

ROADS

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This network of roads is a valuable resource and, it seems to me, a relatively untapped one.

I use the word “resource” with some hesitation. It’s among the words favored by federal land managers — the sort of hedging, general word that started to infest government publications decades ago when bureaucrats began to shun more earthy, but precise, nouns such as trees and grass and rocks.

We’re subjected now to curious substitutes that leave the reader floundering, unsure exactly what sort of vegetation is being managed in a “vegetation management project” and whether a “transportation resource” is a wide gravel road where you can haul a fifth-wheel trailer without slashing pinstripes in its flanks, or a narrow foot-path through the pines.

But roads that aren’t accessible to or often used by motor vehicles certainly qualify as a resource for hikers, mountain



Jayson Jacoby / Baker City Herald

Many roads on national forests in the Blue Mountains are open to hikers and mountain bikers even if they’re closed to, or not accessible by, some motor vehicles.

bikers and horseback riders. And I hope these roads will remain a useful, and used, resource for a long time.

The road where I was almost felled by that stump

is on the west side of the Elkhorns, north of Phillips Reservoir. This area has an extensive allotment of roads, as even a cursory glance at a Forest Service map shows.

The area seems to me a fair representation of the road situation in many other parts of the Blue Mountains — the aforementioned mixture of roads ranging from ones suitable for a family sedan to those that the pines have begun to reclaim since they were blocked by a tank trap or other impediment.

The future of many of these roads is not clear.

The one I walked on recently, and several others nearby, were among those slated to be legally closed to motor vehicles in the Travel Management Plan the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest unveiled in March 2012.

That plan was withdrawn less than a month later, after hundreds of local residents — and Congressman Greg Walden — complained that the plan would have closed too many roads to motor

vehicles.

Since then the issue of motor vehicle access to roads has been superseded by other projects — most notably the Blue Mountain Forest Plan revision. But the matter will return eventually, as Congress mandated that every national forest go through the travel management process.

Some people who advocate for closing roads to motor vehicles aren’t satisfied with a legal ban on access. They also want the Forest Service to “decommission” roads. That entails bringing in heavy equipment to erase, to the extent possible, evidence that the road ever existed by obliterating the roadbed itself and restoring the land’s natural contours.

This strikes me as a waste — and an expensive one at that, given the cost of hiring heavy equipment.

It also would deprive the public — which is to say all of us, the owners of this land — of a way to enjoy the forests.

The vast majority of the hiking trails on the Wallowa-

Whitman are confined to the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Hells Canyon and the Elkhorns. In the Phillips Reservoir area the only designated trails are the paths around the lake itself, and the mile-long path to Indian Rock just north of Highway 7.

But the network of roads serves essentially the same purpose, roads being in essence much wider versions of trails.

I’m not so naïvé as to expect the Forest Service, which struggles to maintain trails, will be able to occasionally clear fallen logs from roads.

But fortunately users often take on that burden — especially on roads that are still accessible to ATVs.

I’ve walked more miles this year on roads than I have on trails, and even the roads that seem to have been all but abandoned are still relatively easy to walk on (notwithstanding the occasional pine stump).

Besides which there’s this bonus — the Forest Service already has detailed maps showing these roads.

OWLS

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If the experimental removal of barred owls improves the spotted owl populations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife may consider killing more owls as part of a larger, long-term management strategy. Enough success has been noted that the experiment already has been extended to August 2021.

“What we’re trying to do is find a way to manage barred owls — not to get rid of them completely — ... so that spotted owls can still survive on the landscape while we look for opportunities to help the spotted owl recover,” said Robin Bown, who leads the agency’s owl experiment.

At the study site, Washington’s Central Cascades, only a few pairs of spotted owls remain and Wiens questions whether they can be saved there. But in Oregon and

“What we’re trying to do is find a way to manage barred owls — not to get rid of them completed — so that spotted owls can still survive on the landscape while we look for opportunities to help the spotted owl recover.”

— Robin Bown, who’s leading an experiment with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that involves killing barred owls, which can outcompete spotted owls for habitat

Northern California, they’re at least more robust, while still dwindling.

“We’re seeing a pattern with removals that the spotted owls that were there when we began are still there, yet the area where we’re not doing removals, they’re vanishing very quickly,” Wiens said.

“But we’re not seeing new spotted owls move into these areas. New owls moving in is really the key sign of success.”

“I certainly don’t see northern spotted owls going extinct completely,” he said, adding that “extinction in this case

sponge at his every step. He sets a digital bird caller on the ground, steps back and waits as the first of several vocalizations penetrates the night, sounding a lot like: “Who? Who? Who cooks for you?”

Barred owls can’t stand intruders in their territory so they will swoop in to chase another owl out. Sometimes, they attack.

Wiens ramps up the pre-recorded calls until he hits one that sounds a lot like screeching monkeys. Somewhere in the darkness comes the muffled call of a male owl. “You hear that?” he says, his headlamp scanning high branches. “He’s way up there.” He plays a few more calls, but the male bird never shows.

That same night, at another remote location, Wiens’ colleague Jordan Hazan has better luck.

Just after midnight, after spending several hours in the

woods, Hazan carries a dead male owl in a white plastic bag into the lab in Corvallis. Inside the tight space, he weighs it, lays it on the counter and spreads the wings to measure its wingspan, revealing streaks of white and dark brown feathers on the bird’s chest.

“They’re beautiful birds. It’s a little sad to have to kill them,” said Hazan, a wildlife technician who took the job in 2015 after spending two years surveying for increasingly scarce spotted owls.

His hands still shake every time he pulls the trigger.

“You’re taught all of your life that owls and raptors are to be protected,” he said. “People ask me how it is killing the owls. As a hunter, it’s fun going out and bagging your ducks and geese. With the owls, you don’t get any kind of pleasure out of it. It’s just something you have to

do.”

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St. Mary's Catholic Church
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City of Elgin Elgin Group (Winter only)
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(Keep it Simple Sister)
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