

RECREATION
REPORT

**FIVE DEER HUNTS
CANCELED DUE
TO DISEASE IN
WHITE-TAILED
DEER LASTYEAR**

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is canceling five 600 Series deer hunts, meaning hunters will not be able to apply or draw the tag for them for the upcoming fall 2020 season.

The cancellations are in an area of the Blue Mountains from Milton-Freewater to Pilot Rock where an outbreak of Epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) is estimated to have killed 2,000 white-tailed deer late last year. The hunt cancellations for these 227 tags are needed to protect does and allow the white-tailed deer population to rebound.

The hunts cancelled are on private land, where antlerless deer hunting addresses damage to agriculture. The hunt numbers are 649A (N Ukiah), 654A (Rawhide), 655A (Orchards), 655B1 and 655B2 (Walla Walla Valley No. 1 and No. 2). While some of the bag limits for these hunts allow an antlerless mule deer or white-tail to be harvested, most of the harvest is white-tailed deer in these hunts.

These hunts will no longer be available for application through ODFW's licensing system. ODFW License Sales Service staff will be contacting hunters who have already applied for these hunts and asking them to adjust their application through their online account (applications can be edited online under Recreational Portfolio/Controlled Hunts; see how-to online).

While EHD typically does not have long-term impacts on white-tailed deer populations, cancellation of these hunts should help the population rebound faster.

**ODOT ALLOCATES
MONEY TO PLOW
SNO-PARKS**

The Oregon Department of Transportation allocated an extra \$11,910 recently to plow snow from three sno-parks — Catherine Creek, Clear Creek (north of Halfway) and Salt Creek Summit.

ODOT initially budgeted \$34,500 for the three sno-parks, but higher-than-average snowfall necessitated the additional money.

ODOT partners with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and local contractors to keep the sno-parks accessible. The money comes from the sale of sno-park passes, required to park at the sites.

EARLY SEASON HIKING



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A Wallowa Mountains vista from the Virtue Flat OHV Area east of Baker City includes Red Mountain (red arrow), the highest peak in Baker County at 9,555 feet.

SCRATCHING A SPRING ITCH

I was driving through the sage, hoping to find a mild spring breeze and the early buttercup, when I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw a cloud of dust roiling in my wake.

In summer this would be a gritty, cornea-scratching annoyance.

But on the cusp of spring, I take the dust as a promising omen — a sign that I might get in some miles without having to lug around a couple pounds of mud on each boot.

This purgatorial period, with the snow receding and the temperature on some afternoons flirting with 60, can frustrate hikers.

We yearn to tromp around without having to lace up heavy winter boots and, like as not, snowshoes or skis.

Yet the mountain trails, no matter how warmly the sun falls across the face, will remain snowbound for months.

Hells Canyon, the lowest place around here, beckons with its promise of snow-free slopes. But the great canyon of the Snake River is too far from my home in Baker City for a quick jaunt.

Not so with Virtue Flat.

This 5,000-acre swath of public land is just a 10-minute drive from Baker City — maybe 15 if, as I typically do, you go to the eastern end of the area.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Expanses of sagebrush and grass predominate in the Virtue Flat OHV Area.



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

Virtue Flat is best known as a playground for off-highway vehicles. The area, which is overseen by the BLM, has a network of more than 30 miles of signed roads and trails, ranging from relatively smooth two-tracks to narrow, boulder-strewn dry washes where drivers like to challenge their purpose-built rock-crawling rigs.

But Virtue Flat is also open to hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders.

It's my favorite spot early in the season not only due to its proximity, but also because I relish the scent of sun-warmed sage after months marked by frigid winds and frequent snow flurries.

The herbaceous harbingers of spring — buttercups and grass widows and desert parsley, among others — also tend to blossom earlier at Virtue Flat than in most other places nearby.

But sometimes I'm overea-ger, lured into the sagelands by a particularly balmy day, only to find the ground still squishy with the remnants of winter frost.

Virtue Flat is no place for hiking during the thaw. The saturated desert soil makes a type of mud that clings with a tenacity that would impress the chemists who create powerful glues.

This glutinous interlude, fortunately, tends to be brief,

spanning perhaps a few weeks after the last snowdrift has surrendered its moisture to the ground.

As I drove along Ruckles Creek Road on a recent morning, the southern boundary of Virtue Flat, the dust cloud behind me suggested that the ground was likely to be dry enough for hiking.

And generally speaking that was the case.

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Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Mountains rise in every direction from Virtue Flat. To the southeast the snowy slopes of Little Lookout Mountain, which tops out at 6,676 feet, dominate the view.

Chow Time



Photo and caption by Jim Ward

Ron Coleman, with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, fills a deer feeder at the Elkhorn Wildlife Area west of Baker City. A specially formulated, high-protein pellet is offered to mule deer coming to the feeding sites. As with most areas of the West, mule deer numbers are down on the Wildlife Area, from over 1,000 animals in the mid-1980s to 250 animals currently.