

# ELK

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## Keen instincts

Even a nasty winter, the sort that can kill hundreds of mule deer across Northeastern Oregon, typically takes only a minor toll on elk.

ODFW started the Elkhorn Wildlife Area in 1971 for a very different purpose — to stop elk from marauding cattle ranchers' haystacks in the Baker, North Powder and Bowen valleys. The idea, which has proven largely effective over the past half century, is to set up feeding stations where daily distributions of alfalfa will, in effect, intercept the elk, satisfying their hunger and discouraging them from migrating into the valleys.

During the ensuing decades, Marvin said, the elk have become habituated to these seasonal offerings, their instincts so keen that their arrival, as the calendar turns from November to December, is quite reliable.

"The cows every year bring their calves here, and they learn, and then they bring their calves," Marvin said.

Although the elk know when December comes, they don't always wait until then, Marvin said. In years when snow comes early — 2020 was an example, with a couple feet of snow accumulating in the mountains the first half of November — elk will wander into some of the feed sites.

"Acting like they're going to starve to death," Marvin said with a chuckle during a 2020 interview.

But ODFW doesn't start bucking hay bales before Dec. 1, early snow or no. The reason, Marvin said, is that the Elkhorn Wildlife Area remains open to the public, including hunters, through Nov. 30, and he doesn't want to, in effect, set up bait stations where elk would congregate.

Typically, as was the case last year, early snow melts and the elk return to the mountains, waiting for Dec. 1.

## Elk numbers

This fall was quite different, with little snow until this past weekend. Nonetheless, about 150 to 170 elk arrived at the Anthony Creek feeding



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Rocky Mountain elk congregate at a feeding site in a meadow along Anthony Creek on Sunday, Dec. 12, 2021. This site, about 10 miles west of North Powder, is one of the 10 sites that comprise the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Elkhorn Wildlife Area.

## ELK VIEWING AT FEEDING SITES

During mid-winter, the Elkhorn Wildlife Area crew feeds more than 1,000 elk, including about 500 at the Old Auburn Lane site and 250 or so at Anthony Creek. A few of the feed sites also attract deer. The Auburn and Anthony Creek sites are the two publicly accessible properties with maintained roads where people can park and watch the big herds of elk, which usually include multiple mature, branch-antlered bulls.

To get to the Auburn site, drive south of Baker City on Highway 7 for about 7 miles, and turn right on Old Auburn Lane. Follow this gravel road (maintained in winter) for about 3.5 miles where a sign marks the Wildlife Area. The elk are fed on a knoll south of the road.

Earlier this year, crews pruned many of the ponderosa pine trees near the road, improving the view to the feeding site, said Dan Marvin, manager of the Elkhorn Wildlife Area.

To reach the Anthony Creek site, from North Powder drive west on River Lane for about 8.5 miles. The elk are fed in a meadow south of the road. You can also reach River Lane via Haines and the Anthony Lakes Highway.

site Dec. 1, and they've been showing up daily since, Marvin said.

Elk numbers have been much lower at the other sites, however. That's pretty typical, Marvin said, even though the Wildlife Area crew set out hay at each of the sites on Dec. 1.

The elk that congregate at Anthony Creek tend to be the most consistent when it comes to the Dec. 1 arrival, Marvin said.

"They're very habituated elk," he said.

Elk that migrate to the other feeding sites, by contrast, often don't show up in large numbers until snow begins to pile up.

With the first major winter storm of the season bringing heavy snow to the Elkhorns this past weekend, Marvin said he expects the elk numbers will rise at all the sites soon.

"Peak numbers are usually in January when it's the coldest and the snow tends to get the deepest," Marvin said.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande's Landon Perry wrestles with Pendleton's Owen Golter, left, at the Mullenburg tournament hosted at La Grande High School on Saturday, Dec. 10, 2021. The teams will be in the same league starting next fall with Pendleton dropping down to Class 4A in OSAA's latest redistricting decision.

# OSAA

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Pendleton is one of a handful of local teams the redistricting affects.

In addition to Mac-Hi moving to 3A, Irrigon will drop down to the 2A Blue Mountain Conference, and Pilot Rock will drop to the 1A Old Oregon League with Griswold and Nixyaawii.

The Mac-Hi, Irrigon and Pilot Rock moves benefit the schools, which have recently seen decreases in enrollment.

Schools at the 3A level will have an enrollment of 146-310 in grades 9-11, while 2A is 75-145, and 1A is fewer than 74 students.

At the 4A level, enrollment is 311-607. Pendleton will be one of the largest schools in the division with an enrollment of 588 — bigger than any school in the Greater Oregon League by more than 100 students. Only St. Helens and Crook County have a higher enrollment.

