

Stories, memories at Blue Mountains hunting camp

By RICH LANDERS
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POMEROY, Wash. — Five generations of memories come alive in white wall tents and around the campfire every big-game hunting season at Scoggin Hole.

That’s the name given to the carved-out plot of flat earth in a harshly vertical, rocky maze of canyons and slopes in the Washington side of the Blue Mountains.

Scoggin family hunters have camped at this Umatilla National Forest site every year since 1937.

The white enameled steel coffee cup hanging in the cook tent dates back about 100 years to the homesteader family’s first cabin down in the foothills.

“There are a lot of old things here, but it’s probably the oldest,” Max Scoggin said.

Antlers taken by Scoggin Hole hunters for 80 years are kept at the foothills homestead. His grandmother was a hunter and trapper who lived in the defunct village of Mountain View. His uncle once carried a black bear carcass into the campsite over his back as though it were a sack of beans. A cousin has a cherished Stetson hat that an uncle anointed with a handful of blood from his first elk.

One family member’s ashes are buried easy visiting distance from the camp.

“There’s a piece of all of us here,” Erv Koller said.

Max, 59, of Pomeroy is the youngest of the third generation. Cousin Erv Koller, 71, of Spokane was the oldest in the camp in the recent elk season. His son and 9-year-old grandson had been there for the deer hunt along with an assortment of uncles and cousins.

“We limit the camp to family; that’s why the tradition has lasted so long,” Koller said. “If our wives knew everything that happened here, they’d never let us come back.”

The family

Koller first joined the camp at the age of 14 with his twin brother in 1960, when the Blues were crawling with elk, and elk hunters. The meat pole was regularly festooned with deer, elk and anything else that was legal. “The hills weren’t so steep,” he said.

“Our best season was 1974; we killed five bull elk by 8 a.m. on opening morning, and had another one three days later; only two were spikes. We spent the rest of the season packing meat. We have a picture of 24 quarters hanging from the meat pole.”

They all used Army issue M-1 Garands that year, Vern Scoggin of Spokane said. One family member had been a military supply sergeant with access to a lot of cheap ammunition. “We were accused of using automatic weapons. It must have sounded that way with several of us shooting at once.”

“We were born in the ’40s and we wanted to somehow share our uncles’ WWII experience,” Koller said. “Carrying 88 rounds is heavy as all getout, I’ll tell you.”

In 1980, when a radio report confirmed Ronald Reagan had been elected president, the Scoggin campers rolled out of the tents with their M1s and fired 8-round clips of tracers.

“My uncles once declared daylight several hours early by using parachute flares over the canyon,” Koller said.

Camp is tamer nowadays, with the crew usually in bed for good by 8 p.m.

Before he could afford a four-wheel-drive vehicle, Koller traveled to camp in his 1959 Plymouth Savoy station wagon V-8 with a typewriter push-button tranny.

“When it snowed, we’d put chains on all fours to try to stay on the road,” he said, noting the consequences of going off the road are grim. “You’ll roll to the bottom of the canyon unless you’re lucky enough to hit a tree.”

“We got stuck once and the only way we could turn around and head back was to jack up one end of the station wagon, push it off the jack to gain a few feet and repeat.”

Storms are the foundation for many harrowing camp stories, including a big blow two years ago that knocked down a tent ridge pole, which could have injured someone.

“We had two 200-pound boys out on either side of the tent trying to hold down the Visqueen cover,”



In an Oct. 30 photo, continuing an annual family tradition started in 1937, brothers, sons and cousins gather for a photo after moving into their Scoggin Hole hunting camp near Pomeroy, Wash., the day before the Washington general elk season opens. From left, Larry Scoggin, Erv Koller, Vern Scoggin, Hunter Scoggin, Mike McDowell and Max Scoggin. He represents the fourth generation at the camp.

Koller said. “One gust came in that lifted them up like they were dead meat.”

Being visible from the road has made Scoggin Hole the first stop for emergencies involving other hunters and greenhorns. Typically they involve getting lost or vehicles sliding off the godforsaken road.

“Two men are alive today only because their headlights stayed on and we spotted them below after they went off the road and down the steep slope,” Koller said. “One was trapped under the front axle, the other pinned under the back axle. Both were drunker than a skunk, but sober by the time we got them out.”

“Somebody used a chain saw on a tree three inches from one guy’s head. I remember them screaming in pain as they were packed and bounced out of there on stiff boards.”

In November 1973, Scoggin Hole became headquarters for an aerial evacuation of Bill Loomis, an elk hunter who was accidentally shot as he led horses in the forest.

Helicopter pilot Floyd “Mose” Carr Jr. and Neil Zander flew in fog from Pomeroy to rescue Loomis, who survived but later lost an eye and an arm. The rescuers were awarded the Carnegie Hero Award in Washington, D.C.

The camp

The camp sometimes is a hospitality center where the family and special guests enjoy a pig roast before elk season. “We’ve eaten an 80-pound pig in one sitting,” Koller said. “We cook all day, drink beer and make applesauce. When the pig’s done it’s gone.”

