

AHEAD

Continued from Page A1

faced several roadblocks related to the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain issues. However, the Liberty Theatre Board has remained meticulous in getting every small detail of the theater renovation correct.

“So much thought goes into the design, to not just have an absolutely beautiful theater that we can all be proud of, but also one that is historically accurate,” O’Toole said. “We want patrons to walk in the theater and really feel like they’re stepping back into the 1930s and 1940s.”

Also trending up in Union County is the Buffalo Peak Golf Course, which was named facility of the year by the Oregon Golf Association this past October. The course experienced financial difficulties early on after its construction in 2000 but has seen a major resurgence in the past year under general manager Dana Londin and the staff.

Beverage stated that Buffalo Peak will be part of the brochure to promote businesses in Union County in March of 2022.

“That’s exciting, working together to promote businesses in Union County, especially our golf course, which is a huge draw to the region,” she said.

Improvements continue

A similar attraction in the sports world will be a large draw for La Grande in 2022. The newly renovated turf field at Pioneer Park will provide a pre-

mier baseball and softball facility in La Grande and improve local teams’ ability to practice and compete in the years to come.

The project involved the efforts of the city, La Grande High School and Eastern Oregon University, while numerous local businesses and contractors made major contributions. The new facility opens the door for tournaments and local tourism as the fields will serve as one of the top facilities on the east side of Oregon.

“I’m just excited to see the kids on the field and for the grass to fully grow in the outfield,” La Grande Parks and Recreation Director Stu Spence said. “I’m excited to have fields that will be durable for a number of teams to play on.”

According to Spence, the parks and recreation department is planning to bring back the Moonlight Tournament, an all-night adult softball tournament. And, with the improved fields, the department plans to host similar tournaments.

While many things have changed in the past year and local facilities are looking to keep improving in the future, the La Grande Police Department is aiming to maintain a similar standard.

“For 2022, the La Grande Police Department is looking forward to serving our community in the coming year and we are hopeful that all of our community members will have a safe and healthy new year,” La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell said.



Bell



Beverage

BIGHORNS

Continued from Page A1

horns in the Lookout Mountain unit. A survey in late 2020 showed about 250 sheep.

Ratliff said he expected about 225 in this year’s count, so he was somewhat pleased by the total of 274 animals. About 62% of the bighorns, however, were distributed among several large groups in one canyon in the south part of the unit. Ratliff didn’t see any lambs in that area.

He said that’s strong evidence that the bacteria, which sheep can easily spread among themselves, is still present in those larger groups and likely killed all of this year’s lambs.

“In the smaller subgroups there’s less chance of lambs being infected,” Ratliff said. Biologists were initially optimistic in 2020, with no dead lambs found as of mid-June. They knew, from earlier testing, that lambs aren’t infected by their mothers prior to birth.

But later in summer 2020, as ewes and lambs started to congregate in larger “nursery” groups, lambs started to sicken and die.

Finding the ‘shedders’

The key to saving the Lookout Mountain herd — and the smaller herd of California bighorns, a smaller subspecies, in the Burnt River Canyon south of I-84 — is finding the sheep that are chronic “shedders” of the bacteria that causes potentially fatal pneumonia, Ratliff said.

COSTLY CAMPAIGN

BAKER CITY — Trapping, testing and attaching GPS collars to bighorn sheep in some of Baker County’s most rugged country is a time-consuming, and expensive, endeavor. Brian Ratliff, wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Baker City office, said the agency has benefited from financial assistance from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as technical assistance from the Tribes’ biologists. The Tribes have contributed \$32,000 from their own budget, and also received a federal grant for \$183,000.

Ratliff said the Oregon chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep contributed \$10,000, and the foundation’s national office allocated \$50,000 for a three-state bighorn sheep project that includes Washington and Idaho. The Bureau of Land Management, which oversees much of the land that both the Lookout Mountain and Burnt River Canyon bighorn herds use, recently contributed \$20,000. And ODFW has spent more than \$125,000 so far on the campaign, Ratliff said.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald

That’s the focus of a multi-agency effort that started in 2020 and likely will continue for several years.

This campaign relies heavily on temporarily capturing bighorns, testing them for the bacteria, and fitting them with GPS tracking collars.

Chronic shedders often don’t get sick, but they can quickly spread the bacteria to other sheep that lack high levels of immunity, Ratliff said.

Ewes that are chronic shedders are especially problematic because they mingle with other ewes, and lambs, more often than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams much of the year.

Lambs are especially vulnerable, as the nearly wholesale loss of the youngest animals the past two years attests.

Last fall, ODFW, with financial aid from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as the Oregon and national chapters of the Foun-

ation for North American Wild Sheep, captured 25 bighorns from the Lookout Mountain herd. Although all 25 of those sheep had antibodies in their blood showing they had been infected with the bacteria, just four of the 25 were shedding bacteria at that time, Ratliff said.

Biologists fitted all those sheep with tracking collars so they can be captured again and retested.

‘We’ve just got to figure out who it is’

So far this fall, ODFW has captured, tested and collared 14 more sheep from Lookout Mountain.

None was a chronic shedder, Ratliff said, although test results from two of the bighorns were inconclusive, so it’s not clear whether they are shedders or not. One of the 14, a ewe, was a chronic shedder identified in 2020, but was not shedding this fall.

Sheep that are trapped twice and are chronically shedding both times will be

euthanized, Ratliff said.

So far, ODFW hasn’t euthanized any bighorns from Lookout Mountain since none has twice been identified as a chronic shedder.

Ratliff said it’s possible that the herd could recover from the outbreak by virtue of the chronic shedders dying naturally. Over time, more sheep are likely to gain immunity from a previous exposure to the bacteria, as well.

On the other hand, just a few chronic shedders could potentially keep the bacteria circulating within the herd, and decimating each year’s crop of lambs.

“We’ve just got to figure out who it is,” Ratliff said.

To maintain the herd population requires a minimum of 20 lambs per 100 ewes, he said.

The average ratio for the Lookout Mountain herd is 38 lambs per 100 ewes, and the number has ranged from a high of 67 per 100 to a low of 24.

Ratliff said he expects to see a typical crop of lambs born in the Lookout Mountain herd late in the coming spring.

During the aerial survey this month, he said he didn’t see any evidence of sick sheep — bighorns that develop pneumonia from the bacteria typically cough and stumble. And based on 2020 and 2021, it doesn’t appear that the bacteria is affecting the reproductive capacity of the herd.

Ratliff said biologists don’t know how the Lookout Mountain herd was initially infected with the bacteria.

VACCINE

Continued from Page A1

about 1 in 5 urban Oregonians. Of the rural people who haven’t gotten shots, 74% say they’ll never do it, compared to 69% of urban people who aren’t vaccinated. The difference is right on the edge of the margin of error for the

urban-rural analysis, so it’s not entirely clear how significant the result is.

“It will be vital to continue finding ways to persuade, entice, and encourage residents everywhere, particularly rural Oregonians, to get vaccinated,” the researchers wrote.

The most reliable indicator of whether someone has received a shot, per

Clark’s analysis, is their level of education — more so even than their income or location. The higher a survey respondent’s education level, the more likely they were to say they’ve been vaccinated, Clark found.

A regular course of shots substantially reduces the risk of severe illness and death, research shows. Booster shots, meanwhile, reduce

the risk of infection overall, which is why Oregon health officials have asked 1 million more Oregonians to get boosted by the end of January.

As of Dec. 23, 1 in 4 Oregonians — about 1.1 million people — had received boosters, according to Oregon Health Authority data. Just over 71% have received at least one shot.

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