

Scouting elk by following wildfire footprints

By Gary Lewis
ForWesCom News Service

When the forecast called for snow, I laced my boots and grabbed the rifle. My friend Charlie was waiting on a forest road. It was the last day of the season, and we had 4 inches of snow.

We parked the Ford at a closed road and worked up into the timber in the fresh powder. A mile in, I found a turned-over mushroom and the tracks of a lone bull.

For most of an hour, we played hide-and-seek with the elk. His tracks told us he turned to listen to elk talk, but he didn't come toward us. Then the wind changed and blew away my chances of turning my elk tag into elk roasts.

According to the numbers, 4 percent of hunters in the Upper Deschutes Unit filled their tags last year. I am in the

96 percent.

I can't help but remember what ODFW biologist Steve Niemela told me once. "In any given year, 95 percent of people are not going to get their elk," he said. "A hunter can do everything right and still not get a bull."

Yep, most years, that's me.

The Cascades bull elk hunt takes in nine units on both sides of the Pacific Crest Trail and parts of three other units. With high percentages of public land, this is at once Oregon's most accessible and lowest percentage elk hunt opportunity.

The Indigo, McKenzie, Rogue, Santiam and Upper Deschutes units produce the most bulls each season.

In the Cascades, the elk are often on a five- to seven-day rotation that can put them 10 miles away from the other end of their home range.

In a seven-day hunt, they may not get back to a pre-scouted spot in time. The chances of tying a tag on a bull diminish if a hunter doesn't work the whole season.

Elk numbers are stable on the east side of the Cascades, according to Corey Heath. As district wildlife biologist in the Bend office, Heath's region includes the Metolius, the Upper Deschutes and the north end of the Fort Rock.

Over the last few years, habitat conditions have improved in some areas. What is habitat improvement? Think wild fire and thinning. We are looking for fires and logging operations three to five years back.

One resource is the GEOMAC wildland fire support website at www.geomac.gov. The GEOMAC site provides information on fires, which can hold clues for the future.

Click up the EcoWest interactive map at <http://vis.eco.west.org/wildfire.html> then zoom in on Oregon. This is where we go back a few years to look at the fires that burned in the Cascades. Slide the toolbar back to 2013, then click on a fire in the Fires List and look for wildfire incidents in your hunt area. Now click on a fire and select the "zoom in to fire" box. This will provide a burn footprint. An animation shows where the fire started and how it spread. Do this for each of the last five years throughout your hunt area.

To find information on thinning, contact the Forest Service and the nearest BLM office and ask for a report on thinning operations in the last three to eight years.

When the canopy is opened up from fires or logging, sunlight hits the ground and

elk groceries sprout up.

We know these truths: Elk don't like people or mountain bikes, trucks or four-wheelers. Elk like grass and other elk. Locate the feed and the security cover and, chances are, there are elk nearby. Find them before the season starts.

The elk hunter should think in terms of shadowing a specific herd.

Before the season, try to isolate a group of animals that might number five cows and a bull and a satellite bull, or 20 cows and a bull and four or five satellite bulls. Dial in to their habits, their feeding areas, their bedding, their rotation cycles and escape routes.

The Cascade hunt lends itself to the family hunts that have largely disappeared throughout much of the rest of the state. Tags are avail-

able over the counter, and the hunter can find a place to camp every season.

With its over-the-counter tags and any-bull harvest, the Cascades draw hunters from all over. Some areas, especially in the Upper Deschutes unit and portions of the Santiam and McKenzie, see a lot of hunting pressure, while other sections see few hunters. The hunt begins Oct. 13 and runs through Oct. 19. Like no other hunt, the Cascades rifle season offers a chance to learn the land and learn the habits of an individual herd. That is the kind of education that pays off in the long run.

— Gary Lewis is the host of "Frontier Unlimited TV" and author of "Fishing Central Oregon," "Fishing Mount Hood Country," "Hunting Oregon" and other titles. Contact Lewis at www.GaryLewisOutdoors.com

BONDING

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Phil, though, had been intrigued by the Elkhorn Crest Trail since he and Cindy moved to Baker County in October 2017.

The couple live along Pine Creek, at the eastern base of the Elkhorns, and Phil had hiked twice up to Pine Creek Reservoir and beyond.

