

Wildlife refuge begins process of returning to normal

By Les Zaitz
The Oregonian

BURNS (AP) — Armed guards still block access to the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, but this time they carry badges.

They're officers from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, staffing posts once held by anti-government protesters. But they'll soon be gone, too, as the agency takes steps to return the compound to normal.

On Friday, the scene was relatively still. A pair of geese honked their arrival as they drifted onto the pond nearest the headquarters. Other birds flitted from tree to tree, bush to bush, as the migratory season at the 187,000-acre refuge commences.

But markers of the 41-day takeover endure. Concrete barriers and bundles of railroad ties stand at the refuge entry, a choke point created by the protesters as they tried to control access to the area. A shelter there — a guard shack, really — is now missing its tarp and twisted out of shape.

The stone monument

meant to hold an official government sign announcing the refuge stands empty. The protesters, led by businessman Ammon Bundy of Idaho, had proudly replaced the official sign with a big blue one reading "Harney County Resource Center." No one at the entryway could say where the sign had gone, perhaps squirreled away with other evidence collected in recent weeks by the FBI.

Remnants of "Camp Finicum" — the spot where the final act of the occupation unfolded — still litter a parking area at the edge of the headquarters buildings. The camp was named by the last four occupiers for Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, 54, who was shot and killed by state troopers when he tried to evade arrest on Jan. 26.

As others fled or surrendered, the four were left alone. They cobbled together their own base to withstand demands that they surrender. The holdouts — David Fry, 27, of the Cincinnati area, Jeff Banta, 46, of Elko, Nevada, and Sean Anderson, 47 and his wife, Sandy, 48, of Riggins, Idaho — arranged government pickups and SUVs in a rough

corral, then used tarps and tents for shelter.

After they gave up on Feb. 11, the FBI soon swarmed their post and the rest of the refuge headquarters, gathering evidence for criminal prosecutions facing at least 25 people.

Some of Camp Finicum is gone, but the vehicles remain, as does the tent where Fry apparently retreated in the final moments before leaving only after he heard others shout "Hallelujah" as he wanted. Odds and ends are piled up — a piece of ladder or a ramp, fuel cans, a bench and more.

Next to the camp is what appears to be a long trench, now lined with white tarp by government officials. It apparently was the outhouse for the final four that federal prosecutors mentioned in court filings.

The entire scene got a fresh load of visitors Thursday, when defense attorneys and investigators arrived by bus to survey it for themselves. They toured the buildings and grounds where some of their clients spent January and part of February, insisting the refuge would never again be a

federal compound. The lawyers couldn't touch, but only look and tape.

The visit certainly gave them context to understand what happened out on the Oregon desert 30 mile southeast of Burns, but FBI evidence teams already have identified and removed evidence.

According to a video posted to Facebook, Lisa Bundy also showed up Thursday. She's the wife of Ammon Bundy and said on the video that she had come from her Idaho home to fetch her husband's truck. She said she also wanted to get his clothes, ATVs — and picnic benches. She complained on the video that she had been told she couldn't take the items just yet.

Another sign of normalcy is what's not on Sod House Lane, the two-lane road that leads to the refuge headquarters. There's no more electronic sign at the turn off at State Route 205 warning of arrest to those who ignored the roadblock.

And the heavily armed FBI agents with their imposing BearCats no longer wave traffic to a stop a few miles from the headquarters, where

some turn off Sod House Lane to reach the nonprofit Malheur Field Station.

At the Burns Municipal Airport, there's no sign of the FBI special teams that rotated in from around the country — 46 of the agency's 54 SWAT teams saw duty in Harney County.

And at the Harney County Courthouse, the metal detector at the entrance is gone, as is the fencing that safeguarded police as they worked to end the takeover.

Representatives of the Burns Paiute Tribe are expected to be the next to tour the refuge, planned for Monday. They will particularly be paying attention to what damage might have been done to artifacts and to sacred ground.

Meantime, the Fish & Wildlife Service continues planning how to fully assess the damage, repair it and get the people who manage the expansive refuge back on the job.

But that work is days away.

So quiet reigned over the headquarters, seeming to amplify the sounds of geese and other birds claiming what's theirs.

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