

BLOOMIN' BLUES



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Antelope bitterbrush

Antelope bitterbrush a roadside attraction

By BRUCE BARNES
For The East Oregonian

Name: Antelope bitterbrush

Scientific Name: *Purshia tridentata*

Antelope bitterbrush is a common sight along Interstate 84 from Boardman to Biggs. It doesn't really get up into the Blues. It prefers low elevations around here, and grows in dry to semi-arid areas from inland British Columbia to Mexico, and east to Montana to New Mexico. From a distance it looks a lot like sagebrush, and is often mixed in with sagebrush on sandy slopes, but has dark green foliage and obvious yellow flowers.

The name *Purshia* is for Fredrick Pursh, who wrote one of the first books on the plants of North America about 200 years ago. *Tridentata* means three-toothed, referring to the three rounded lobes on the tips of the leaves, much like the leaves of sagebrush. The plant is in the rose family, whereas sagebrush is in the sunflower family.

Around here, the woody shrub is about two to five feet high, with an irregular overall shape. The leaves are dark green and shaped like a

narrow fan about a half-inch long, with three lobes at the tip. The flowers are less than an inch wide and have five rounded yellow petals and yellow stamens.

The plant is an important browse shrub for deer and antelope. Indian tribes valued it as food for deer, but used it themselves for a wide range of medicinal and other uses. Medicinal uses were for coughs, colds, lung problems, lung pain, pneumonia, fever, gynecological aid, tuberculosis, skin problems, liver problems, chicken pox, smallpox, measles, blood tonic, constipation, venereal diseases, stomachaches, bleeding, or as an emetic. Shredded bark was used for diapers, bedding for a cradleboard, and moccasins. Purple dye was made from seeds to stain wood. Branches were used for arrows and as firewood.

Where to find: Bitterbrush is easy to spot at highway speed, especially in bloom as it is now, with its yellow flowers. Drive the Columbia River highway from Hat Rock north, or I-84 from Boardman eastward. When you see a big, dark green shrub with yellow flowers, that's it.

ODFW to present proposed budget

Public meeting set for May 12 in Island City

East Oregonian

The Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife will host a series of public meetings across the state to present the agency's proposed budget for 2017-19 and gather local input.

Public comments will help refine the budget proposal before it is presented June 9 to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. Once the commission approves the budget, it will go to Gov. Kate Brown's office for consideration. A final budget will ultimately be determined by the 2017 Legislature.

No major changes have been proposed in the next budget, and no new increases

are scheduled for recreational and commercial licenses, according to ODFW. Rather, the goal is to match the department's work with potential funding sources.

Meetings will be held in Clackamas, Tillamook, Roseburg, Coos Bay, Newport, Klamath Falls, Bend and, finally, Island City — adjacent to La Grande. That meeting is set for May 12 from 7-8:30 p.m. at Island City Hall.

More information about ODFW's budget can be found online at www.dfw.state.or.us/agency/budget. Comments can also be submitted through June 1 via email to ODFW. Comments@state.or.us, or by mail to ODFW Director's Office at 4034 Fairview Industrial Drive Southeast, Salem, OR 97302.

Have an adventure story or photo you would like to share? Call outside page editor Tim Trainor at 541-966-0835 or email him at ttrainor@eastoregonian.com

Great American Eclipse draws tourists to path of totality

By MEAD GRUVER
Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Where's the best place to watch next year's eclipse? If you're thinking the grand open spaces of Wyoming, you have plenty of company.

Hotel rooms across the Cowboy State are going, going, gone, well over a year before the arrival of the first total solar eclipse to be seen from the mainland U.S. in almost four decades.

A national astronomy convention has reserved Casper's largest hotel. International guides plan eclipse-oriented tours of the Yellowstone region. Jackson Hole is bracing for big crowds, and Native American tribes are promoting their heritage as the perfect backdrop for the rare natural event.

Tourism boosters are giddy. They've done little to market Wyoming as an eclipse destination, with millions already visiting Grand Teton and Yellowstone each year, and yet even campsites are being claimed more than a year before eclipse day, Aug. 21, 2017.

