

Outdoor Rec & Sports

What happened to all the rabbits?



THE OUTDOOR COLUMN
By Steve Culley

I started seeing dead rabbits on the highway between Richland and Baker this year.

Not many, but a few. I even saw a jackrabbit or two during the daytime.

I suppose that doesn't seem like something of note to anyone who can't remember the sixties.

But really, back in the day, jack rabbits and cottontails were part of every country boy's existence.

If you felt boredom coming on, a .22 and some sagebrush was the cure. Especially in winter with snow on the ground was the best of times.

You had better take

more than one box of shells because it was common to see many hundreds of rabbits moving through the sagebrush flats and up the draws.

Most older people will tell you that cotton tail was often on the menu.

This was mostly a winter-time thing since it was believed that they had less fleas at that time.

Thanksgiving Day usually had a cottontail hunt for the Culley boys.

I think mom was glad to get us out of the way during the morning while she cooked Thanksgiving Day dinner.

One of my earliest memories was of my dad cleaning cottontails with a couple of his brothers.

I can remember him saying that they hunted around Love Reservoir and had 99 rabbits, but the last one kicked down a hole and they couldn't get it and

make an even hundred.

It would absolutely scare the socks off the new bunch of law enforcement people and the Portland liberal, but as kids in our teens we would drive around the alfalfa fields on winter nights and shoot boxes of .22 shells as we spotlighted the waves of rabbits that came in from the sagebrush.

Kids running free with firearms, after dark! My God! We need to ban that practice.

A month or so ago I was coming back from La Grande and stopped at the rest area just north of Culley Lane.

I was looking over the old homestead and started having a conversation with guy who was walking his little dog.

I told him: It was on a sagebrush, right here, in 1956 or 1957. Wasn't any freeway and an old dirt road wound its way across that flat down there up to that spring over there that we used to call the Jenkins' place. My dad was mowing some alfalfa and I had my .22. As the mowed part grew and the standing hay got smaller scores of cottontails were trapped.

I shot a lot of shots and I think I got a few. I remember being there when mom and dad strung some barbed wire and there were sage-grouse chicks flying up, but that is another story.

So what happened to the rabbits? I returned from Viet Nam and Okinawa in the fall of 1967. It wasn't too long after that, maybe the next summer that I was out in the hills with my .22 and started seeing rabbits that were sick. I shot a couple that had big sores.

They died off and you never saw rabbits for quite awhile.

In previous years they would die off and then come back. The local wisdom was that they ran in seven-year cycles.

That has been interrupted since the 70s. That is why I mention the fact that I see dead rabbits while crossing Virtue Flat. Not many, not the dozen that would be on the highway every morning in the rabbit glory days—but a few. A comeback?

So why is this important? It was during the rabbit years that we had the deer years. Anybody who grew up in eastern

Oregon in the 60s remembers what real deer hunting was.

I haven't read it, but have talked with George Keister, Dick Humphries' replacement at ODFW. George wrote some stuff on how the lack of a rabbit buffer between coyotes and deer fawns has affected deer numbers.

I spent some time on Virtue Flat in a blind watching sage-grouse and filming them. At night you can hear the coyotes working the leks. When rabbits aren't available, the pups still need to eat.

Who knows all the impacts of the rabbit die-off are.

Evidently the die-off affects all of the west.

What did it?

I will venture my guess. Although die-offs were part of the past cycles they didn't last.

Personally I think the answer will be found in globalism. We like to trade and get rich but the microbe is global too, especially with the flying incubators of today.

Like West Nile virus that I think came in on some parrots to a New York Zoo and spread nationwide. I

suspect a new bug—different from the native tularemia—that native rabbits and hares have no resistance to.

We should really study that because the native sage-grouse is becoming controversial as it declines in number for various reasons.

I suggest that a lack of alternative food sources for predators is one reason.

Editor's Note: We would like to thank Richland's Steve Culley for submitting this guest column this week for "The Outdoor Column." Steve was born in Baker to pioneer stock with ancestors at Auburn in 1862, Malheur City, Mormon Basin and Eagle Valley. He was raised on a ranch just north of what is now Culley Lane. He says he hunted and fished Northeast Oregon from the time he was old enough to walk behind his father or grandfather.

Starting next week, reporter Todd Arriola will take this column and run with it, writing a new installment twice per month.

Guest columns for those in-between weeks are welcome!

Sam O Swim court turns into ice skating rink

As part of what has become an annual tradition, the basketball court in the parking lot just outside the YMCA's Sam O Swim Center was hosed

down with water earlier this week—just prior to the subzero temperatures.

The public is welcome to bring their boots and skates, and go slip slidin'

away.

Visit the Center at 580 Baker Street in Baker City or call (541) 523-8328 for more information.

Anthony Lakes snow report



Photo Courtesy of Anthony Lakes.

As of December 31, 2014, Anthony Lakes reported the following conditions: New Snow (24 hr): 0"; New Snow (48 hr): 0"; Base Depth: 49"; Temperature: 2 degrees; Conditions: Clear, calm; Groomed Runs: Broadway, Bert's, Holiday, Trouble Creek, Variety, Lower College, Grouse, Vista, Road Run. Updated reports can be found at www.anthonylakes.com.

Elk visible at NP feed site

The Elkhorn Wildlife Area, nestled below the east crest of the Elkhorn Mountains, is best known for the Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer herds that frequent the area during the winter.