Everything at Scoggin Hole has been refined over time. For example, the first pig came out of the earth raw even after many hours of cooking in a ground pit. “We’ve improved the cooking part to avoid food poisoning,” Koller said.

A railroad tie planted like a step at the brink of a dropoff outside the tent door has a white line painted on the outer edge. “That’s where you ‘hang 10’ when you have to get up and come out at night,” Koller said.

In October, before the deer season, a group of 6-8 men heads into the Blues to set up the 16- by 24-foot sleeping tent and the adjoining 16- by 20-foot cook tent, which will be stocked with about six propane stoves under lanterns, cast-iron pans that have never been fouled by a drop of soap and old wooden compartmentalized food boxes on tables next to waterproof Rubbermaid bins.

“We’ve done it so many times, we can put the camp up in a few hours, plus more for wood cutting,” Koller said.

The gear ranges from old to new with only one thing absolutely forbidden: “No generators,” he said. “No way. And iPhones don’t work up there, so we don’t have to worry about that.”



In an Oct. 30 photo, Hunter Scoggin leaves the sleeping tent at the Blue Mountains hunting campsite near Pomeroy, Wash.

As kids, they slept in straw on the ground. Now the sleeping tent has bunks with plenty of space for up to about 12 hunters. Female family members have often joined the camp, but mostly it’s been the males.

A good night’s sleep with all the snoring and fussing takes practice. Rare problems with things such as an hourly watch chime that won’t turn off are solved with a hammer.

External commotion is harder to control.

“Once we were awakened at midnight by a gunshot right outside the tent,” Koller said. “Some hunters we knew from Chewelah were rolling into their (nearby) camp, having had some toddies en route, and one of them decided to sight-in his rifle on the Forest Service sign.”

The hunt

Three square miles they hunt regularly from camp look dark on a topo map, the result of so many contour lines being tightly squished together.

“We’ve done a lot of hunting in horrible places over the years,” Koller said.

When they were kids, they found prized hunting spots accessible only by foot and a lot of sweat. “Then in 1966 the Forest Service built a road up to the butte,” he said. “We felt like dynamiting it. They ruined one of our honey holes.”

Every family member at the camp this year has had a connection with the U.S. Forest Service over the years, from trail crews to wildlife biology work. The family often clears the trails they use because the agency no longer has the staff to regularly maintain them.

“As we get older, it’s harder to keep up with the trail work,” Koller said.

Life around camp is more leisurely nowadays, with a coffee pot usually on the stove and cold-packs of beer readily available. Nobody goes thirsty.

“We haul some spring water to the camp from up the road,” Koller said. “It makes the best coffee in the world.”

About the only thing we wouldn’t eat again is crow. They’re awful.”

As young men, Scoggin boys and cousins packed out quarters of elk on their packboards without stopping all the way up from the bowels of the canyon. “Now we’ll bone out meat to save weight and it’s still a chore,” Koller said.

“Maybe it’s a good thing they went to spike-bull only. There’s less chance of having to pack something out.”

It’s bittersweet if a camper draws a cow tag or coveted branch-antlered bull elk permit. “Talk about pressure,” Koller said. “Hunters wait years, decades, for a chance to do what we took for granted years ago.”

Hunters were on every ridge on the season opener before Blue Mountains elk herds dwindled starting in the ’80s, Vern Scoggin said: “You’d just sit and wait for elk to run by.”

“This year, not one spike, cow, or calf was spotted in our area; just large bulls for which we had no tag,” Koller said. “This was the first year in our history that we heard no shots fired the first three days of elk season!”

“But it was another relaxing year with family in the old stomping grounds sitting around the fire reminiscing.”

That doesn’t mean they didn’t have any action.

“We did catch a bushy-tailed woodrat in our kitchen,” Koller said. They had set a trap after missing food and “sign” indicated a visit by the critter better known as a pack rat.

“We had him by the left front leg and he wasn’t hurt. We’re all too soft-hearted now to kill even a rodent.

“Last we saw of him was white hind feet and tail disappearing under the bottom of the cook tent into the darkness toward the creek where he and his kin live in the logs below our camp.”



Photo submitted by Jack Simons

This photo of a dead coho salmon was snapped Nov. 17 on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. As of Wednesday, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife have counted 5,795 coho 3,381 chinook and 312 steelhead that have traveled past Three Mile Falls.

Groups push for wilderness area around Crater Lake

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon conservation groups are putting pressure on Congress to designate a large swath of public land, including Crater Lake National Park, as a federal wilderness area.

The Oregonian reports that representatives from Oregon Wild and Environment Oregon delivered a petition in support of the proposal to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden’s office on Monday. The petition calls for having 500,000 acres declared the Crater Lake Wilderness Area.

In a statement, Wyden, a Democrat from Portland, said protecting natural treasures is a top priority for Oregon.

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, a Eugene Democrat, says he thinks he’ll have to focus on preserving already protected areas rather than expanding them, based on statements from President-elect Donald Trump and Republican leadership in Congress.