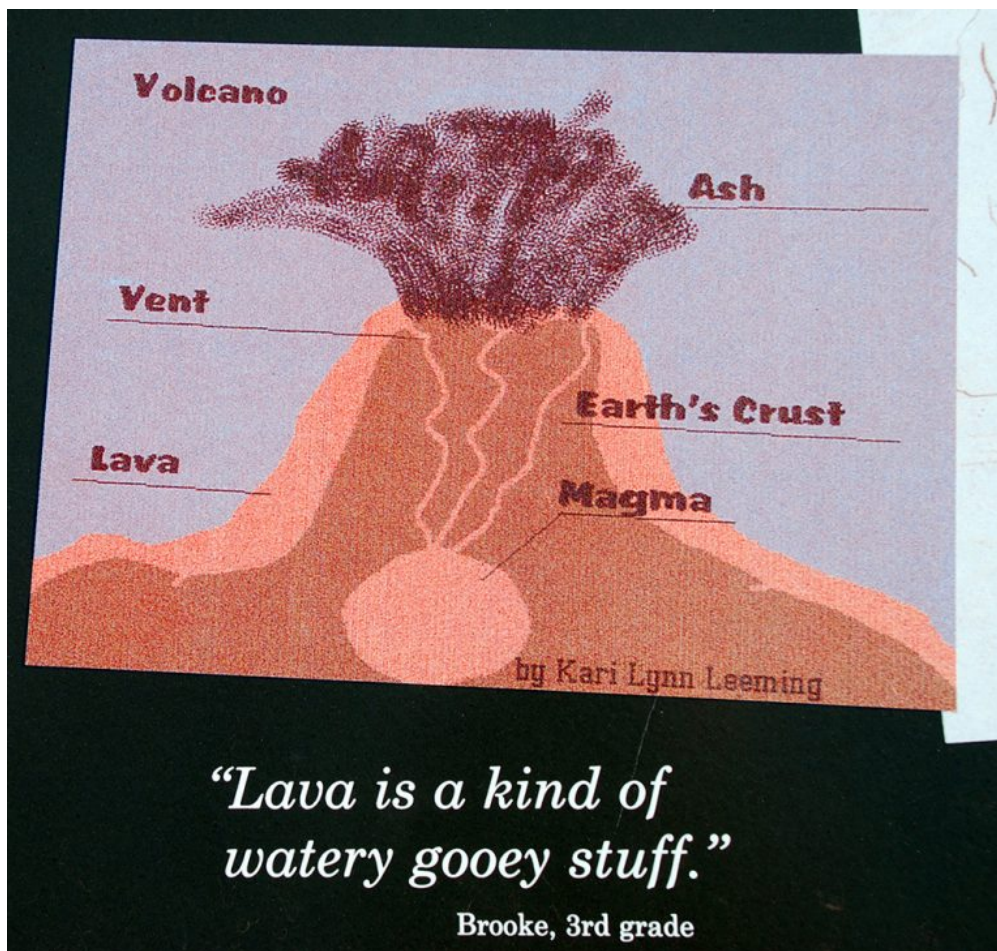
Our first hike was at Craters of the Moon National Monument, an area of intense (and still visible) volcanic activity northeast of Jerome (toward Pocatello). We hiked around the volcanic remains, which contains both pahoehoe (ropy) and a'a (clinkery) lava. We also scrambled through a lava tube. The first eruption was probably about 15,000 years ago, and the last within the past 2000 years.



Anna at Craters of the Moon

Geology of the Snake River Plain

Shawn, our evening lecturer, explained about the passage of the Snake River plain over the Yellowstone "hot spot" that caused some of the the more explosive volcanic activity. The last Yellowstone eruption was 1000 times the recent Mount St. Helens eruption! Other major contributors to the volcanic remains are the Basin and Range extension and the basalt vulcanism that produced oozing (pahoehoe) lava.



People of the Snake River Plain

Father Hugh told us a little about the people inhabiting the Snake River area. Partly because of the newer farming phenomena (crops, dairy cows, cheese making), there has been a large influx in recent years of Hispanics. (Father Hugh says that all the priests connected with local parish churches need to be fluent in Spanish.) The story is usually told like this: “The Hispanics do 90% of the work, and 90% of them are illegal.” Needless to say, the farmers and ranchers are not in favor of “sealing the borders” and “eliminating the illegals,” because if that were to happen the farms would not be able to keep operating. However, there is a strong libertarian streak in the area, and many of that population are in the “throw the illegals out” camp.



Oregon Trail on the Snake River Plain

The recently arrived Hispanics have increased the number of Catholics in the area. Being so close to Utah, the area is also heavily Mormon, and the evangelicals also have a large presence. As in other parts of the country, the mainstream Protestant groups (Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian) are losing out.

Idaho (like other mountain states) is also popular with retirees.



Lava flow

Native American tribes in the area include Shoshone, Paiute, and Blackfoot. They were traditionally migratory, but, of course, they now live on reservations. Father Hugh said there is little tribal identity in the south, but stronger identity among the Nez Perce in the north, where the tribe owns casinos that have improved their tribal economic outlook.

