

## *The Search for Elusive Trees in the Ruby Mountains of Nevada*

With few exceptions Nevada isn't known for luxurious, forested alpine areas. Two Nevada high-desert mountain ranges provide these notable exceptions – the Snake range (which includes Great Basin National Park) and the Ruby Mountains. I will examine the Snake range in another presentation.

The Rubies benefit from more rainfall than most of the state, some estimate fifty inches of precipitation fall on the slopes, most of it as snow. There are over a dozen alpine lakes and many permanent streams. The streams and subsurface water either irrigate much of the surrounding ranches or seeps into the much drier downslope areas. Some of the water supplies the Ruby Valley and marshes to the east.

The vegetation of the Rubies is typical of many of the Nevada mountain ranges: quaking aspen, western juniper, Utah juniper, Rocky Mountain juniper, whitebark pine, limber pine, single-leaf pinyon pine, and bristlecone pine. But perhaps because of the extra rainfall two other conifers also grace the slopes: white fir and Engelmann spruce. These two species are relatively rare in the state. In fact neither appear in any of the mountains to the west until you reach the Sierra Nevada.

This article will document several of my visits to the Rubies and my attempt to document the exact locations of the white pine, the Engelmann spruce, as well as the bristlecone pine, another tree with a colorful history. One of my trips included a week-long backpacking trip to a small, disjunct population of Engelmann spruce that involved a difficult, long cross-country hike. The Engelmann spruce forest looked like a verdant area more likely found the Rocky Mountains or the Sierra Nevada. I will detail that hike as well as a few shorter trips to seek out the uncommon white fir and bristlecone pine.

### *General Description of the Ruby Mountains*

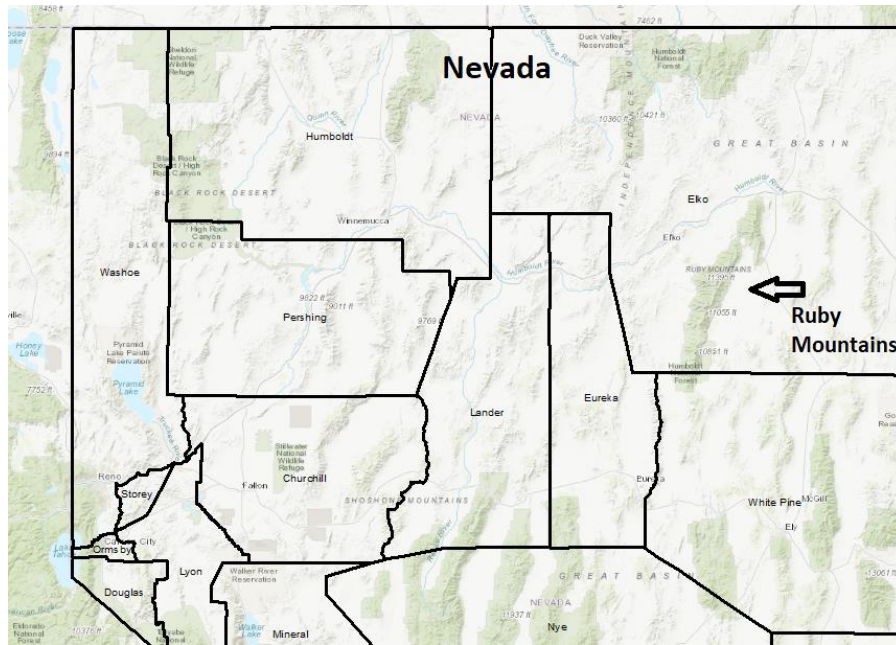
The Ruby Mountains are one of the larger mountain ranges within Nevada. The range is nearly 100 miles long. It ranges in the northeast corner of the state, mostly in a north-south orientation, as do nearly all of Nevada's ranges. It is also one of the most beautiful and popular in the state. The range is mostly volcanic, with a largely granitic middle section. The East Humboldt range just to the north had many of the same characteristics as the Rubies. The arctic zone is the largest in the state. It includes many lakes which were carved out thousands of years ago during many of the glacial periods.



The Ruby Mountains from the west as depicted from the west. Notice Lamoille Canyon to the left of center that has the “hook” shape.



