



AP Photo by Jeff Barnard
Fran Mainella, then director of the National Park Service, looks at a feature of the Oregon Caves National Monument outside Cave Junction in August 2005, highlighted with a flashlight by tour guide Chas Davis.

Oregon Caves present singular mountain retreat

By **CHRISTINE SHERK**

The (Eugene) Register Guard

We are in the middle of one of the Siskiyou Mountains, the River Styx flowing beneath the grated platform upon which we stand. We have crouched — cave-walk style — along the narrow passageway to enter the Imagination Room, taking care not to hit our heads against ancient, dripping marble formations.

Already we've come through the Petrified Gardens and the Belly of the Whale, where marble ridges curve down both sides of the cave walls like the two sides of a giant rib cage.

Ranger Kat Gans, our guide on the popular Discovery Tour, tells us we are in the heart of the Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve here in the Imagination Room. She shines her flashlight beam onto a cartoonish white heart on the cave ceiling, and on another white formation shaped like a human heart, both formed from moon milk. "It's the only spot in the cave where you'll see moon milk," she reveals, "formed by a bacterial colony growing here." The colony has not been active for quite some time, but it's left other formations in its wake. When Gans points them out — The Cat Stuck in the Drainpipe, The Old Man Who Lives in the Cave — we laugh, welcoming comic relief.

After all, we have just emerged from the absolute darkness Gans had plunged us into with the flip of a light switch.

"This is about as far in the cave that Elijah Davidson got," Gans had explained about the mountain man who discovered the caves in 1874. He'd entered it to search for his dog in chase after a bear. "This is about as far as he got when he used up his last match."

In such darkness, the river sounds clear as a bell. Sharing a moment of silence, we think we see shapes and shadows simply not there. It's the closest we get to seeing into ourselves.

Below the surface

In summer, while it's quite warm above ground — in the mid 80s, say — it's an average of 44 degrees inside the caves, cool enough that visitors should wear long pants and a jacket.

"The guides get kind of used to it after a while," admits George Herring, park

ranger and chief of interpretation at the Oregon Caves site, which the National Park Service manages. "You'll get some of them going in there wearing shorts, but I sure wouldn't recommend that for any folks coming for a visit," he advises, adding, "Make sure you have good shoes."

Gans, wearing long pants and a short-sleeved button-down shirt, leads the Discovery Tour group onward through the well-lit cave chambers thanks to the wonder of electricity. We see countless grottos, peer up and down at intricately sculpted stalactites and stalagmites, climb ladders and even descend a spiral stairway to see a grand column.

For anyone uncomfortable with the experience, there is a way out.

"I can actually let you out of this Twilight Zone here," Gans explains at one point. We blink at the slice of daylight to our right, an "ecological gateway" through which species such as insects and rodents come inside the caves. "Anyone want to leave?" But no one exits. Not with jaw-dropping formations such as the Niagara Falls, the Ghost Room and Paradise Lost — an astounding cavern of geologic beauty — up ahead.

The tour takes 1.5 hours to complete. By the time we head uphill through the exit tunnel, we are ready for summer's warmth. We know we have experienced something extraordinary, "the nation's first wild and scenic underground river," as Herring says. "There's no place else in the nation that has that, which is unique and distinctive to Oregon."

Degrees of adventure

During the summer season, after Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, visitors to the Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve benefit from a full schedule of tours, with three options for which reservations and ticket purchases should be made in advance at recreation.gov. (Don't wait to purchase tickets until you arrive because you're bound to be disappointed; wait times can be up to two hours at the busiest times, and tours definitely fill up.)

The most popular Discovery Tour introduces people to the geology of the mountain, Herring says, "and while you go through you literally see the geology of the mountain from the inside out.

In addition to seeing marble, which is what the cave itself is carved from, and the formations that chemically develop from the marble, you'll also see some of the bare rock of the mountain."

The caves maintain an air of mystery, however, what with so many variables at work in their formation that experts only can guess at their age beyond "many thousands of years old," according to National Park Service literature about the underworld of Oregon Caves.

The Discovery Tour covers about a mile of the 3.8 miles of known cave passages and is open to all ages, as long as children are at least 42 inches tall.

Another summer tour option is the hour-long Lantern Tour at 6 p.m. daily. This tour presents the caves much like their earliest visitors would have experienced them with only a hand-held light. The tour guides share stories with a bit more of a historical context. That story about Elijah Davidson going after his dog, for one, is all the more terrifying when the group is instructed to blow out their candles in the Imagination Room to experience the total darkness.

BLOOMIN' BLUES

A close look is needed to distinguish Carey's Balsamroot

By **BRUCE BARNES**

For the East Oregonian

Name: Carey's Balsamroot
Scientific name: *Balsamorhiza careyana*

Last week the featured plant was the Arrowleaf Balsamroot. That species looks almost identical to the one featured today. Carey's Balsamroot can be found from southern British Columbia to southern Oregon.

The two species are known to produce hybrids in nature, and look the same from twenty feet away. A closer look and the differences become apparent. They are also known to naturally produce hybrids intermediate between the two.

Carey's Balsamroot is about 15-20 inches tall and wide. As with the Arrowleaf Balsamroot, the flowering heads have a central disk with many tiny flowers, and an outer ring of 8-25 flowers that each have a single large yellow petal.

