

# Operation oak: Mapping Oregon's iconic trees protects habitat, builds connections

By D.K. Row

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This story appeared in the fall 2014 edition of *Our Big Backyard*, ([oregonmetro.gov/our-big-backyard-magazine](http://oregonmetro.gov/our-big-backyard-magazine)) a quarterly magazine about parks and nature. Read more stories, plan an outing with a field guide and find out more about fun nature events and classes.

It's sweaty hot – 90 degrees hot – as the July afternoon blazes sunny radiance at Mount Talbert Nature Park in Clackamas. Coolly, Savahna Jackson and Sequoia Breck gaze upward at the tall white oak trees looming over them.

Slowly, they approach one, as if encountering something beautiful and mysterious for the first time. Then Jackson and Breck begin a duet they'll conduct many times throughout the day: Breck gently places a global positioning system device on the tree's broad trunk, like a doctor listening to a patient's heart, while Jackson receives then inputs information about the tree on her iPhone several paces away.

Jackson and Breck are mapping white oak trees at Mount Talbert Nature Park. Their diligent work this July afternoon serves a large project bringing together several core elements of Metro's nature work: protecting fragile habitats, collaborating with partners, fostering community and honoring culture and history.

The young women – both work for the Native American Youth and Family Center or NAYA – oversee about 100 volunteers who've committed weeks of their personal time to help map endangered white oak trees across the greater Portland region, including at Metro sites like Cooper Mountain Nature Park, Canemah Bluff Natural Area and Mount Talbert.

Known as the Regional Oak Mapping Project, this effort is produced and overseen by a group of partners, including Metro, the Intertwine Alliance and Kingfisher Ecological Services. The goal is simple: to create a baseline map of how much white oak remains in the region.

"This is the only native oak to this part of the state," says Lori Hennings, a senior natural resources scientist at Metro who is co-leading the effort. "But no one has managed to create an aggregate map of Oregon white oak."

There are urgent reasons to pursue such an expansive project right now. Oregon white oak habitats were once plentiful in the region and even thrived



Courtesy photos by Fred Joe

Sequoia Breck spent much of her summer mapping the region's endangered white oak trees – part of an expansive project to create a baseline map to support conservation and restoration efforts across the region.

Below: Savahna Jackson, Sequoia Breck and Ted Labbe



in abundance from California to British Columbia. But urbanization, farming and other factors began to suppress the white oak. Today, in the Willamette Valley, upland prairie and oak savanna habitats have been reduced to single-digit percentages of their historical range.

"The clock is ticking," says Ted Labbe, a biologist from Kingfisher Ecological Services co-leading the project with Hennings.

This work has consequences beyond the white oak itself. As the trees have declined, so have the plants and animals that rely on them: the Western gray squirrel, white-breasted nuthatch, Fender's blue butterfly and many more. A fragile ecosystem – many generations in the making – is threatened.

Oaks have been at the forefront of Metro's natural areas work. Fueled by two voter-approved bond measures, Metro has protected more than 13,000 acres of land on behalf of the region, including some of the best remaining oak habitats. From Graham Oaks in Wilsonville to the Willamette Narrows in West Linn, restoration projects are helping oaks make a comeback on this land.

But in an urban region, preserving oaks is difficult. Gone are the days when it was simple to plan fires that would manage faster-growing species like the Douglas fir, which deprive oaks of sunlight and water. Fire-resistant oaks survived the burn, while their competitors did not.

Three years ago, Hennings and Labbe began to create a high quality map of the

white oak that could be used as the basis for conservation and restoration efforts. With financial support from Metro and grants to bolster their project, they began by collecting and compiling existing GIS-based oak maps. Hennings then led a team that developed the project's own fine-scale map.

A Metro Nature in Neighborhoods grant supports the current stage, which dispatches volunteers to verify and refine the traditional maps. Professional field surveys will then fill in gaps and add more detail.

The two leaders describe public involvement as the project's soul because of the potential to create passionate stewards among the public and develop a partnership with the Native American community.

Native Americans studiously cultivated the white oak widely for generations. That careful shepherding is why the project teamed up with NAYA, which creates opportunities for Native Americans through partnerships, programs and advocacy. Jackson and Breck were handpicked and hired through NAYA to help manage volunteers, who conducted most of the field work during the summer.

Jackson, 22, and Breck, 19, are from the Portland area and plan to complete college. Both pursued the white oak project because of its connection to nature and the chance to engage their inner science nerd. They also saw an opportunity to learn leadership skills that would benefit them – and the public – in the future.

"I'm so happy to help restore part of the culture of our Tribes and to help the public while I'm doing it," says Jackson, a Klamath Modoc Indian.

"We're doing something significant in terms of educating the public about the environment and to remind them to value the habitat we all share," says Breck, a Siletz Indian.

Back at Mount Talbert, an afternoon of mapping trees is complete. The air is still thick and the temperature is climbing a few ticks. As Jackson, Breck and Labbe walk back to the parking lot, they survey the trees and land around them, including an area that was recently restored through a controlled fire.

"We're trying to do a lot here," says Labbe, taking in the breadth of this quiet piece of heaven not far from the city. "We're trying to bring Native people into the fold as well as create job opportunities for them. And we're trying to help save the white oak."

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PHARMACY STAFF

## General Council Meeting

May 7, 2016 • 1 p.m.

Siletz Tribal Community Center • Siletz, Oregon

Call to Order  
Invocation  
Flag Salute  
Roll Call  
Approval of Agenda  
Approval of Minutes

Tribal Council Committee Reports  
Tribal Members' Concerns  
Chairman's Report  
Announcements  
Adjourn