While travel will be reduced for Pendleton, the hunt for nonleague games begins now.

The GOL athletic

directors will meet in Baker City on Thursday, Dec. 16, to discuss standard operating procedures, schedules and the like.

"We are hitting the ground running," Somnis said. "For us, it has been a long, long time since we have been connected to these schools. In 5A and 6A we have scheduling meetings. It's a collaborative effort. I'm not sure how it is in 4A. Being at a small school before, it was a free-for-all. In the past, we haven't played 3A schools. It's a different world we are stepping into."

Goodman and Gonzales know the challenges of scheduling nonleague games, which can be upward of 14 games or more for basketball, volleyball, soccer, baseball and softball.

"We have to work hard for those games," Goodman said. "If you have teams that are good, it's easier to get those games. Sometimes people don't want to travel that far. Some are good about hosting a game and coming here the next time. It can be

challenging."

Gonzales said Pendleton could help open up avenues for new non-league opponents.

"If they can open us up to some new travel destinations, that would be great," he said.

Adding Pendleton to the GOL has benefits, according to Goodman.

"You want your teams to be prepared to go into the playoffs," Goodman said. "You want to challenge them so they will be ready. We have always had a little rivalry with Pendleton. Instead of friendly rivalries, now they mean something."

Gonzales said he likes that Pendleton can offer junior varsity and freshman teams to play, and they have swimming, which adds another team to their league.

"On the competitive level, we match up well," he said. "It will be good for the region. They were very competitive in baseball and softball, and they are a good 5A football team. I think they will continue to dominate at that. Baker is going to have to step up their game."

# CRIME

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social issues in the span of my career than we've ever had."

Strope explained that Bell and Spence engage regularly with the League of Oregon Cities to gather input and feedback from other cities that have similar issues. Grigg also detailed future plans within CHD to increase resources for mental health issues that are believed to be a large cause of homelessness and drug abuse.

"I think we're at a stage now in our society where we need a behavioral response in the community," Grigg said.

Bell voiced concern that the city has a number of resources available, but some individuals are not prone to accepting the help.

"We try to get people to utilize resources that are available to better their situations," he said. "The facts are that sometimes the people we communicate with don't want the help."

The city officials and business owners on hand mutually emphasized a need for continued communication. Bell said people should call the police department if they feel unsafe at any time and report any issues downtown.



Bishop



Grigg



Spence



Strope



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

The school district's latest weekly statistics show that five students missed school during the week of Dec. 6-10 because of positive COVID-19 tests, COVID-19 symptoms or close contact with those who have COVID-19. This is down 44% from the week of Nov. 29-Dec. 3 when nine students missed school because of the virus.

# COVID-19 numbers in La Grande School District continue to fall

## Just one positive case of COVID-19 reported in LG School District last week

By DICK MASON

The Observer

LA GRANDE — The La Grande School District's COVID-19 infection rate remains in single digits and is dropping.

The school district's latest weekly statistics show that five students missed school during the week of Dec. 6-10 because of positive COVID-19 tests, COVID-19 symptoms or close contact with those who have COVID-19. This is down 44% from the week of Nov. 29-Dec. 3 when nine students missed school because of the virus.

The number is even more impressive considering that the week of Dec. 6-10 had five school days, while the week before had only four class days.

The school district's recent COVID-19 numbers are down dramatically from the week of Oct. 11-15 when 57 students were out because of COVID-19, and a far cry from mid-September when 123 students and staff were out during one week.

The school district's Nov. 29-Dec. 3 statistics indicate that no staff members were absent during the week due to positive COVID-19 tests, symptoms of the virus or close contact with someone

who has it. This marks the ninth week in a row the La Grande School District did not have any staff out due to COVID-19.

The district's latest statistics, based on reports to school district nurses, show that one La Grande Middle School student was out the week of Dec. 6-10 due to testing positive for COVID-19.

Four students — two from La Grande High School and one each from Island City Elementary School and La Grande Middle School — missed class because of close contact to an individual who had tested positive for COVID-19.

The total of five students out due to COVID-19 for the week of Dec. 6-10 tied the previous low for the school year, a mark set Nov. 22-23. The total for Dec. 6-10 was arguably lower, though, because it was for a five-day week.

La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza credits the declining numbers primarily to COVID-19 risk mitigation strategies being followed by students, staff, parents and the community.

"What they are doing is helping us keep our schools open and operating," he said.

Mendoza said he is hopeful the school district's low infection rate will result in the state later deciding to let school districts in low-risk categories, as La Grande is, be able to make masks optional.

"I would like to see the wearing of masks be a personal choice," said Mendoza, who said he will encourage the state to move in that direction.

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