RECREATION REPORT

Daily bag limit for Snake River chinook drops to 2 starting Saturday

As of Saturday, Oct. 19, the daily bag limit for anglers fishing under an Oregon license in the Snake River will be 2 adult hatchery chinook salmon per day. This is reduced from the earlier allowance of up to 6 hatchery chinook per day.

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission directed the Department of Fish and Wildlife to take the action to reduce catch-and-release mortality of wild salmon in the river.

The fishery remains open to retention of hatchery chinook through previously announced dates or until allowable Endangered Species Act (ESA) impacts for the fishery are reached, whichever comes first.

The chinook regulations are as follows:

• Through Oct. 31, or until further notice, the entire area of the Snake River from the Oregon-Washington border upstream to the deadline below Hells Canyon Dam is open for hatchery chinook.

• Effective Nov. 1 through Nov. 17, or until further notice, the Snake River from Cliff Mountain Rapids (about 1.1 miles downstream of Hells Canyon Dam) upstream to the deadline below Hells Canyon Dam will be open for hatchery chinook.

New Take on Old Roads

The forests of Northeastern Oregon are criss-crossed by roads that are either not open to, or accessible by, certain motorized vehicles. But these routes can make for interesting hike or mountain biking routes

Jayson Jacoby / Baker City Herald

Old roads might not be well-suited to full-size rigs — and in many cases they're blocked by 'tank traps' or other obstacles — but they often make for excellent hiking or mountain biking paths.

The stump of the juvenile ponderosa pine nearly sent me sprawling, but I wasn't particularly perturbed at barely avoiding what might have been a painful tumble.

The pine wasn't much of an obstacle, for one thing.

Had I been paying even slightly closer attention to where I was putting my feet I could have easily bypassed the stump.

And I'm not what anyone would describe as nimble.

(Anyone who's ever watched me walk, anyway, an experience that tends to induce in spectators a kind of grudging admiration that I can get around under my own power.)

But the reason I appreciated rather than resented my innocuous encounter with the little bit that's left of that pine is that it reminded me I was fortunate to have this place to hike.

Moreover, the episode clarified a notion that's been floating about, as it were, on the shoals of my subconscious for some time.

ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

I was walking on a road. It's a road that so far as I could tell hasn't been navigated by a motor vehicle for at least a few years. But it was quite clearly a road — something built to the dimensions required to accommodate log trucks.

And it struck me, not long after the toe of my right shoe struck the stump, that this road is one of dozens that have been built over the decades in the publicly owned forests of Northeastern Oregon.

Many of these roads are open to, and frequently traveled by, motor vehicles.

But a fair number are not. Some have been blocked by gates, and others by "tank traps" — series of ditches that span the road bed. Of the latter group, some are still accessible by ATVs, which, with their tidy dimensions and supple suspensions, can often get through the tank traps that turn back pickup trucks and other highway-legal rigs.

These roads constitute a network of routes that in parts of the region boast more mileage than the trails, where motor vehicles can't legally go.

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Officials killing barred owls hoping to save spotted owls

By Phuong Le
Associated Press

CORVALLIS — As he stood amid the thick old-growth forests in the coastal range of Oregon, Dave Wiens was nervous. Before he trained to shoot his first barred owl, he had never fired a gun.

He eyed the big female owl, her feathers streaked brown and white, perched on a branch at just the right distance. Then he squeezed the trigger and the owl fell to the forest floor, its carcass adding to a running tally of more than 2,400 barred owls killed so far in a controversial experiment by the U.S. government to test whether the northern spotted owl's rapid decline in the Pacific Northwest can be stopped by killing its aggressive East Coast cousin.

Wiens is the son of a well-known ornithologist and grew up fascinated by birds, and his graduate research in owl interactions helped lay the groundwork for this tense moment.

"It's a little distasteful, I think, to go out killing owls to save another owl species," said Wiens, a biologist who still views each shooting as "gut-wrenching" as the first. "Nonetheless, I also feel like from a conservation standpoint, our back was up against the wall. We knew that barred owls were outcompeting spotted owls and their populations were going haywire."

