



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Ralph Bloemers checks a time-lapse camera that is documenting a parcel of woods in Elkhorn in February.

Cameras capture life in forests after wildfire

By CASSANDRA PROFITA

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Ralph Bloemers was looking for the right place to put a wildlife camera in the burned forest surrounding the former mining camp at Jawbone Flats.

The area is closed to the public, but the Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center invited Bloemers to document wildlife and forest recovery around its educational facility after the area burned in the Beachie Creek fire last year.

"Oh, that's a burned out structure up here," Bloemers said, stopping short before a pile of twisted metal and ash. "That's not doing it for me."

He changed direction to look for game trails nearby. He stopped again among a grove of burned trees and looks up at the blackened canopy.

"It's pretty shaded in here," he said, unpacking his camera gear. "It's going to take a while for the vegetation to come back because of the light."

Bloemers, a co-founder of the nonprofit Crag Law Center, has been refining his own art form over the past few years as an advocate for natural wildfire recovery and fire-safe communities.

He started setting remote cameras in burned forests after the 2017 Eagle Creek fire in the Columbia River Gorge with a goal of changing how people think about the effects of wildfire.

"You can show the plants coming back, and the elk and the deer and bear and the cougar and everything else that loves that highly burned landscape after it starts to regrow," Bloemers said. "And just by showing that to people, it's kind of undeniable the beauty and life that can be found there."

After years of experimenting with time lapse and motion sensors, losing cameras in the snow and finding them knocked down by bears, Bloemers now has

an impressive sizzle reel of cougars, bobcats, bears and majestic elk amid scorched trees. He also has time lapse photos of wildflowers, ferns and maple trees sprouting with vibrant colors in blackened landscapes.

He's expanded his operation, too, so he now has dozens of cameras in burned forests across Oregon. He maintains cameras on Mount Hood, where the Dollar Lake fire burned in 2011, in the Santiam Canyon and Willamette National Forest where the Beachie Creek fire burned last year, and in the Siskiyou Mountains of southern Oregon in the footprints of the 2017 Abney and Burnt Peak fires and the 2018 Spencer fire.

"I knew these places weren't destroyed despite what people were saying about them," Bloemers said. "I wanted to capture the wildlife that was there and the rebirth, the recovery of the natural landscape. Instead of telling people that they're OK, I wanted to show them."

Oregon State University ecosystems ecologist Boone Kauffman studies the effects of natural disturbances such as wildfire, and his research about the role of wildfires in Northwest forests explains a lot of the images Bloemers has captured on his cameras.

"Virtually all species, whether they're fungus like mushrooms or plants or birds, they all have adaptations to survive fire or to live at some level of the succession from the first years following fire to old growth, hundreds of years following fire," Kauffman said.

Douglas fir, for example, has a very thick bark that often protects it from fire, he said, and when trees die in fires, they feed insects that woodpeckers love to eat.

"We see this pretty beautiful cycle of life," Kauffman said. "It may look horrible to us in the first few months or years after fire, but in the long run they're providing very integral fea-

tures to the structure, function and dynamics of these ecosystems."

During a fire, Kauffman said, most species survive by running or flying away or hiding under water or soil.

"Even in very, very severe conditions, just a few inches of soil will provide enough insulation for many species to survive," he said. "Usually there is pretty low mortality of wildlife during fires because they've evolved and adapted to fire as well."

Some species even depend on fire, Kauffman added.

"There's a number of species that only exist right after a fire, that produce seeds that will lay dormant in a forest for as long as 250 years," Kauffman said. "And it requires fire, heat from a fire, to stimulate germination of the seed."

Even the most severe fires typically burn less than 10% of the forest biomass above ground, his research shows, and while a fire might kill trees it doesn't burn much of the wood, which can go on to store carbon and provide valuable salmon habitat in streams.

"One of the classic features of Pacific Northwest streams is tremendous quantities of large woody debris in the streams," he said. "A lot of the gravels and sands that ultimately end up in the rivers and creeks are from these fire events, and so they can be very important sources of sediment that in the long run is utilized by species such as salmon."

Bloemers said he hopes people will see the beauty in his post-wildfire photography and start enjoying burned forests in new ways.

"I hope they will see it not as a destroyed thing but a young thing full of potential," Bloemers said. "It's like a charcoal forest. It's black and gray and brown in the beginning, but it's basically a blank canvas that nature will start to paint green, and the wildlife will come back."

Bend resident shares the impact of DUII crashes

By KYLE SPURR
The Bulletin

Jack Beal knows firsthand the dangers of driving impaired.

The 71-year-old Bend resident still can't believe he survived a crash 42 years ago, when a drunken driver in Portland was fleeing police and crashed into Beal's work truck.

"I could've died," said Beal, who injured his neck in the crash. "The guy hit me at 106 mph. The only thing between me and him was a door."

Twenty-six years later, Beal's son, Joe, was struck by a drunken driver on Deschutes Market Road north of Bend. The crash left Beal's son with two shattered wrists.

After his son's crash, Beal decided to share his personal experiences. He gave talks for police departments, high schools in central Oregon and for the Deschutes County DUII Victim Impact Panel, a program required for those convicted of driving under the influence of intoxicants.

"I was really proud to do it," Beal said. "I was giving something back to the community."

Beal retired from public speaking about three years ago, but recently had the urge to return. He was moved by an incident last month when a 61-year-old cyclist in Bend was struck and killed by a suspected drunken driver.

He asked his wife, Debbie, if he should start speaking again, and she agreed. He's since been actively looking for speaking engagements.

"I was talking about it with my wife and she said, 'You enjoyed doing it, and we know it makes a differ-



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin
After hearing about recent fatal DUII crashes in Bend, Jack Beal, a 71-year-old resident, decided to resume giving public talks about his family's experiences with drunken drivers.

ence, so start looking into it," Beal said.

Beal is returning at a time when drunken driving cases continue to rise in Deschutes County.

According to data from the Deschutes County District Attorney's Office, cases have increased from 1,022 in 2016 to 1,171 in 2019. Cases declined to 745 in 2020, but that may be due to fewer people driving during the coronavirus pandemic and police departments not emphasizing DUII patrols, District Attorney John Hummel said.

"As policing increases, DUII arrests will increase even if there are not more DUII drivers on the streets," Hummel said. "The converse is also true." The overall increase in drunken driving cases is partly due to the growing population and tourism in the area, Hummel said.

"It's important to remember that Deschutes County's population has increased significantly since 2016, and that tourism has increased significantly since then," Hum-

mel said.

Each case could have a victim that was injured or killed. That serves as motivation for Beal.

In his talks, Beal discusses his crash and how they affected their family. But he also discusses his career working as a driver for funeral homes across the state and having to respond to deadly crashes caused by impaired drivers.

He ends each talk with a story about how he had to transport a 4-year-old girl who was killed in a crash with an impaired driver just east of Bend. It's a story that brings the audience to tears and reminds them of the consequences, Beal said.

"They may not have been paying attention. But then I ask, 'Who in this room wants to kill a 4-year-old tonight?'" Beal said. "I have their attention."

Over the years, Beal has felt the positive effect of his talks. Strangers have approached him on the street and expressed how much he helped them stay sober.

For Beal, his stories are not just lessons for impaired drivers. They are memories he lives with every day. Powerful memories that cut deep.

He will never forget assessing the scene where his son's van was smashed from a head-on collision. His son was driving alone that day, but had three child car seats in the back for his children.

Beal noticed the car seats were ripped out and laying on the dashboard. He realized he could have lost his son and grandchildren that day.

"You don't forget that," Beal said. "It doesn't go away."

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