Lamoille canyon. Notice the “U” shape of the valley – indicative of the impact of a very large glacier that reached into the Lamoille Valley below about 250,000 years ago. The bristlecone pines I mapped are located in a little canyon to the left, near the center edge of the valley.



General Location

## The Hike to the Engelmann Spruces

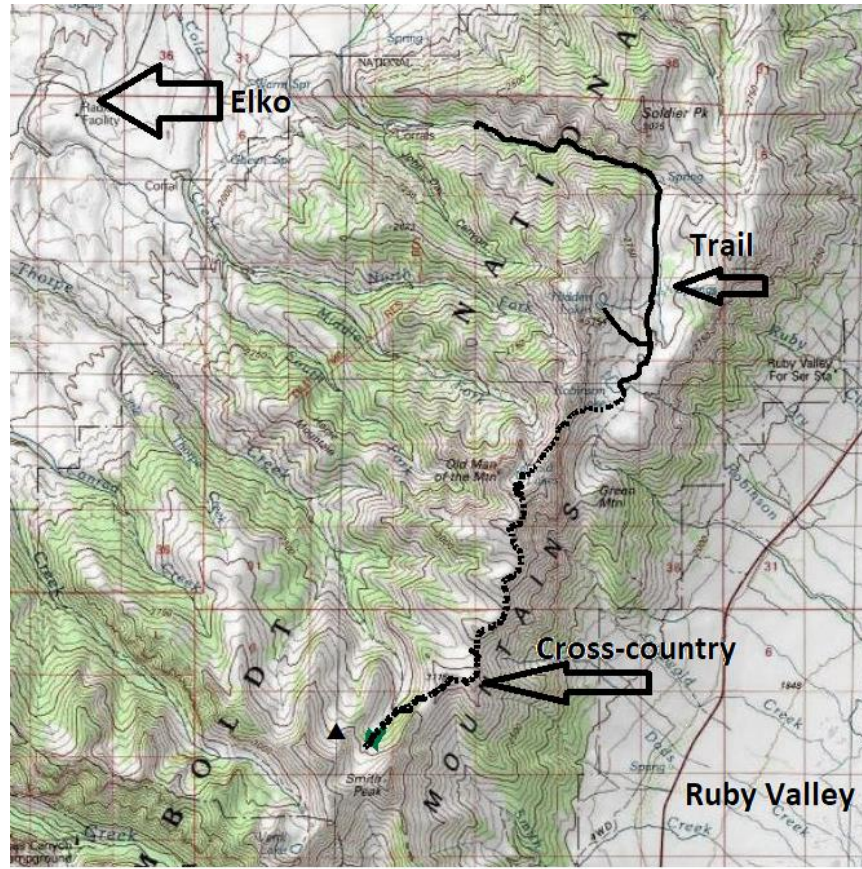
Access to the trail was via the Soldier Creek Trailhead, which was reached from the west via a very long dirt road out of Elko. This took my cousin Pat Grediagin (a former National Park Ranger) and I three days to access the spruces. I had tried another route from Lamoille Canyon the year before, but the cross-county route was too steep for my old legs, and probably too dangerous for a hike by myself. It is notable that we didn't see one person throughout the week-long hike, whether on official trail or cross-country.

The trail up Soldier Creek was brushy with a few junipers. As we got near our first camp at Hidden Lakes (see the little spur off the trail) we spotted a few whitebark pines. I also found many common junipers near the lakes. This juniper is found throughout North America – one of the most widespread trees in North America. Quaking aspen, also found throughout the Rubies, also are very widespread in North America.

We spent some time at Cold Lakes (picture below). I had some of the best fishing in my life at these lakes. They were planted Brook Trout, probably planted a long while ago. The rest of our trip was cross-country over a ridge-line that was fairly flat. The exception was a nearly technical climb south, out of Cold Lakes. We spotted a very white mountain goat along the ridge.

As we approached Thorpe Canyon from the north, we spotted a very green area where we suspected the spruce would be. As we made our way to that area, we found what we were looking for. There were reports of Engelmann spruce near here, but as the map depicts, they were located a mile or so to the west. We hiked along the perimeter of what we perceived to be the boundary of the spruce and "GPSed" them (meaning we located and logged trees using a GPS unit). There were hundreds of trees.