The federal government has been trying for decades to save the northern spotted owl, a native bird that sparked an intense battle over logging across Washington, Oregon and California decades ago.

After the owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1990, earning it a cover on Time Magazine, federal officials halted logging on millions of acres of old-growth forests on federal lands to protect the bird's habitat. But the birds' population continued to decline.

The Triplicate (Crescent City, California

Spotted owl

Meanwhile, researchers, including Wiens, began documenting another threat — larger, more aggressive barred owls competing with spotted owls for food and space and displacing them in some areas.

In almost all ways, the barred owl is the spotted owl's worst enemy: They reproduce more often, have more babies per year and eat the same prey, like squirrels and wood rats. And they now outnumber spotted owls in many areas of the native bird's historic range.

So in a last-ditch effort to see whether they can save spotted owls, federal officials are resorting to killing hundreds of federally protected barred owls.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service experiment, which began in 2015, has raised thorny questions: To what extent can we reverse declines that have unfolded over decades, often due partially to actions by humans? And as climate change continues to shake up the landscape, displacing species and altering how and where plants and animals live and thrive, how should we intervene?

The experimental killing of barred owls raised such moral dilemmas when it first was proposed in 2012 that the Fish and Wildlife Service took the unusual step of hiring an ethicist to help work through whether it was acceptable and could be done humanely.

Just as with other conservation measures that involve killing one creature to save another, the program also prompted litigation and debate.

Federal and state officials, for example, have broken the necks of thousands of cowbirds to save the warbler, a songbird once on the brink of extinction. To preserve salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest and perch and other fish in the Midwest, federal and state agencies kill thousands of large seabirds called double-crested cormorants. And last year, Congress passed a law making it easier for Oregon, Washington, Idaho and American Indian tribes to kill sea lions that gobble imperiled salmon runs in the Columbia River.

The owl experiment is unusual because it involves killing one species of owl to save another owl species — and it may well be the largest killing program involving raptors.

In four small study areas in Washington, Oregon and Northern California, Wiens and his trained team have been picking off invasive barred owls with 12-gauge shotguns to see whether the native birds return to their nesting habitat once their competitors are gone. Small efforts to remove barred owls in British Columbia and northern California already showed promising results.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has a permit to kill up to 3,600 owls and, if the $5 million program works, could decide to expand its efforts.

Wiens, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey, now views his gun as "a research tool" in humankind's attempts to maintain biodiversity and rebalance the forest ecosystem. Because the barred owl has few predators in Northwest forests, he sees his team's role as apex predator, acting as a cap on a population that doesn't have one.

"Humans, by stepping in and taking that role in nature, we may be able to achieve more biodiversity in the environment, rather than just having barred owls take over and wipe out all the prey species," he said.

Marc Bekoff, professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, finds the practice abhorrent and said humans should find another way to help owls.

"There's no way to couch it as a good thing if you're killing one species to save another," Bekoff said.

And Michael Harris, who directs the wildlife law program for Friends of Animals, thinks the government should focus on what humans are doing to the environment and protect habitats rather than scapegoating barred owls.

"Things were put into motion a century ago. We really have to let these things work themselves out," said Harris, whose group unsuccessfully sued to stop the killing and is now contesting an Endangered Species Act provision called an "incidental take" permit that exempts landowners who kill spotted owls during activities considered lawful, such as logging.

"It's going to be very common with climate change," Harris said. "What are we going to do — pick and choose the winners?"

Some see a responsibility to intervene, however, noting that humans are partly to blame for the underlying conditions with activities like logging, which helped lead to the spotted owl's decline. And others just see a no-win situation.

"A decision not to kill the barred owl is a decision to let the spotted owl go extinct," said Bob Sallinger, conservation director with the Audubon Society of Portland. "That's what we have to wrestle with."

Barred owls are native to eastern North America but began moving West at the turn of the 20th century. Scientists believe they migrated to western Canada across the Great Plains in the early 1900s, using forests that popped up as people learned to manage wildfires and planted trees around farms. They arrived in Washington in 1973 and then moved south into Oregon and California.

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