"What's hot on everybody's mind is, what's the attendance number?" said Brook Kreder with the Casper Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

She projects 20,000 visitors, one-third of Casper's population. With an influx like that, many more locals might join in the profits. "We have had some people inquire about putting their personal bedrooms up on Airbnb," she said.

Some are calling this the Great American Eclipse, because the moon's shadow will cross Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina before heading out over the Atlantic.

Communities from coast to coast are already arguing for bragging rights as the best place to watch:



AP Photo, File

This March 2016 file photo shows a total solar eclipse in Belitung, Indonesia.

— Madras, Oregon, claims its high-desert setting 100 miles southeast of Portland gives the best odds for clear weather. The city plans an Oregon SolarFest, with camping, music and beer gardens.

— North Platte, 275 miles west of Omaha by Interstate 80, bills itself as a safe and accessible viewing place in the Nebraska Sandhills region.

— The sun, moon and Mississippi River will meet 80 miles south of St. Louis in Perry County, Missouri, local promoters say.

— Nashville will be the biggest city under total eclipse but Hopkinsville, Kentucky, an hour north, boasts it will have the greatest degree of eclipse anywhere, meaning it will remain "total" for longer.

— South Carolina offers the closest eclipse-watching for 100 million people on the East Coast, right before the moon's shadow crosses into the Atlantic Ocean, assuming summer rain clouds don't block the view.

Solar eclipses, which happen when the moon passes directly between the Earth and sun, are not rare, but they seldom happen in such easily accessible places.

A roughly 65-mile-wide zone, called the path of totality, will offer the best viewing as the moon's shadow races over the Earth's surface at more than 2,000 mph. Stars and planets come out, and the sun's corona glows in a perfect circle around the dark side of the moon as the effect of a sunset appears in all directions.

Depending on the location, the eclipse will be total for less than 30 seconds to as long as 2 minutes, 41 seconds.

"It gets darker and darker and darker. And what's weird is, the temperature drops and then wildlife becomes mysteriously quiet," amateur astronomer Lowell Lyon explains. "All of a sudden — boom! — it suddenly gets dark."

Astrocon2017, next year's annual convention of more than 240 U.S. amateur astronomy groups in the Astronomical League, will bring dozens of experts to Casper over the four days leading up to the eclipse. Lyon, who sells insurance in Salt Lake City by day, is organizing the event.

Even without astronomical phenomena to attract them, tour groups in Jackson Hole often reserve

blocks of hotel rooms a couple years ahead of the winter and summer peak seasons.

People hoping to watch the eclipse from the foot of the Teton Range began booking rooms even further in advance, said Clarene Law, who owns four Jackson hotels.

"Some of these photographic groups got in here before my staff realized it was the eclipse," Law said. She said she doesn't plan to raise rates — by much — for the few rooms she has left.

One company that provides eclipse-viewing tours worldwide plans several multi-day, multi-state packages that will take hundreds of travelers to Tennessee, northwest Wyoming and Oregon to watch the eclipse.

Past customers of the Prescott, Arizona-based TravelQuest International who have traveled as far as Bali, the Faroe Islands and Ethiopia have signed up for next year's trips, President Aram Kaprielian said.

"This time, they're traveling with their children and with their children's children. So we're getting these generational groups that are joining us," he said.

Health officials report elevated mercury in bass

By GEORGE PLAVEN
East Oregonian

Elevated levels of mercury have been detected in Oregon bass, prompting health officials to warn residents against eating too much of the fish.

The Oregon Health Authority issued a statewide advisory Tuesday after evaluating tissue samples from 62 bass from 11 waterbodies across the state, including the Columbia, Snake, John Day, Grande Ronde and Owyhee rivers. Results showed mercury at high enough levels to pose a threat to human health if not eaten in moderation.

Samples were collected between 2008 and 2014. The advisor affects bass from all waters in Oregon, and will remain in effect for the foreseeable future.

Bass are the focus of concern because they are a resident species — that is, they live in the same place

their entire life, unlike salmon and steelhead. Bass are also top predators, eating other contaminated fish within the ecosystem.

OHA is recommending the general population eat no more than six meals worth of bass per month. A meal is about the size and thickness of your hand. Pregnant and nursing women, infants and children are at higher risk of mercury, and should eat no more than two meals per month.