According to David Charlet, a biogeographer, it's hard to say whether these trees are a remnant of a larger population that is shrinking due to natural climate change, or they are new immigrants from other mountain ranges.



Map of Engelmann Spruce Hike



Cold Lakes - On the way to the spruce



The Spruce Forest

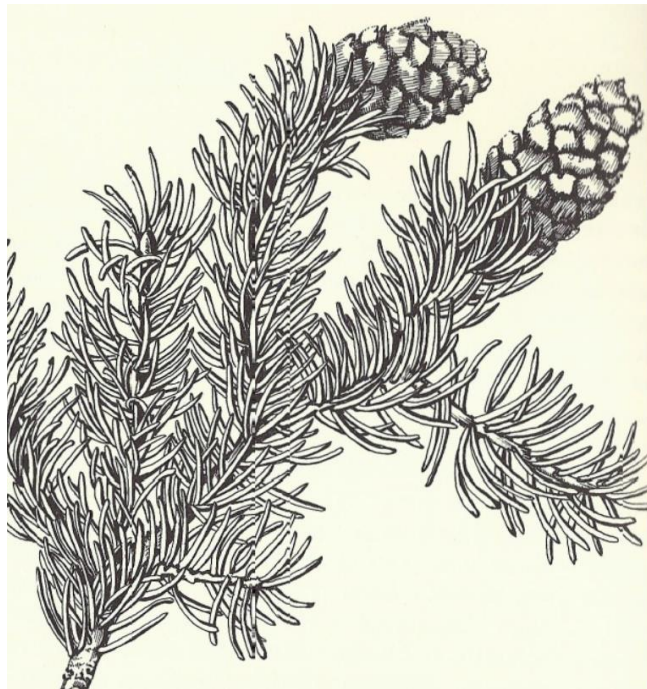
Coming upon Thorpe Canyon from the north



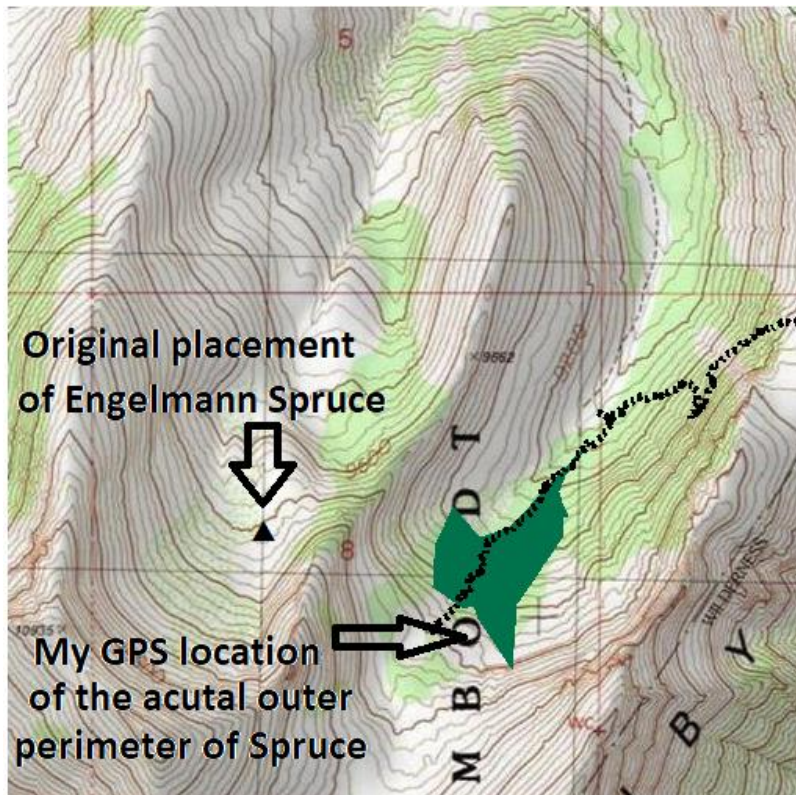
Our camp during a brief dry period within two days or rain



One of the tallest spruces in the area. My cousin shows the relative size of one of the more mature trees. This area was very verdant and wet – quite uncommon for most Nevada mountain ranges.



