

ELK: Drought seems to have affected the elk rut

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ended Nov. 1 to mixed success rates, from average to slightly below average across the Blues.

And though a third straight year of drought hampered bowhunting season in September, wildlife biologists say recent rain and snow should keep big game active during the day, increasing rifle hunters' odds for success.

Schulman, DeWolf, Osteen and Milldrum traveled Thursday from as far as Portland, Bend and Salem to camp together in the Umatilla National Forest. They each drew general season spike tags, and felt good about hunting conditions coming in.

"Another inch or two of snow would be perfect," said Osteen, of Terrebonne. Not only does snow help with spotting elk tracks, he said, but keeps the ground soft and damp for sneaking around the woods.

That was a problem two months ago for bowhunters, coming off a summer racked by drought. The intense heat also stressed animals and delayed rutting by at least a week, biologists said.

Weather forecasts generally call for a wet week ahead and temperatures in the 30s and 40s at higher elevations, according to the National Weather Service. Steve Cherry, district wildlife biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife in Heppner, said animals tend to be on the move and feed more when it's cold and wet.

"The moisture has certainly helped with hunting conditions," Cherry said.

ODFW conducts elk counts once every year in March, Cherry said. Herds in the Heppner Unit came in at about 5,400, or just slightly above management objectives.

Schulman said the group will rise before dawn on Saturday and break up into groups of two, hiking several miles into dense timber and along steep ridgetops. As a party, they've been more successful than not in past years. Spike bulls might only be a year or two old, but they can still fill up a freezer with 150-200 pounds of meat.

More than anything, Schulman, of Bend, said the group just looks forward to getting together in some different country and having fun.

"As soon as we get back home, we're already thinking about next year," Schulman said.

DeWolf, of Portland, said Heppner tends to be a magnet for hunters from the Willamette Valley. Rural areas like Heppner and

Ukiah benefit economically from the visitors: ODFW reports hunters and anglers spent \$2.5 billion statewide in 2008. That includes the cost of food, gas, gear, tags and licenses.

Considering the investment, Cherry said it's up to the agency to manage big game for successful hunts and keep visitors coming back. After three straight years of drought, Cherry said they are starting to see some impacts on how the animals spread out and how they are reproducing.

Biologists aren't seeing a lot of unusual dispersement yet, Cherry said, but have noted mule deer fawn ratios have declined in recent years.

This is the first year drought seems to have affected the elk rut, Cherry said. That can disrupt the timing of some hunts, but he said good hunters are able to adapt.

"Hunters are used to adjusting to weather conditions to find their animals," he said. "That's just part of hunting."

Wildfire can also temporarily displace game from their usual habitat, but over the long run tends to reinvigorate forage and make for prime hunting in future years.

Lizzy Berkley, wildlife biologist for the Umatilla National Forest, said there are already signs of elk returning to the area around the Grizzly Bear Complex, which burned 82,659 acres in the Wena-ha-Tucannon Wilderness. The fire burned in a patchy mosaic pattern, Berkley said, and the scorched areas will bounce back with healthier green grasses and shrubs.

"Usually, the quantity and quality of forage is improved," she said.

Mark Kirsch, ODFW wildlife biologist in Pendleton, predicted first season success rates in his district were somewhere in the 15-17 percent range. He said a fair number of bulls and spikes should still be on the move, and so long as dense fog and storms stay away, the second season should be in good shape.

"Absent any weather like that, it should be good hunting," Kirsch said.

As a hunter of 35 years, Milldrum, of La Grande, said the Heppner Unit has become one of his favorite spots. For as much planning and scouting as goes into a trip, hunting can sometimes simply boil down to the luck of the draw, he said.

"It's mostly just camping out with family and friends," Milldrum said. "If we get an elk, that's just a bonus."

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DISTILLERY: Will also be a bottling plant, tasting room

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Growers' McKennon Station for the past three years.

"Distilling and agriculture go hand-in-hand," he said.

Bullington plans to print the lot number from each batch of grain used in Oregon Grain Growers liquor so consumers can track the exact place the grain came from.