He was impressed by the rugged slopes of Rock Creek Butte, highest summit in the Elkhorns at 9,106 feet, and its slightly lower neighbor, 8,932-foot Elkhorn Peak.

Phil knew from looking at a map that the Elkhorn Crest Trail wound between the two mountains, but he was confounded as to how a hiking trail could have been hacked out of such precipitous terrain.

He also didn't know how long the trail was.

"He found out about 7 o'clock last night," Cindy said with a smile on Tuesday.

The whole thing came together in less than two days.

Initially the Reindls planned to leave one car at the trail's northern terminus near Anthony Lake, and start their hike from the southern end at Marble Creek Pass.

But they didn't realize that the road leading to the pass from Baker Valley can be termed a road only by employing a certain flexibility in definition.

They decided instead to start their trek at Anthony Lake, then hike down the Marble Creek Pass road to meet Cindy, who would park at the site of an abandoned lime quarry where the road transforms, rather suddenly, from gravel to something more resembling a goat path.

They took to the trail at 7 a.m. on Monday, just as dawn was giving way to real daylight.

Phil had hiked the first 3 or 4 miles of the Elkhorn Crest Trail several years ago with his sister, who lives in Eagle, Idaho, so he was somewhat familiar with the route.

The trail, as its name suggests, generally runs near the crest of the Elkhorns. As a result it's unique among long-distance mountain trails in Northeastern Oregon for its lack of elevation changes. The biggest climb by far, for hikers heading south from Anthony Lakes, as the Reindls did, is the first 3 miles as the trail climbs about 1,300 feet to Angell Pass.

That was the last section of the Crest Trail built, in 1984 (see history of the trail in boxed story, at right) and it is laid out so as to avoid any steep ascents.

Both Phil and Andy said the climb was relatively easy.

"They did a real nice job with that trail," Phil said. "It's beautiful country."



Photos by Andy Reindl



Vegetation is taking on the bright colors of fall along the Elkhorn Crest Trail. Above, the trail passes through a patch of alpine fleecflower.

Butte the pair spotted a group of about 20 mountain goats.

They reached Marble Creek Pass at about 7 p.m., almost exactly 12 hours after leaving the trailhead near Anthony Lake.

They had seen a handful of hunters, near Cracker Saddle and near Marble Creek Pass, but no other hikers.

Phil called Cindy to let her know they would be heading down the road.

Cindy said she parked at the quarry, but as dusk became full dark she worried about the two hikers.

She called her cousin, Ray Illingsworth, who lives in Haines. He agreed to drive his four-wheel drive pickup to Marble Creek and take her toward the pass to meet Phil and Andy.

Not long after, Phil had his euphoric moment.

He said he had been feeling "a little queasy" during the descent from the pass, but after drinking some water he felt better.

"It was over my limit by a long ways," Phil said with a

They had their first wildlife sighting — a lone mountain goat billy — near the pass, where the trail was hewn through a notch in the granitic rocks that dominate the northern Elkhorns.

Several miles farther along, where the trail overlooks the headwaters of the North Fork John Day River, a basin scorched during the Sloans Ridge fire in 1996, Andy heard an elk bugling from a thicket of trees that survived the 10,000-acre blaze.

"I was just listening to the wind blowing through my hearing aids," Phil said with a smile.

The pair saw fresh bear tracks in the trail south of Cracker Saddle — but no bear.

They reached the halfway point — at least according to Andy's GPS watch — between 2:30 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Phil, who was a timber feller and is used to long, physically demanding days, said his legs were tiring.

They briefly considered hiking a couple miles back to Cracker Saddle and then following the old road that descends steeply along Cracker Creek to the ghost town of Bourne.

But Phil decided they had hiked too far to abandon their goal.

"I said I'm going to get this done no matter what," he said. "It's been on my bucket list. I was tired but I just wanted to plug along."

As the afternoon progressed and the pair continued south, clouds thickened and a brisk southwest wind began to buffet them.

Phil said they had packed rain clothes and brought a firestarter, hatchet and extra food in case they had to spend the night in the mountains.

Near the saddle between Twin Lakes and Rock Creek

Elkhorn Crest Trail History

This renowned trail was inspired by sheep. Domestic sheep, not bighorns.