When snow covers the ground, ODFW staff feed

elk and deer to encourage them to stay in the higher elevations and out of the agricultural fields in the valley below.

The area is not open to hiking, camping, etc. at present, but there are opportunities for viewing and photographing the herds.

A wide variety of smaller mammals and birds can also be seen at the site on any given day.

For more information about the Elkhorn Wildlife Area at 61846 Powder River Lane in North Powder, call (541) 898-2826.

—ODFW RECREATION REPORT—

BAKER COUNTY HUNTING:

Chukar, Hun, and California Quail - The season opens Oct. 11 and ends Jan. 31, 2015. Hunters should expect another season very similar to last years. Chukar numbers are still low for the county, however quail numbers showed a slight increase from last year.

Grouse - Blue grouse can be found in the higher elevations while ruffed grouse are more common in wetter areas. Hunters should expect an average year for grouse. Successful hunters are asked to place the tails and wings from harvested birds in the collection barrels.

Cougars can be found throughout Baker County but hunters should target areas with high concentrations of deer and elk. Setting up on a fresh kill or using distress calls can all be productive techniques. Hunters are required to check in the hide of any cougar taken, with skull and proof of sex attached.

Coyote numbers are good throughout the district. Try calling in early morning and late afternoon. Remember to ask for permission before hunting on private properties.

BAKER COUNTY FISHING:

BULL PRAIRIE RESERVOIR: rainbow and brook trout. Remains open all year. Approximately 200 trophy rainbow trout were stocked on Sept. 23. The reservoir has frozen. Proceed with caution, ice may be too thin to support anglers.

GRANDE RONDE RIVER: steelhead. Anglers have recently reported good steelhead fishing on the Grande Ronde. However, flows have jumped to very high over the weekend and will make angling a more difficult until flows subside. Once flows drop angling will continue to produce well throughout the winter. Boating will be much easier for both rafters and drift boaters. With cooling water temps look for fish to move to calmer water where they can conserve energy while holding. A healthy proportion of two salt fish has resulted in a large average size this year. So, expect a few larger fish and some screaming drags! Remember, only adipose-fin clipped rainbow trout may be retained and all bull trout must be released unharmed.

HOLLIDAY PARK POND: trout. Remains open all year. Trophy trout were stocked on Sept. 23 and should provide good fishing for the remainder of the year. Proceed with caution if pond is iced over. Ice may be too thin to support anglers.

IMNAHA RIVER: Steelhead. Anglers are still making successful steelhead trips to the lower Imnaha. Flows jumped over the weekend and are falling which is the best time to get on the fish. Anglers have reported catching fish on both fly and conventional gear. Try using gear that's a little smaller than your used to when water temperatures are low.

JOHN DAY RIVER: Steelhead. Heavy rains over the past weekend have made the John Day high and muddy. Steelhead fishing is expected to be poor until flows recede to 2000 cfs or below. Then the steelhead should be scattered from the mouth up to Kimberly. ODFW encourages all anglers to keep any ad-clipped steelhead taken in this fishery. All wild (adipose intact) steelhead must be released unharmed.

UMATILLA RIVER: steelhead. Steelhead fishing was good last week with lower river anglers averaging 3.0 hours per steelhead caught and upper river anglers averaging 4.1 hours per steelhead caught. High flow over the weekend made the river unfishable for several days; the river has dropped and is clearing in the Pendleton area. Steelhead are distributed throughout the system. Anglers are finding best success using bobbers and jigs and drift fishing for steelhead. Anglers should consult the synopsis for detailed regulations.

WALLOWA LAKE: rainbow trout, kokanee, lake trout. Some rainbow trout are still available and tagged fish are occasionally being reported. Trout have been caught with a variety of methods but a simple rig with PowerBait has been most effective. If the cold weather continues and the lake freezes, ice fishing can be good for both kokanee and trout. The lake was stocked with tagged rainbow trout in an effort by ODFW to better understand the utilization of this fishery. Tagged fish have been caught at very high rates and over \$2,700 in rewards have been paid.

WALLOWA RIVER: steelhead, mountain whitefish. Reports of successful steelhead trips have been surprisingly consistent for steelhead. The best time to catch steelhead on the Wallowa is normally late winter or early spring, but there are enough fish being caught currently to keep anglers interested.

— RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS —

Each week The Baker County Press will include a list—all anonymous, of course—of the good deeds and random acts of kindness people from around the area have witnessed. To include something you've seen or experienced, email News@TheBakerCountyPress.com with "Random Acts of Kindness" in the subject line. We'll be sure to include your story.

• I left my purse on the bottom of a shopping cart that was overloaded to begin with. I unloaded the top and forgot where I'd stuffed it. I wheeled the cart over to the place they stack them, and started walking back toward the car. I hadn't even gotten there yet when a gentleman came running after me, swinging my purse in front of

him. It didn't match his outfit at all! I'm kidding. What a nice guy.

• I am grateful for the man who gave me the job tip. I didn't even know the place he said was hiring. Thank you.

• So there was a mom and two little kids ahead of me in the grocery line. Ahead of them was this older man. He

just finished buying a bunch of groceries and along with it a couple of those potted flowers they sell. Well this mom was completely frazzled, and the kids started crying. Then this man turns around, hands the flower pot to the mom and says, "Merry Christmas. I always buy two. One for whoever's behind me. Here take it." It took her a minute to get over it but she did.