The Elevations of Ruby Mountain Lakes
By Larry Hyslop

A recent hike into Island Lake, accompanied (and prodded along) by my grandsons, Riley and Mykel Dick

The two mile hike into Lamoille Canyon's Island Lake is a nice hike but tiring. I used to coax my kids up this trail, now my grandsons coax and prod me. The parking lot at the End of the Road is at 8,800 feet elevation and the trail climbs to 9,672 feet, rising 877 feet.

Not that the climb is any better into other area lakes. To reach any Ruby Mountain lake requires a climb to about this same elevation. Local lakes all lie at between 9,200 to 9,900 feet elevation. The lakes in the East Humboldt Range are found at between 8,400 feet elevation and 9,100 feet. All of these lakes sit in cirques, bowl-shaped glacial features dug into mountain sides and this fact accounts for their elevations.

Alpine-type glaciers begin on mountain slopes where the most snow accumulates. As snow falls year after year and does not melt off, it builds to a great enough depth to form a glacier. The bottom snow is under enough pressure to become ice and then to begin its slow movement downhill. This moving ice gouges out the mountain rock, leaving a bowl-shaped depression. After the glacier melts away, this depression is called a cirque and often, but not always, contains a lake.

This slope is called the glacier's accumulation zone. The location of this zone depends on three factors: elevation, latitude and available moisture. Some coastal glaciers are at very low elevations but receive huge amounts of snow. Inland glaciers form higher in elevation because that is where they receive enough snow. Glaciers farther south form higher in elevation since that is where more snow accumulates. In Northern Canada, glaciers form near sea level, while Mexican glaciers are above 16,000 feet.

In our Ruby Mountains, the elevation where glaciers tended to form was between 9,000 and 10,000 feet. In the East Humboldts, it was between 8,000 and 9,000 feet, since they are a little farther north. All these accumulation zones are on east or north facing slopes, since shade helped the snow persist. Above these elevations, there was not enough slope to accumulate snow. These mountains are between 10,000 and 11,000 feet high. Plus winter winds often blew snow off ridges and higher slopes, onto the accumulation zones. Lower mountain slopes did not build up enough snow and what snow they did accumulate melted too easily. So the local accumulation zones all developed at about the same elevation.

Since all Ruby Mountain lakes are at about the same elevation, what is important is the hike's starting point. What makes Lamoille Canyon such a popular hiking area is the ability to start the hike at 8,400 feet elevation. I have hiked into Griswold Lake, which is at a relatively low elevation of 9,200 feet, but the hike began at 6,400 feet, so we climbed 2,800 feet. I plan more trips to Island Lake but maybe not Griswold Lake.

Elko Daily Free Press, “Nature Notes”, 7/13/2012

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