

High Above The Hawks

■ Spring bear hunting in the ancestral land of the Nez Perce

Here in the breaks of the Snake and the Imnaha, they passed down their knowledge of the land and the animals in oral histories illuminated by the orange glow of 10,000 fires. The Nez Perce called it the “land of winding waters.” The names of the old ones are written on the land: Sacajawea Peak, Joseph and Ollokot campgrounds. Chesnimnus means “hawthorn encampment” and Imnaha means “land ruled by the Chief Imna.” On a point of a west-facing ridge, exposed to the winds and the rains, a redoubt was built on the edge of the cliff,



ON THE TRAIL
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leaning almost like a figure-head from the bow of a ship. Formed with rocks, carefully fitted together to conceal a hunter and protect him from the elements, it was encrusted with the lichen that had grown around it over decades or centuries. Bryan pointed out where the hunter had gathered the rocks he had used to construct the one-man fort. We wondered what game or enemies he had spotted in the canyon below — sheep and elk certainly.



A sow and a cub spotted on the first afternoon of a spring bear hunt.



Bryan Murphy hunting bear in the Snake River Unit with the arrowleaf balsamroot in bloom.

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For us this was a bear hunt. In the next canyon, our partners Lee and Matt were at work with a FoxPro call. Fifty-two minutes into the distressed fawn wail, a coyote came bouncing in, Lee said later, “Like it was floating along the tops of the bushes.” They let it pass and then saw the bear. “We could see it every now and then, steadily coming on,” he said. “And we were ready to shoot when we heard an ATV. As soon as the bear heard the vehicle, it swapped ends and headed the other direction.” A hunter on a yellow ATV, on a road closed to vehicle

travel, had blundered right into their setup. Those are the chances one takes on public land. Rain, wind and fog forced our group back down the mountain. That evening, we employed the FoxPro call and after 43 minutes, a cinnamon-colored black bear stalked out of the tree line across the canyon, sniffed the air, caught our scent and bolted into the bushes and back up the creek. We hunted the last day on a hillside so steep I had to brace my seat and heels with rocks to keep from sliding down the mountain.

We would leave the canyons of the Snake and Imnaha without a bear that spring but we took with us the memory of the hawks that soared above and below us, riding afternoon thermals. We would remember the arrowleaf, the Indian paintbrush, purple asters and trilliums, splashes of color. We would remember how, for a few minutes, the clouds parted and the sun warmed the green grass. This is spring bear hunting at its finest. And when we look, we see the signs left by ancient hunters who saw these canyons the same way we see them.

CALLING BLACK BEAR

One of the most thrilling ways to hunt black bears in the spring is to call them with a predator call. When a stalk stalls because the hunter has run out of cover, a call can attract the



A hunter glasses for bear in a narrow canyon.

bear’s attention and bring the animal within range. The drawback to a mouth call in this situation is that the bear will pinpoint the sound and come in head-on, looking for food and a fight. An electronic call, if it can be put into play with a minimum of trouble, can be positioned away from the hunter to allow for a crossing or a broadside shot. The predator call — elk calf bleats, fawn bawls, deer distress — heightens the bear’s awareness and raises the stakes. If there’s one thing a hungry bear wants more than anything else, it’s an easy meal. And it is used to taking food away from smaller predators. But bears are easily distracted. On the way in, it may stumble across something else it

wants to eat. Keep the sound rolling to keep the bear on the move. Give the bear time, up to an hour or more. Keep the wind in your favor and confidence high. Commit to spending at least an hour at each call set. Everything changes when the call is used. The bear may turn aggressive, go passive, be curious or turn tail, depending on his hunger and place in the local bear hierarchy. But calling works often enough that it is a viable option that can bring a bear into bow or handgun range.

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Camping fees increasing at some Oregon state parks

EO Media Group

Overnight camping fees for electric and full hookup sites will increase by \$3 at more than a dozen Oregon state parks starting May 28, including Wallowa Lake State Park. Nightly camping fees will range from \$24 to \$35 for electric sites and \$26 to \$38 for full hookup sites. The increased fees will be in effect through Sept. 6. Although officials from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department project revenue from the Oregon Lottery and park visitor fees will be down by more than \$20 million when the state’s two-year budget period ends June

30, almost all state parks are open, or will open this spring. “None of us imagined this time last year that we would face a more than two-month shutdown of Oregon state parks and then reopen under pandemic and safety precautions, followed by last September’s wildfires that damaged our local communities and several state parks,” said Lisa Sumption, director of the parks department. “Our park staff, operating with fewer employees because of a revenue shortfall that prevented us from hiring our usual seasonal staff, have rallied and are looking forward to the coming months.”



Overnight camping fees will increase by \$3 at some sites at Wallowa Lake State Park starting May 28 and continuing through Sept. 6.