"Plants grow easier on
Pahoehoe than A'a."



Mule Deer eat
Antelope Bitterbrush.

Vance

"The food is so good deer often
have two fawns."

Jared, 4th grade

"Deer like bittersweet brush
because they get food and water
at the same time."

April, 3rd grade

Other temporary residents (besides the pioneers who passed through the area on their way west) included 10,000 Japanese who lived in a wood-and-tarpaper internment camp not far from the monastery. Few Japanese remain in the area today, but some settled just across the border in eastern Oregon.

Bruneau Dunes State Park

On the second day we hiked at the Bruneau dunes, named by French Canadian trappers who hunted beaver in the area. The wind blows the sand in two directions, but the geography keeps it relatively contained. On the day we climbed the dunes the wind had blown what was previously a flat-topped dune into a sharp peak, and it was an extreme challenge to make progress. It was a situation of "take 20 steps and rest for several minutes." Only nine of our group of 30 attempted the climb at all, and by the time we reached the top and had eaten some lunch we were all (but one brave soul) ready to find an easier route down.



Hiking on Bruneau Dunes



Bruneau Dunes

We ended the day talking about trout farming (big business in that part of Idaho) and eating ice cream produced by one of the local dairies.

Snake River and Pioneer Trails



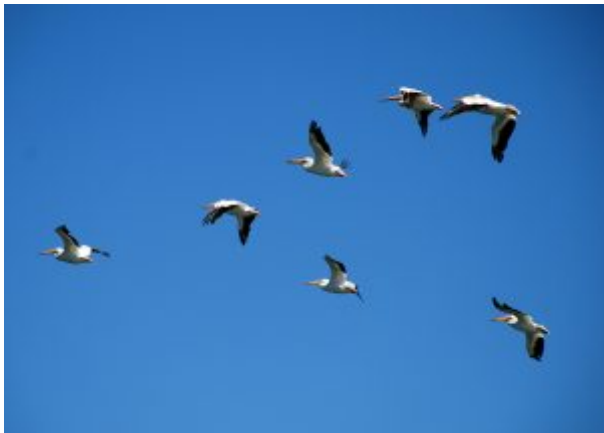
Boat on the Snake River

The next day we took a boat ride on the Snake River, and hiked in very dry, windy conditions along the Oregon Trail.



House along the Snake River

Although the birds aren't as visible in the fall as in the spring, we saw a number of water birds, (for example, mallards, grebes, herons, gulls, and pelicans) birds of prey (for example, hawks and kestrels), and others (magpies, swallows, doves, and kingfishers).



Many of the pioneer trails to Oregon, California, and other parts of the west and southwest converged and crossed in the Snake River area. We hiked a portion of the Oregon trail, and saw bits and pieces of others.



Springs along the Snake River

City of Rocks and Sun Valley

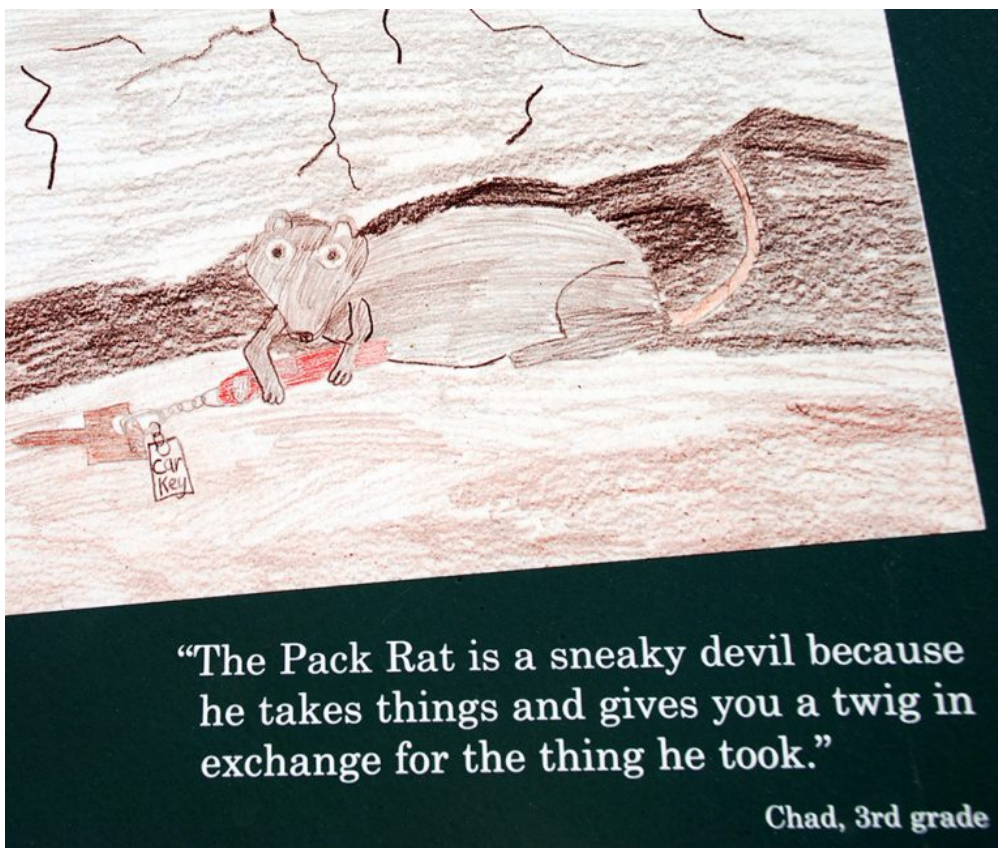
On September 5 we hiked the City of Rocks National Reserve, near Burley. It is another area where many pioneer trails criss-cross. Our group of 30 divided into three subgroups to accommodate different preferences, needs, and hiking abilities. Our group did about 5.5 miles from a rock formation known as the Bread Loaf to one called Elephant Rock. The rocks in this area are granite, which is extremely hard and doesn't wear quickly. The weather was outstanding!