That being said, Dave Farrer, toxicologist with the OHA Public Health Division, said fish are still an important part of a healthy diet. While the advisory is meant to keep people informed, it is not meant to take all fish off the table.

"The elevated levels of mercury we're talking about in bass are of concern to us, but there are some simple steps people can take to reduce their exposure to

"The elevated levels of mercury we're talking about in bass are of concern to us."

— Dave Farrer, Oregon Health Authority toxicologist

mercury when consuming bass," Farrer said.

People who eat too much fish with too much mercury can suffer organ damage and problems with their nervous and reproductive systems over time. Babies and small children can also develop life-long learning or behavior problems if exposed to high levels of mercury.

According to OHA, mercury can be harmful to human health if it exceeds .6 milligrams per kilogram of fish, or .2 milligrams per kilogram for those most vulnerable. The average total concentration of samples ranged from .8 to .86 mg/kg of mercury.

Lonnie Johnson, conservation director for the Oregon Bass Angler Sportsman Society, previously said most bass fishermen are catch-and-release only. However, the state did recently lift bag limits on all warmwater species, including bass, on the Columbia, John Day and Umpqua rivers.

Should more data become available, OHA said it will update advisories as necessary. All statewide fish advisories are posted online at www.healthoregon.org/fishadv.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

New Mexico lawmakers challenge feds over rare mouse

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Nearly half of New Mexico's Legislature is stepping into the fray between ranchers and the federal government over the fencing of watering holes on national forest land to protect an endangered mouse found in three Western states.

The 50 lawmakers say the federal government has overstepped its authority and is trampling private property and water rights, some of which predate New Mexico's statehood. They recently sent a

letter to State Engineer Tom Blaine, asking that he use his authority as New Mexico's top water official to stop the U.S. Forest Service from limiting access to springs, streams and other riparian areas. The letter was made public this week.

"We believe the taking of this private property is illegal; it is contrary to court decrees and decisions; and it is morally wrong," the letter reads. "The incursions of the USFS must be stopped."

The letter was signed by Republicans from across the state and some Democrats from rural areas.

Blaine's office confirmed Thursday that the letter was being reviewed. Regional forest officials

BRIEFLY

were aware of the letter but did not comment on the accusations leveled by the lawmakers. The agency has previously argued that it's obligated under the Endangered Species Act to ensure the mouse is protected.

Television episode to feature Klamath Basin birding

A nationally syndicated television show will air this week featuring the 2016 Winter Wings Festival and birds of the Klamath Basin, according to a news release from the Klamath Basin Audubon Society. Friday's 30-minute episode of "Birding

Adventures 2016," hosted by life-long birder James Currie, will cover his visit to the Klamath Basin in mid-February.

Area birders Gerry Hill, Kevin Spencer, Dave Hewitt and Harry Fuller (of McMinnville) also appear on the show.

DirecTV subscribers may view the show at 4:30 a.m. Friday on Destination America, channel 286. Following its airing, the show will be available for viewing on YouTube and on the Winter Wings Festival website, winterwingsfest.org next week.

For more information, call Winter Wings Festival co-organizer Diana Samuels at 541-850-5832.

INSURANCE AGENT HONORED BY NATIONAL SOCIETY OF CIC FOR 25-YEAR COMMITMENT

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Russ Heimark, CIC of Wheatland Insurance Center was recently recognized for professional leadership and advanced knowledge by the Society of Certified Insurance Counselors (CIC), a leading national insurance professional organization.

Russ was awarded a certificate marking more than twenty-five years of leadership as a designated CIC, which requires annual completion of advanced education and training.

Russ's ongoing allegiance and support of the CIC program is a testament to the value he places on "real world" education and customer satisfaction. "Your clients, associates, and the insurance profession as a whole continue to benefit from such dedication," cited Dr. William T. Hold CIC, CPCU, CLU, President of the Society of CIC.

The CIC Program is nationally recognized as the premier continuing education program for insurance professionals, with programs offered in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Headquartered in Austin, Texas, the Society of CIC is a not-for-profit organization and the founding program of The National Alliance for Insurance Education & Research.

