

Philippi Park to reopen Memorial Day Weekend

Park closed in 2013 due to budget cuts

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
East Oregonian

Darrell McSmith grew up camping and fishing at Philippi Park on the John Day River; it's where he learned to water ski with his older brother and two sisters, and where he'd bring his own daughters years later for family reunions.

"It was just kind of this little oasis in the middle this dry desert area," said McSmith, who owns All Points Media in Beaverton. "It had a little bit of everything for everyone."

Located about a mile upriver from where the John Day flows into the Columbia, Philippi Park can only be reached by boat. Budget cuts forced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to close the park in 2013, though the agency left the door open for alternative management proposals.

Wanting to do something in memory of his parents, McSmith, 49, came up with a plan. He established a nonprofit group called the OPAL Foundation in February to restore the park, which is now set to reopen over Memorial Day Weekend.

Volunteers with the OPAL Foundation have spent most of the last six weeks mowing tall grass, removing downed trees and cleaning up the park's sandy beaches. At the same time, they have started fundraising to build up a maintenance and operations budget for the next three years, working with the Army Corps of Engineers.

So far, McSmith said they've



Photo contributed by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Philippi Park, located on the John Day River about a mile upstream from the confluence with the Columbia River, will reopen Friday, May 27 for Memorial Day Weekend.

raised \$63,200 of their \$250,000 goal. The foundation recently recruited a summer camp host, and future projects might include adding wildlife viewing trails and new eco-friendly showers.

"It took a lot of effort just to get it started again," McSmith said. "We wanted it to be about community, and bringing back these types of recreation opportunities that are unique to the Gorge and the Northwest."

Philippi Park was established by the Corps in 1978 and it soon became a popular attraction for boaters and fishermen, drawing in roughly 13,000 people every year.

By the 1980s, McSmith said the park would be packed with visitors during annual bass fishing tournaments.

McSmith said he and his family would make trips every year from Woodburn — sometimes two or three times every year — to enjoy the sunshine and water.

"We're one of probably hundreds of stories of people who have spent a lot of time enjoying this park," McSmith said.

McSmith lost his father unexpectedly in 2001, and his mother died from cancer in 2007. Both loved the outdoors, and he knew he wanted to do something in

their memory. When Philippi Park closed, he said it was the perfect opportunity.

"I was fortunate to have great parents," he said. "I just thought this was something I wanted to do."

McSmith reached out to the Army Corps of Engineers to forge a partnership, and he said they've been supportive throughout the process. Rural communities like Rufus and Arlington have also lent their support, recognizing importance of recreation and tourism to their local economies.

The OPAL Foundation — which combines the names of McSmith's parents, Oppie and Paul — has

spent every weekend since the beginning of April returning the park to pristine shape. McSmith said they will be ready to reopen on Friday, May 27, with the Army Corps reinstalling the main boat dock and turning water and power back on.

Matt Rabe, spokesman with the Corps' Portland District, said they would not be able to reopen Philippi Park without the "truly unique" partnership with OPAL.

"Because everything is boat-in, boat-out ... it just compounds the cost of maintaining that park," Rabe said. "It's having the extra resources from this outside organization that allows us to reopen."

Rabe said recreation is one of the Corps' primary missions, and they're excited to be able to offer the opportunity again at Philippi Park.

"It's a fairly secluded facility," he said. "If you're trying to get away from it all, it's a nice place to go."

Philippi Park will officially reopen May 27 with a boat parade up the river, followed by a ribbon cutting and barbecue. Those interested in attending can meet at 9 a.m. at LePage Park, exit 114 off Interstate 84, where boats will launch.

McSmith said he hopes to use Philippi as a model for reopening other parks and recreation sites in the future.

"It's just an amazing feeling," he said.

For more information about the OPAL Foundation, or to donate to the Philippi Park project, visit www.opal-foundation.org.