A drawing of an Engelmann Spruce from *Trees of the Great Basin* by Ronald M. Lanner



A close-up map of the Engelmann Spruce location

I also took a few day trips up the Seitz and Lamoille Canyons. The Seitz canyon was very difficult to get to. In fact I had to get a day pass from the Spring Creek Association (775-753-6295) and then cross-country through tick-infested brush to get up the canyon to GPS the white fir, which are found nowhere else in the Rubies. They were known to be in the canyon, but were not accurately mapped. I mapped all the white firs, and created a “polygon” or perimeter that hopefully included all the trees. They are noted on the map below.



*White fir in Seitz Canyon*

The hunt for the bristlecone pines involved a steep hike up from the road that courses through the Lamoille Canyon. On the way I found a large beaver pond with a very “busy beaver” collecting sticks and logs to shore up his pond and home.



The bristlecone pines were found high on the west slope of Thomas Canyon which drains into Lamoille Creek. The significance of these pines is that they are the most northerly of all bristlecone pines in Nevada. Outside Nevada there apparently are some located in a slightly more northerly latitude in Utah.

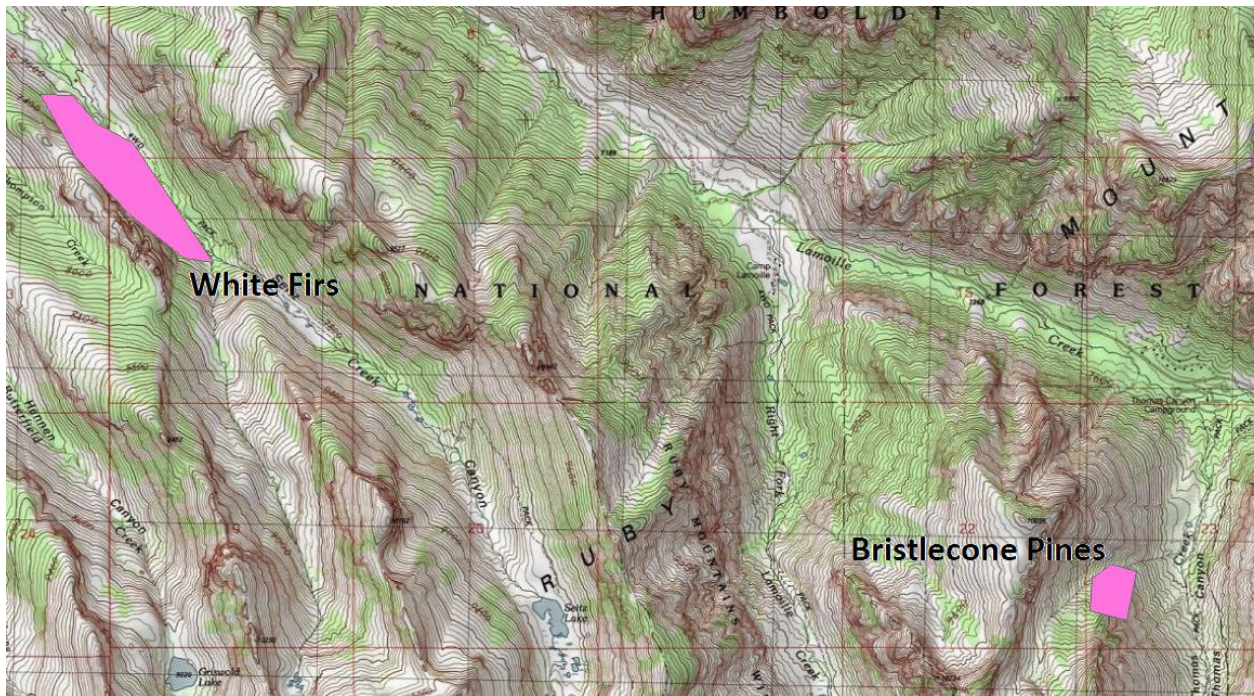


*Close-up of bristlecone pine branch – note the way the needles of five cluster*





*An old bristlecon pine*



My thanks to my cousin, Pat Grediagin, for accompanying me on several trips, including the Ruby Mountains, and offering her expert knowledge on natural history and her expertise in spotting all things wild.

For more information on the Ruby Mountains, please refer to:

<http://rubymountains.net/>