In the early goings, Bullington wants to produce gin and vodka, including a watermelon and mint vodka.

The flavored vodkas will have other locally sourced ingredients, like Hermiston watermelon and mint from Milton-Freewater and La Grande.

While the Bullingtons are both originally from Pendleton, they first met in Seattle. They've been kicking around the idea of opening a micro-distillery since moving back to Pendleton almost five years ago, but purchasing the Court property was a symbol of their seriousness.

In order to receive state certification, Bullington said they need to show that they have property and equipment.

Now that they own the property, they'll spend the next months doing the necessary work to turn the building not only into a distillery, but also a bottling plant, tasting room and retail store.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Rodney and Kelli Bullington want to turn the old Comrie auto dealership on Court Avenue into a micro-distillery.

Under the Bullingtons' vision, the outside will also receive a makeover.

Bullington said that under the old wooden edifice with a Western painting on it is the building's original stucco and brick façade.

Besides stripping away the wood, the building's new owners will install a neon sign with the Oregon Grain Growers logo.

With the assistance of a micro-distillery consultant, Bullington said the project will move forward aggressively, with plans to hold a soft open in March and a grand opening in May.

While the name Oregon Grain Growers was partly chosen because of the

vintage feeling it evokes, Wm. Roesch Brewery has a legitimate claim to history.

Wm. Roesch's liquor license was recently approved by the City of Pendleton, which co-owner Debra Roesch said was another step in establishing one of Pendleton's oldest brands.

William Roesch established his first Pendleton brewery in 1882. Under various names, Roesch's brewery produced brands of soda, beer and sparkling water.

One of those brands, Elk Horn Beer, adorns the 230 S.E. Third Street building where Wm. Roesch will reestablish its brewery.

Debra Roesch said the Wm. Roesch brand was sold in the 1940s and was only taken back by the family in 2010.

Debra Roesch married into the family, but her son, Ryan Roesch, is the great-great-grandson of the William Roesch and will be the Wm. Roesch's brewer.

After Wm. Roesch finishes the licensing process and refines its recipes, Debra Roesch said the brewery will rollout its product in "baby steps" by sending beer in kegs to local bars.

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RIVER: Looking into extending two miles toward Rieth

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paths in general.

A recent presentation for the transportation service plan update revealed some of the possibilities the city is looking at for the future.

While the western portion of the river walk ends near Rudy Rada Skate Park, the levy continues westward toward Rieth.

One of the city's ideas is to pave this section of the levy, which MacKenzie said would extend the parkway by more than two miles.

There would be challenges to this hypothetical extension — the city would have to negotiate with separate public entities and the

path would have to cross under Interstate 84, creating flooding issues during wetter months.

But MacKenzie said projects like the parkway are the quality-of-life aspects of a city that attract businesses and residents to town.

MacKenzie compared the river walk to Portland's Eastbank Esplanade, a pedestrian and bike path that former Portland mayor Vera Katz took flak for when it was built, but is now a major source of foot traffic.

Other possibilities the city is looking into for the parkway is a southern expansion down Tutuilla Road toward Sunridge

Middle School, a northern extension on an old railroad alignment and an eastern expansion toward Mission.

The river walk is being included in discussion for an update to the transportation service plan, which MacKenzie said will make it easier for the city to apply for grants for the parkway.

In comparison to other public works projects, MacKenzie said the cost of building extensions is relatively cheap because the pavement doesn't need to bear the weight of cars.

MacKenzie's optimism was tempered by interim parks and recreation director Donnie Cook, whose department maintains the parkway.

Cook said his seven-person staff is already stretched thin and extending the river walk would require the city add personnel to his department.

Despite Cook's concerns over a river walk expansion, he's still working on establishing a dog park under the Bedford Bridge.

The Let'Er Bark Dog Park is dependent on a deal with the Round-Up Association, which owns the land.

"I'm just waiting for the OK," he said.

Cook said the dog park could open within 30 days of a finalized agreement.

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