City of Rocks

Our last hike was in the Ketchum and Sun Valley area, which is often associated with Ernest Hemingway, and popular with fly fishermen. Sun Valley was developed in the 1930s by the Union Pacific railroad, and is definitely “old money.” Hailey, just south of Ketchum, is an area of more recent development, and has been associated with Bruce Willis and Demi Moore.

The weather was again beautiful, and we did a fairly challenging seven-mile hike with lots of elevation change.

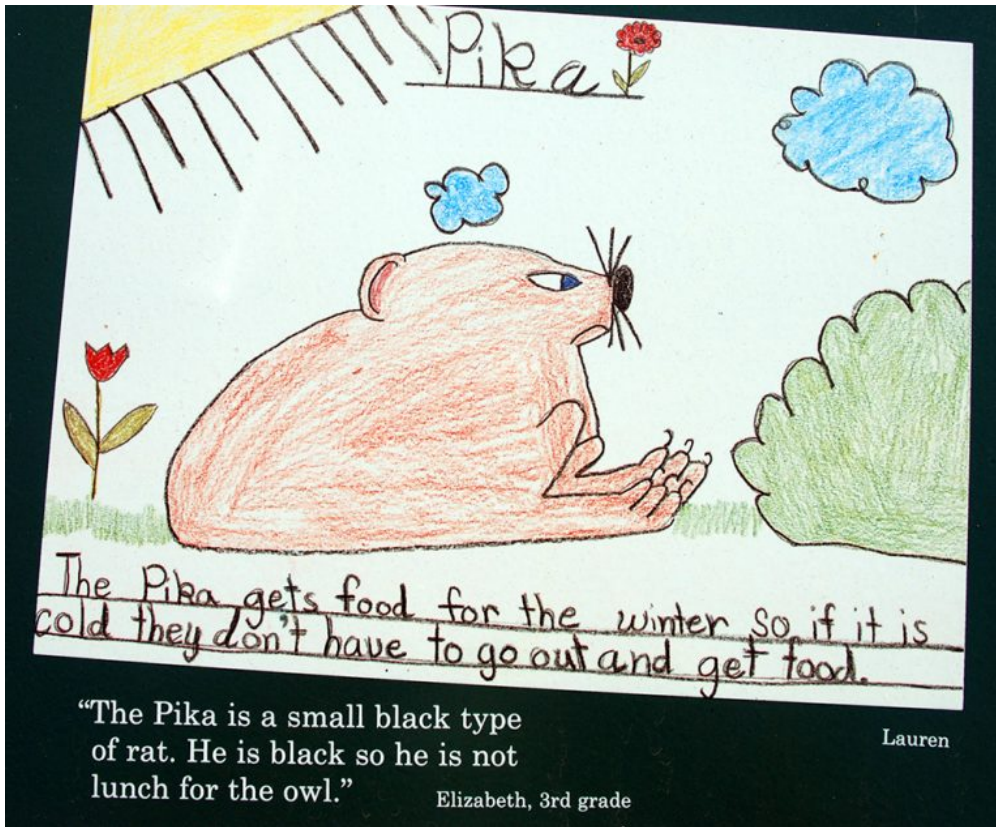


Good-bye to Idaho and Trip Home

Our last evening in the monastery featured a piano and harp concert by a sister and Brother Selby. Our trip home was uneventful. We took Interstate 70 through Colorado with stops overnight in Grand Junction and for lunch in Leadville. We had a great time hiking in Idaho, and enjoyed the company (both Elderhostelers and monks) immensely!



Hiking at Craters of the Moon



- ◀ 2008
- ◀ BRUNEAU DUNES STATE PARK
- ◀ CITY OF ROCKS NATIONAL RESERVE
- ◀ CRATERS OF THE MOON NATIONAL MONUMENT
- ◀ ELDERHOSTEL
- ◀ FLAMING GORGE
- ◀ IDAHO
- ◀ JEROME
- ◀ JOHNSON
- ◀ MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION
- ◀ OREGON TRAIL
- ◀ ROAD SCHOLAR
- ◀ SNAKE RIVER
- ◀ VAN RAAPHORST