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

Bear dogs help wildlife officers

By **RICH LANDERS**
The (Spokane)
Spokesman-Review

SPOKANE, Wash. — Barking at bears, romping through the forest, sniffing for poaching evidence, getting petted by a child and maybe cooling off with a swim in the Pend Oreille River.

It's all in a good day's work for Jax, a 1-year-old Karelian bear dog employed by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"The beauty of this breed is that Jax can be calm and licking the fingers of a kid one moment and then turn it on when he's on the ground scaring the heck out of a bear," said Keith Kirsch, the Spokane Region Fish and Wildlife police officer who trains, houses and handles Jax full time.

The agency's six Karelian bear dogs are being used across the state for wildlife research, enforcement and for conditioning bears, cougars and moose to avoid humans. The dogs also are ambassadors and conversation starters for public wildlife education.

"They have the genetics to do it all very well," said wildlife biologist Rich Beausoleil, the agency's bear-cougar specialist in Wenatchee.

Most of the dogs were purchased over the past 13 years for about \$4,000 each from the Wind River Bear Institute in Montana. Jax is the first Karelian assigned to the Spokane Region.

These wildlife service dogs are trained to confront sometimes dangerous animals without attacking or injuring them, Kirsch said. "We've used them to haze bighorn sheep off a highway," he said.

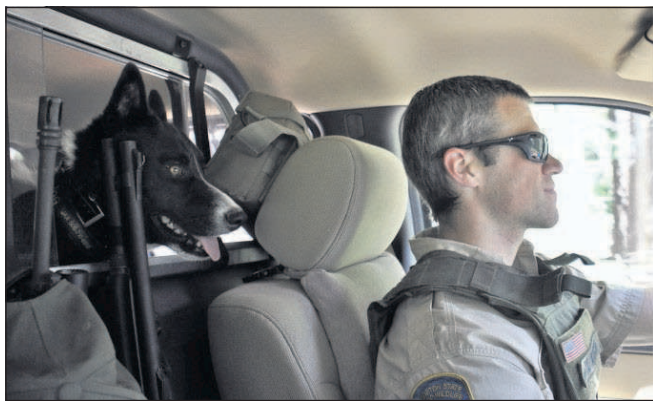
Other states using Karelians for wildlife service include Montana, Nevada, California and the province of Alberta.

The dogs sometimes are used to find orphaned bears so they can be taken to rehabilitation centers for eventual release.

Nick Jorg, the officer who oversees Washington's Karelian program out of Seattle, said his 75-pound Karelian stepped up to another role in an unplanned bear encounter.

"I was alone with Colter when we discovered two cubs up in a tree," he said. "I was trying to get out of there immediately when I saw this big, beautiful (black bear) sow barreling in on me."

"Colter responded and plowed into her side. He rolled over a bear more than twice his size. That gave us a chance to get out of there."



Rich Landers/The Spokesman-Review via AP

In this photo taken May 6, Jax, a 1-year-old Karelian bear dog rides with his handler, Washington Fish and Wildlife Department officer Keith Kirsch, in Spokane.

Nobody hurt."

Beausoleil handles a Karelian named Cash that's been trained for a variety of work. In some cases, Cash will scent bears and cougars and chase them until they go up a tree so they can be tranquilized for wildlife study and collaring without having to be trapped.

"Cash has dealt with 500 bears and 130 cougars so far in his career and saved a lot of staff time," he said.

The agency's Karelians are taken to fairs, festivals and schools where they break the ice for staff to educate the public on living with dangerous wildlife.

Jax came to Spokane last year and debuted at 5 months old with Kirsch as they responded to a black bear cruising a North Side neighborhood.

The dog gave Kirsch an approachable platform to explain bear management to the crowd that had gathered on Oct. 16 along Lyons Avenue near Nevada Street. Meanwhile, department staff tranquilized and removed the bear from a tree.

Kirsch traveled with the crew to a release site and Jax did his part to help convince the bear to stay out of town.

