



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

The impact of wildfire on wildlife

The Milli Fire that's been so hard on the breathing and vision for people living in Sisters Country has impacted the wildlife as well.

While no one in the Crossroads subdivision lost their homes to the fire, wildlife in the Milli Fire area have lost everything they need to make a living, with some exceptions. The large animals have fled, of course; deer, elk, bear, coyote, cougar, bobcat and such are equipped to flee when fire destroys their homes. But for some species the conflagration is catastrophic.

The summer feeding grounds for some of the big game animals is gone, and for a long time it will stay gone until green plants begin to thrive. This will have a profound impact on local mule deer, especially, who will spend the cold months in their winter range and begin their normal trek back to the summer range around Black Crater Butte area. However, they will run into a carboniferous forest and burned out understory with little to nothing for them to eat.

This will inevitably disburse them to search for food in other areas, including perhaps, local backyards.

(Please, don't feel sorry and put out food for them, or put up with their plundering. It will not benefit the deer, and in fact spread more disease to go with their unfortunate hunger. Send 'em packin', for the good of all.)

Wildfire also impacts the food of raptors; for instance the great gray owl—the largest owl in North America. They will have a tough time of it, as they're known to nest and forage for prey in higher elevation forests with meadows in them. Although they've returned to the B&B Fire area where prey has become available again, the small mammals they foraged on for food in the Milli Fire are no longer available, and won't be until the burned-over lands turn green again.

There was a time when wildfire was a normal turn of events in summer, and in the long run, good for all. Ponderosa pine thrive in a fire environment, as well as native grasses, wildflowers and shrubs. The land is renewed when fire releases rich nutrients and converts soil to a healthy medium for plants and animals. In most cases, there are greater numbers of wildlife, and a greater variety of species in areas recovering from wildfire.

Today, however, due to a number of factors, wildfires are becoming increasingly larger, more intense and more difficult to manage and control.

When a fire breaks out, wildlife who cannot flee dig down. The three-toad salamander for example — the only salamander on this side of the Cascades — digs down in the same way it searches for invertebrate food. Other species, such as gophers, shrews and ground squirrels,

as well as many insects, also burrow into the soil to escape the heat.

In years past, digging down worked. But with these current, hot, intense fires, ground-dwellers just can't go deep enough to escape the overpowering heat, and they perish. If it's a flash fire that burns fast and cools right down, even most of the insects pupating in the ground will make it, but these hot ones of today that are so big, like the Milli Fire that now is over 22,000 acres, kill smaller forest-dwellers in prodigious numbers.

Animals such as the porcupine can't flee a fire fast enough. Tree voles, flying squirrels and other tree-top dwellers, as well as young in the nest will all perish, if not from the flames, then from predators capturing them on the fire's perimeter.

And then there's the fire retardant used to quench and slow down a forest fire. There was an accidental aerial drop in Whychus Creek during the Milli Fire, but Forest Service fish biologists say it was of little consequence. No USFS or Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife officials questioned were aware of any adverse affects of fire retardant on wildlife.

The only data that appears to be available is a study conducted in Australia using 5,400 pitfall traps for capturing invertebrates that moved in after a fire. Samples taken of 190 specimens concluded that despite the amounts of retardant applied, the retardant did not alter or impact the species themselves.

There's a phenomenon that follows a wildfire that is all on the plus side: the opportunities for woodpeckers to expand their range, increase

reproductive habitat and grow in numbers.

As the smoke of a wildfire begins to permeate the countryside around the fire area, wood-boring beetles recognize an opportunity. They begin to move toward the cooling fire to lay eggs in the dead and dying trees while the wood under the burned bark still has the moisture and nutrients beetle grubs need. Several species of woodpeckers — like the black-backed above — follow them and feast on the invasion.

As the beetles lay their eggs they become food for woodpeckers, but the numbers and species of beetles is overwhelming, and hundreds of millions of beetle and other insect species eggs hatch and burrow into the dead and dying trees, creating more woodpecker food.

In addition, woodpeckers are also hammering out nesting cavities in trees, which become a vital element for a healthy forest. They're not only used by the woodpeckers that created them, but over the years these cavities in the fire-killed trees will become nests and shelter for other birds, such as flammulated owls. "Flams," as they are known to birders and biologists, are moths and beetle-eaters and help rid the forest of pests that can, and do, harm trees. Bats



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Wildfires mean food a-plenty for woodpeckers like this black-backed.

also shelter in the hollows in summer. These occupants are all an asset to protecting the new forest.

After the Black Crater Fire of 2006, some creeks turned dark with carbonized mud. The macroinvertebrates living on the bottom of the creeks suffered as the oxygen levels went down and the debris and carbon levels went up. The salmon that local conservation organizations and agencies have worked so hard to establish in the creeks may also suffer from lack of food and unhealthy water conditions after this current fire.

Salmon conditions in the affected creeks will recover in the Milli Fire area, while wildlife habitat recovery will happen more slowly, but in the long haul — if wildfire does not flare up again — deer and elk will return with cougar following them into what will be healthy and vibrant ecosystems.

The Fly Fisher's Place

COME IN TODAY AND SAVE BIG!

Hats, T-Shirts & Patagonia on Sale!

Open 7 days a week
151 W. Main Ave., Sisters
541-549-FISH • flyfishersplace.com

Quality Truck-mounted CARPET CLEANING

Quality Cleaning 16 years in Sisters!
Reasonable Prices — Credit Cards Accepted —

ENVIROTECH
541-771-5048
Licensed • Bonded • Insured • CCB#181062

RESIDENTIAL • COMMERCIAL

GOLF SPECIALS FOR SENIORS & LOCALS

CALL THE PRO SHOP OR VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR DETAILS

Aspen Lakes

Pro Shop 541-549-4653 | www.aspenlakes.com

Back-To-School Special

\$300 Discount

For the month of September when you start a comprehensive treatment program!

Not valid with any other offer. New Patients Only.

THE BRACE PLACE
Central Oregon Orthodontic Specialists
541-382-0410
410 E. Cascade Ave., Sisters

Smile by Brooke and The Brace Place!

CentralOregonBracePlace.com

All-You-Can-Eat Soup, House Salad & Bread!

Our menu is made from scratch, every day.

We have **AMAZING** specialty salads, too: Cobb, Mandarin Chicken, Steak, Caesar and Quinoa. Our soup of the day changes every day. Breakfast & lunch any time!

Tues.-Sun. 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m.
541-549-6562 • 473 E. Hood Ave.
www.lamagiccafe.com

Breakfast • Lunch • Bakery

La Magie
Vegan & Gluten-free Options Available