A century or more ago, before the federal government started regulating livestock grazing on public lands, tens of thousands of sheep munched grass every summer in the Blue and Wallowa Mountains.

Herders often drove bands of sheep hundreds of miles between summer and winter pastures, and one of those historic routes followed the spine of the Elkhorn Range, which dominates the western skyline from Baker Valley.

This was never one trail, of course — sheep don't as a rule travel in single file — but the traces that those woolly bands left on the land served as a sort of template for what became the Elkhorn Crest Trail.

Today's trail was built in multiple stages over more than 15 years.

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest built the first segments in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The northern end of the trail was near the top of the chairlift at Anthony Lakes Ski Area. The trail ran south for about 17 miles to Pole Creek Ridge northwest of Sumpter.

Forest officials had plans to extend the trail to Marble Creek Pass, but nothing happened for several years.

But then, in 1979, Joaquin "Moose" Stephens, who worked for the Baker Ranger District from 1970 to 1987, nominated the Elkhorn Crest Trail as a national recreation trail.

(Stephens died Jan. 3, 2015, at his home in Baker City.)

Congress added the trail to that list the next year, and in 1981 the Wallowa-Whitman built 7 miles of trail, through some of the most rugged terrain on the whole route, from Pole Creek Ridge south to Marble Creek Pass.

That's still the trail's southern terminus.

But the 1981 construction, though it connected the two trailheads, was not the final chapter in the Elkhorn Crest Trail's story.

Three years later, Wallowa-Whitman officials decided to revamp the northern end of the trail, building 3.3 miles of new trail and moving the trailhead from the top of the ski hill to a parking lot near Anthony Lake. This newest section of the trail meets the old at Dutch Flat Saddle.

The older, original Elkhorn Crest Trail is now known as the Crawfish Basin Trail.

— Jayson Jacoby

reueful smile.

He said his longest one-day hike had been 18 miles when he walked up to Pine Creek Reservoir and beyond to the divide between Pine and Rock creeks.

Phil said he ran several half-marathons, and one full marathon, but he admits he was considerably younger then.

Andy, meanwhile, said he has completed several day hikes exceeding 20 miles.

He was surprised by the relative flatness of the Elk-

horn Crest Trail.

"It's one of the easiest hikes I've been on — except for the distance," he said.

Phil said he's pretty sure he'll never repeat this feat.

"I might do parts," he said. "There are lots of other places I have to check out."

Cindy, who participated in the hike vicariously, said it was "heartwarming watching this very fit young man and his fit father watching out for one another."

"It was an epic thing for this father/son duo."

PICK'N PATCH
We will be OPENING on October 5th!
Where: Corner of Booth Lane and Lower Cove Road
When: Friday and Saturday, 9am-6pm
Sunday: 10am-4pm
Monday-Thursday: By appointment
What you will find:
Small corn maze, several varieties of pumpkins and gourds, straw bales, corn stalks.
If you would like to schedule a school field trip or other event, please call the number listed below.
Like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/PickNPatchFarm
farmkidsatoregonwireless.net
Please call 541-786-2421

Time for a fall clearout?
What you should know about the disposal of household hazardous waste.

What is household hazardous waste?
HHW is anything labeled toxic, flammable, corrosive, reactive or explosive. These materials can threaten family health and the safety of pets and wildlife.

What are some examples of hazardous waste?
Aerosols, Bleach, Drain Cleaners, Metal Polish, Mouthbals, Oven Cleaners, Toilet Bowl Cleaners, Ammonia-based Cleaners, Mercury Thermometers, Wood Polishes, Waxes, Fertilizers, Insecticides, Herbicides, Rodenticides, Spa and Pool Chemicals, Roofing Compounds, Antifreeze, Batteries, Motor Oil, Paint Strippers and Thinners, Gasoline and more.

Where can I safely dispose of my hazardous waste?
La Grande Facility: Open to any resident of the three counties every other Tuesday, 8am-12 noon. By appointment, however, small labeled quantities accepted daily. (541) 963-5459.
Baker City Facility: Open the first Wednesday of each month, 10am-12 noon. By appointment only. (541) 523-2626.
Enterprise Facility: Open the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month 10am-12 noon. By appointment only. (541) 426-3332.

Americans generate 1.6 million tons of HHW per year!
The average home can accumulate as much as 100 pounds of hazardous waste.