

A spectacular visit to Wellington Butte

BY LIZA CROSSE

It was a stunning, clear Earth Day on top of Wellington Butte. As our hardy group of hikers gazed south across the Applegate Valley, it seemed that Mother Nature was doing her best to show off the jewels in her spectacular crown.

Applegate glories

We started our adventure by following leaders Suzie Savoie and Luke Ruediger up the historic Wellington Butte Mine Road. Our first view was down into Long Gulch, home to large old-growth trees and the inspirational David Calahan, who led efforts to protect Wellington Wildlands before he passed away in 2020. Leaving the road, we bushwhacked across steep slopes, with Suzie pointing out exquisite wildflowers, including Henderson's fawn lily, common lomatium, Menzies' fiddleneck, and Nuttall's larkspur. Mushrooms and interesting smaller hardwoods underscored the area's biodiversity.

The ultimate experience for us was achieving the crest of Wellington Butte. Wow. Words are simply inadequate. The view is awe-inspiring, as our valley and

the Siskiyou Crest are laid out in a vast panorama. Velvety, sloping meadows frame the foreground. Midrange, our lives are mapped in open fields, ribbons of road, and glints of river. Then, above all, the resplendent mountains crown the horizon. Relatively close to Wellington are familiar neighbors, Ben Johnson and Tallowbox mountains, with Woodrat to the east. That day, we could still see snow sparkling on distant peaks, with glimpses of Grayback and the Red Buttes to the southwest.

Threat to Wellington

The Wellington Wildlands is threatened by logging. The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) Bear Grub Timber Sale, which is still pending, proposes to log the eastern portions in the China Gulch area near Ruch. Many environmentalists agree that some logging is necessary. But the largest trees, covered by the timber industry, are the most precious for habitat and carbon sequestration. As climate change tips on the edge of the point of no return, our most ecologically valuable places should be protected. Also important is the fact that the Wellington Wildlands



The view from the top of Wellington Butte. Photo: Liza Crosse.

is a relatively large and intact area—7,527 acres, which is essential as habitat and a migration corridor.

The Wellington Butte Roadless Area was identified in 2013 by BLM as "Lands with Wilderness Characteristics," yet the Bear Grub Timber Sale was approved by BLM with little public input and scanty environmental review and was sold to Timber Products. Many local people and several organizations have formally protested the approval and sale. BLM's formal response to the protests and the logging contract approval are still pending.

Grassroots advocacy

Concern about the Bear Grub Timber Sale sparked the formation of the Wellington Wildlands Council (WWC), a 501(c)(3) organization that fights for the protection of Wellington Wildlands (wellingtonwildlands.org).

Recently, grassroots advocates formed the Siskiyou Crest Coalition (SCC) with the support of WWC and Applegate Siskiyou Alliance (ASA) (formerly Applegate Neighborhood Network). Luke Ruediger, executive director of the new alliance, is a walking encyclopedia about our region. Luke and Suzie hike in places where few people go. Their hike of more than 100 miles along the Siskiyou Crest can be seen in the video, *Sagebrush to Sea: A Journey Across the Siskiyou Crest*, recently released online. (ASA's annual fundraising event is Saturday, June 18. For more information, see article on page 21.)

SCC is working proactively to support stronger protections for our wildlands. If you'd like to know more about what SCC is doing, please send me an email.

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Getting there

To visit Wellington Butte, park at the Forest Creek Trailhead above Long Gulch, about a 15-minute drive from Highway 238. Walk approximately 1.25 miles up the fire road. When you reach a saddle, you will see a small deer track off to the left. The track peters out but keep going generally up and southwest to the rocky outcrop at the top of the butte. Information about Wellington Wildlands appears on pages 120-125 in *The Siskiyou Crest, Hikes, History and Ecology* by Luke Ruediger.

Applegate wildfires: Past, present, and future

BY ALAN JOURNET

Applegate Valley residents understand that wildfire risk in the region has been increasing over recent years. Of course, we are not alone. Before looking at trends, it's worth reflecting for a moment on the unusual climate the Applegate Valley shares with western states.

Our Mediterranean (winter wet, summer dry) climate occurs in five other locations across the planet (western South Africa, SW and SE Australia, western South America, and the Mediterranean, duh!). One outcome of this climate is that summers are hot and dry and our lands susceptible to drought. The result is annually dry soils and vegetation and a proclivity for fires to burn large areas. The consequence is vegetation systems that are fire-prone, fire-adapted, and generally fire-tolerant and fire-dependent.

A look at the trends reported for lands under fire management by the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) offers some valuable insights (see ODF Fire History 1911-2020 below).

The first and most obvious impression is that 2020 was clearly "off the chart." While we tend to think of the last few decades as representing an atypical acceleration in fire risk, a view through the last century reveals a different story. Indeed, two variables exhibit patterns that might surprise us. The first is that the area burned a century ago was actually greater than the current frightening pattern (2020 excepted). The second is that the number of fire initiations, though variable, has not changed much, if at all.

The pattern depicted in the chart leads us to ask the critical and reasonable

question, "Why?" There are potentially two explanations—and the answer may well be a combination.

Looking at the conditions imposed on the region by the regional climate pattern known as the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO), we find that the beginning of the last century the region experienced a warm and dry phase in which conditions were perfect for fires, once initiated, to spread. From the 1940s to 1970s, the PDO reversed, and we experienced a cool moist phase that would have depressed fire activity. After that, the warm, dry phase returned, drying soils and vegetation and encouraging initiated fires to spread. More recently, global warming and its climate change consequences have reduced snowfall and caused even greater

drying in our already summer-dry Mediterranean climate.

During the early 1900s, fire suppression was imposed to protect timber production from the fire hazard, and effectiveness of fire suppression improved. As a result, fire intolerant species invaded relatively open dry forests, increasing the density of understory and sub-canopy vegetation. Again, and still, global warming and its climate change consequences have reduced snowfall and caused even greater drying. The result is that fires encounter a much greater density of fuel and can spread more widely across the landscape.

The degree to which each of these processes comprises the dominant factor is the subject of some disagreement among forest watchers, but there is general agreement that the climate change resulting from global warming is trumping other factors as a driving force.

The problem we face is that because of the Mediterranean climate in which our forests developed, continued global warming will increase wildfire risk. The message for Applegate Valley residents is two-fold: (1) mitigate the problem by doing whatever we can to reverse the global warming trend, and (2) adapt or prepare ourselves for an inevitable future wildfire scenario.

Even if we reverse the climate crisis, the Mediterranean climate will continue. Thus, wildfires will always be in our future. We need to learn to manage them and live with them.

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Trend in wildfire frequency and area burned in lands managed by the Oregon Department of Forestry. Image: ODF.

