

RECREATION
REPORT

**PRESENTATION
ON HISTORY OF
ELK IN BAKER
COUNTY SET**

The Baker County Historical Society will have a program on the history of elk in the county on Monday, March 2, at 6:30 p.m. at the Crossroads Carnegie Art Center, 2020 Auburn Ave.

The guest speaker will be George Keister, retired wildlife biologist from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Keister was the district biologist for Baker County from 1995 to 2006.

Refreshments will be served. Attendees should use the door to the basement at Crossroads.

**CHANGES
AFFECT BOAT-
ERS ON BROWN-
LEE, OXBOW
RESERVOIRS**

Boaters heading to Brownlee or Oxbow reservoirs in Hells Canyon should be aware of recent changes that will affect access to the water.

Floating barriers have been installed to prevent boats from getting within 600 feet of Brownlee Dam on the upstream side and within 1,000 feet on the downstream side, in Oxbow Reservoir. These restrictions do not limit bank access to either reservoir. The buoys have been installed to improve security and safety around the dam and power plant as Idaho Power complies with federal standards for critical energy infrastructure.

While the reservoir level has been lowered in preparation for spring flood control, the boat launch at the Moonshine Mine Recreation Area near Richland remains available.

**COMMENTS
SOUGHT ON BIG
GAME REGS**

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is asking big game hunters to comment about current hunting seasons through an online forum open through March 3.

The agency has been working for the past several years to streamline hunting regulations.

"Before we start developing proposed changes to 2021 hunting seasons, we want to collect input from Oregon resident hunters on what their current experiences are with these seasons and what changes they would like to see considered," said Nick Myatt, the ODFW watershed manager leading the regulations review.

To comment, go to <https://www.oregon-biggameforum.org/>

Controlling cougars

■ New study casts doubt on use of sport hunting of the big cats to keep predation in check

By Erin Ross

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Most Western states rely on hunters to keep cougar numbers in check. It makes a sort of logical sense: if cougar populations are high, attacks on elk, bighorn sheep and deer should be high. So should attacks on livestock.

But a new study casts doubt on the effectiveness of sport hunting as a means of predator control.

"Apparently, none of the states have ever really thought or cared to see if sport hunting as a management tool is having an impact on the common justifications for the sport," says John Laundré, a biologist at Western Oregon University and the author of the study, which was published in February in the journal PLOS One.

Cougar hunting in Oregon is controversial. Advocacy groups like Predator Defense and Oregon Wild say these big cats are a necessary part of the ecosystem and shouldn't be hunted at all. Hunters, ranchers and some of the people who live in or near cougar habitat say that hunting should be increased because cougars threaten their safety and that of their pets and livestock.

California is the only Western state with a large cougar population that doesn't allow sport hunting. The state euthanizes cougars if they attack livestock, pets or humans, or if they're threatening endangered bighorn sheep. Laundré compared data from California to 10 other western states with similar cougar populations.

Laundré thought that if sport hunting is an effective management tool, hunting-free California should have higher rates of cougar conflicts and lower numbers of prey species like elk and deer. They should also have more cougars.

"That's why we call it 'the



Lion Foundation

A cougar on the prowl. Cougar hunting is controversial in Oregon, and according to recent research, it may not even be an effective wildlife management tool.

elephant in the room.' All of these states know about California, but they refuse to look at the data," Laundré says.

His study found that California had similar cougar densities and rates of attacks on cattle as those in other states. But cougars generally avoid cattle, and prefer smaller animals like sheep. By a long shot, California has the smallest number of sheep attacks. Laundré found that hunting had little-to-no effect on prey animal densities.

California had the third-lowest rate of per-capita attacks on people, with 0.4 attacks per million persons. Montana had the highest, with 7.1 attacks per million people. Many people in California live in urban areas and will never encounter a cougar, so it can also

be helpful to look at the rate of encounters and perceived threats to people or livestock. California, the most populated state with the largest number of people recreating in cougar country, reported an average of 200 incidents per year. Washington reported 578 incidents per year, and Oregon reported 328.

Laundré says that if sport hunting was effective, they would have seen the opposite: more conflicts of these types in California than in states that allow cougar hunting. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife did not comment on the paper or their use of sport-hunting by the time of publishing.

Studies like this one are particularly hard to do. Every state counts cougar populations differently. And states vary in size and habi-

tat type. Laundré estimated the amount of cougar habitat in each state, and used that to figure out how dense the cougar population was.

Much of the data Laundré used came either from the states' fish and wildlife agencies or federal databases. Past studies have shown that some states' population estimates may not be accurate.

"The data isn't great," he said. "But if the states say it's good enough for them to make management decisions like how many animals to kill, then it's good enough to test some of these predictions."

If they disagree with his findings, well, "it's their own data."

Laundré's study is not the first to investigate these ideas, but it is the first to compare cougar manage-

ment across several states. It's particularly challenging, Laundré says, because it's difficult to set up a controlled test. States can't just stop hunting and see what happens or increase hunting and see what happens. But there's one state with fine-enough detail to test the effectiveness of hunting: Washington.

Laundré acknowledges this. He's a frequent critic of the way many states estimate predator and prey populations.

The state of Washington is broken down into small game-management units. A certain number of hunting permits for each game species are allowed per unit, depending on the habitat and how well game management populations are doing.

See *Cougars*/Page 3B



Photo and caption by Jim Ward

The wild turkey breeding season is under way in Northeast Oregon. Toms are breaking from winter bachelor groups and seeking hens. Among birds, turkeys have a unique breeding cycle. The hen's entire clutch of 10 to 12 eggs can all be fertilized from one mating and if her first clutch is lost, her next clutch will still be fertile from the first mating. Good places to see wild turkeys are north of Elgin, along the foothills and fields near Summerville and even in La Grande, at the southern end of Second Street.

Trails Association meeting March 4

ENTERPRISE — The Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association (WMHCTA) will have its annual membership meeting on Wednesday, March 4, at the Toma's Conference Room, 309 S. River St. in Enterprise.

Doors open at 6 p.m. and the meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. The meeting is open to all. Refreshments will be served.

The main purpose of the meeting is to identify and plan trail maintenance and historic site restoration projects in Wallowa, Union and Baker counties for the 2020 season.

The Trails Association, established in 2017, is a group of hikers, horseback riders, packers, mountain bikers, and other outdoor enthusiasts who monitor and help maintain trails in Hells Canyon, the Wallowa Mountains, the Elkhorns, and the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness. The group collaborates with the U.S. Forest Service, universities, and several other agencies and organizations to clear downed trees, cut back brush, and do whatever else is necessary to keep trails open and accessible for the public.

"We keep our focus on getting work done on the ground," Executive Director Rick Bombaci said. "In our three years of operation, we've put in over 5,600 volunteer hours, removed over 1,800 trees, and cleared 240 miles of trail. Folks enjoy getting out, meeting new friends, giving back, and making a difference."

The organization has also made improvements to three historic sites: the Nez Perce Crossing and Chinese Massacre sites (both on the Snake River), and the Lick Creek Guard Station, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"WMHCTA was formed by people in our community who shared a grassroots objective of improving our region's backcountry trails," said Jim Akenson, who has served as the Trails Association's board chair since the group's inception. "We have since grown to a point where other similar-minded trails organizations are contacting us to work together. This coordinated approach will make a monumental difference looking ahead."