

Life in the Valley



The view on Mount Hood on a perfect snowshoeing day.
BOBBIE SNEAD / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

There’s more to see than snow above the timberline

Bobbie Snead
Special to Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Winters at timberline can be brutal. Violent winds, deep snow and shortened daylight hours create a mountain landscape that appears completely devoid of life. It seems impossible for anything to live in these extreme conditions. Careful observation shows that some organisms can subsist in these harsh environs.

I come to the high elevations each year to feel the elemental power of winter and to witness the dauntless timberline inhabitants as they struggle for survival. One of my favorite places to do this is on the snowshoe route at Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood.

The alpine timberline is the elevational limit of tree growth on a mountain. Conditions are too severe for trees to grow above this biological boundary. On Mount Hood, the timberline is at 6,000 feet.

My friends and I are bundled up in multiple layers as we begin our excursion on the marked snowshoe trail. The route skirts a ragged edge of trees. These weary warriors bear many scars of winter battles. Their trunks are stunted and contorted. Cutting blasts of icy air clip their needles on the windward side.

We encounter three kinds of evergreen trees along the snowshoe trail. The first is the whitebark pine. This conifer relies on persistence and flexibility to survive the snowy months. Its branches are so bendable they can be tied in a knot. Uber flexibility allows the whitebark to bend and bow under the extreme weight of clinging snow. Often



Frozen trees at timberline on Mount Hood.

its limbs will be bent clear to the ground and held there all winter. When the spring thaw begins these limbs may take root and produce tiny clones of the original tree.

The subalpine fir handles the snow load differently. It grows as an erect narrow spire. Its stubby limbs are so short they hold very little snow and don’t break.

The elegant mountain hemlock has long limbs that point downward to shed the snow. I look up to the hemlock’s tell-tale droopy top and see that a common raven has been silently monitoring our progress over the snow. It looks down its aquiline beak and fixes me in its gaze. At that moment I come to understand the raven’s dignified intelligence. With a gurgling “quork” it calls to its comrades and flies away to join them.

The snow under a neighboring whitebark pine is littered with the scales of broken pine cones. The ravens have been using their stout beaks to extract

the nutritious seeds from their hard encasements in the cones. High in fat, the seeds are a mainstay of the ravens’ winter diet.

Moving on, we slow our pace to climb a knoll that is topped by a small grove of huddling trees. They seem to be doing a group hug as they shelter and support each other against the elements. A tree island like this usually consists of a mother tree surrounded by her saplings. The young trees grow close to the protective limbs of their parent. The taller tree takes the brunt of winter storm damage and eventually ages out and dies. The dead snag stands in the middle of this family until it finally falls and leaves a hollow center surrounded by a ring of maturing trees.

I maneuver my snowshoes into the center of this conifer circle and contemplate the length to which parents will go to give their offspring a good start.

At the top of the looping snowshoe trail, we turn north on a snowcat track

and make our way up a small valley. In the summer a tiny stream tumbles down this gully. There is no flowing water today. Rising on our left, a steep canyon wall is topped with a narrow overhanging cornice formed by wind-blown snow. These ledges can break off unexpectedly so we keep our distance to avoid being buried in a sudden collapse.

We spot an exposed rock on our right and angle up to it through the deep drifts. It is the perfect lunch spot and provides a commanding view of the White River drainage below us. As we pull lunches from backpacks we notice a flock of at least fifty small brown birds flitting around a tree. The entire tree pulsates with their movements as they work the trunk and branches in search of overwintering insect larvae to eat.

Suddenly the flock flies from the tree as one. Swooping and swirling in unison the birds become a shape shifting cloud as they perform their perfectly synchronized aerial dance from one tree to the next.

From our vantage point I can’t determine their species. So instead of trying to identify exactly what they are, I simply enjoy who they are. These optimistic little creatures go about the business of survival with a determined joyfulness.

Winter lunch breaks are always brief and soon we are up and stomping around to ward off the chill. We head downslope in hopes of seeing the foraging birds again and quickly realize they are nowhere to be found. The trail leads us toward the beckoning Timberline Lodge. Inside the massive lodge, a crackling fire and hot drinks await. I can’t think of a better way to top off this perfect winter outing.

Bobbie Snead is a local naturalist and nature educator who leads more than 50 hikes each year for all ages. She can be reached at naturalist.column@gmail.com.

Stormwater

Continued from Page 1A

pollution runoff from new developments after they are constructed.

The permit was issued on Nov. 30, 2018, and takes effect March 1. The state issued it “after releasing multiple drafts and engaging in extensive public involvement,” DEQ spokeswoman Katherine Benenati said.

It applies to 20 cities and six counties, many of which had been operating under expired permits while the new rules were being developed.

“The new permit contains necessary requirements on these municipalities to control stormwater impacts to water quality,” Benenati said.

DEQ is still reviewing the claims, but likely will move to consolidate the lawsuits, she said.

Municipal separate storm sewer sys-



The rain garden infiltration system at the Starbucks on Commercial St SE is an example of the type of on-site stormwater retention projects that would be required of developers in smaller cities under the new permit.
IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE CITY OF SALEM

tems include streets, catch basins, curbs, gutters and storm drains that discharge, without treatment, to waters of

the state.

They catch rain water that runs off solid surfaces, collecting pollutants such as oil, pesticides, sediment and bacteria, and becoming a major source of pollution.

But the cities say the new requirements would make them responsible for water quality regardless of where the pollution comes from.

“There are many sources of pollution into the (stormwater system) that are beyond Turner’s control, including bacteria from pet, avian, wildlife and illegal camping activities, and other pollutants from atmospheric deposition, and individual applications of fertilizers and pesticides,” Turner’s lawsuit reads.

The six cities have filed petitions for judicial review of the permit, to be followed by actions to stay the permit’s implementation. The petitions also name the state Environmental Quality Commission, and DEQ Director Richard Whitman.

Portland lawyer Casey M. Nokes is representing all six cities. He declined to comment.

David Sawyer, Turner city administrator, canceled an interview with the Statesman Journal on Nokes’ advice.

But in an earlier news release, he said that just one of the new requirements will cost Turner \$40,000 to develop and \$15,000 per year to manage. The city’s stormwater utility has an annual budget of about \$16,000.

“It is Turner’s commitment to work diligently in support of clean water,” Sawyer said. “But we will not support one-size fits all permits that are impractical and unimplementable.”

City managers at the five other other cities said they also had been advised not to speak about the lawsuits.

Contact the reporter at tloew@statesmanjournal.com, 503-399-6779 or follow at [Twitter.com/Tra-cy_Loew](https://twitter.com/Tra-cy_Loew)