"We don't hurt the animals, just condition them," Kirsch said.

"We don't call them problem bears because the problems often are human-caused. Things like bird seed, pet food and unsecured garbage attracts bears and gets them into trouble."

"It's not healthy in the long run for a bear to lose its fear of humans."

Last week, Jax, Cash and Colter were used to condition two young orphaned black bears that had been caught during winter hanging around homes near Bead Lake.

"They were skinny and wouldn't have made it through winter, so we trapped them and they were kept alive in an Idaho rehabilitation facility," Kirsch said. "We wanted to do a hard release to get them back

in the wild with the right attitude."

Hard release means they scare the bear rather than simply letting it go free.

A text-book example of using Karelians to deal with a nuisance bear complaint goes as follows:

Officers use a baited culvert trap to capture the bear. The animal is sedated, given a health exam and ear-tagged so it can be identified later if encountered.

Neighbors are educated to clean up their garbage or other food sources that attracted the bear into trouble. Then the bear is released either on site or transported to a safer area. In either case, the dogs are used for a hard release.

Instead of just drawing open the trap door and letting the bear go, at least two officers bring in dogs on leash to bark and raise the bear's anxiety.

Another officer might carry a shotgun that fires non-lethal projectiles to sting the bear if needed to get it running away.

The bear is given a head start out of the trap before the dogs are released to chase and scare it more before it leaves the area or climbs a tree.

"The idea of a hard release is to create a negative impression so the bear learns to avoid the site and humans," Kirsch said. "You need at least two dogs to be effective. In the case of a grizzly, the minimum is three dogs."

"Of 600 bears we've hard released, 96 percent have never been involved in another incident," Beausoleil said.

Washington's Karelian Bear Dog program is funded by donations garnered online, from presentations and fund-raising events.

"The GPS tracking collar I put on Jax was donated by the Northwest Sportsman Club," Kirsch said. The collar allows the officer to know the dog's position as it roams while the officer's working.

BLOOMIN' BLUES

Small, slender sandwort stands out in Blues

By **BRUCE BARNES**
For the East Oregonian

Name: Ballhead sandwort
Scientific Name: *Eremogone congesta*

This small plant is one that is found from Alberta and Saskatchewan to California, Arizona, and Colorado.

It prefers open, arid or semi-arid sites, from deserts to sagebrush steppe to alpine slopes. It is often blooming in hot, open sun in gravelly or sandy soil.

The plant forms small mats a few inches wide with tufts of slender grass-like leaves at the base. The leaves on the stems are opposite each other and slightly united around the stem, as often occurs in the "pink" family, the *Caryophyllaceae*. The flowering stems are the thickness of pencil lead and about 10 inches high, twice as tall as the leaves, topped with a single round ball, about a half inch wide, of several tiny white flowers.

Each flower has 5 slender petals. The flowers are nearly impossible to photograph as they bounce wildly around in the slightest breeze.

The common name, ballhead sandwort, seems appropriate, with the flowers in a head-like sphere. It likes sandy soil, and "wort" means plant, hence the name sandwort.

The genus name, *Eremogone*, which replaced an older name, *Arenaria*, isn't quite so simple. *Arenaria* was OK, as the Latin "arena" meant sand. *Eremogone* has a prefix "eremo," which means solitary, and



Photo courtesy Bruce Barnes

Ballhead sandwort

the rest of the word may come from "gona," which means angled. The tiny seeds have minute wings which may be the reason for the ending on *Eremogone*.

Ballhead sandwort has been used by some plains Indian tribes for medicine. They used it to treat gastrointestinal problems, rheumatism, skin problems from sun exposure, venereal disease, and as a blood purifier.

Where to find: From now through mid-August you may find it in an open dry areas from middle to upper elevations. It will be easy to spot.

Have an outdoors story or photo you would like to share?
Email ttrainor@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0835.

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