However, instead of only one head per stem, Carey's Balsamroot usually has two to four heads at or near the top of each stem. The bracts under each head usually feel rough to touch, and are not woolly-hairy.

The leaves are about the same shape and size as the other species, with blades arrowhead-shaped and about 8-10 inches long. They also have little or no hairs on the leaves, so the leaves look a bit more green than grayish.

The "Carey" for whom this balsamroot was named is not identified in any reference I checked.

The plant was first described in 1849 by Asa



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Balsamorhiza careyana, Carey's Balsamroot



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Balsamorhiza careyana, Carey's Balsamroot

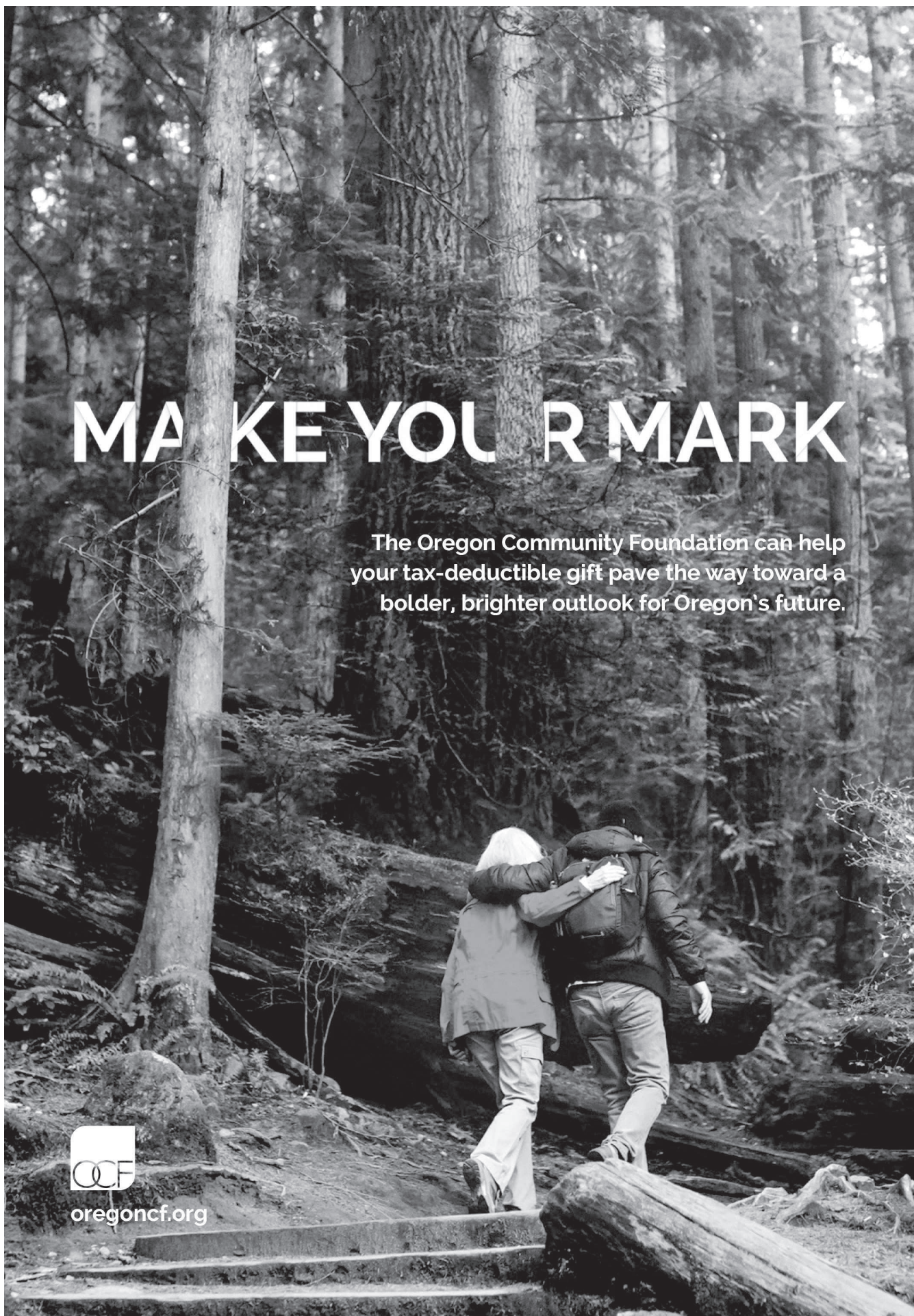
Gray at Harvard University, whose "Manual of Botany," published about the same time, is still a useful reference.

Indian tribes throughout the Pacific Northwest used several balsamroot species for a variety of food, medicine and other uses. However, this species is not listed in any of the usual references of plant usage, and it may be that tribes found *Balsamorhiza sagittata* and *B. careyana* to serve the same purposes and considered them to be the same plant.

Where to find: Watch for the plant on open grassy slopes and in meadows, from Pendleton westward and on the slopes of Cabbage Hill. Both Carey's Balsamroot and Arrowleaf Balsamroot are on the west-facing slopes of Cabbage Hill and are easy to spot at highway speed from 100 feet.

Carey's Balsamroot can be confused with Mule's Ears, a similar plant with dark green leaves that are tapered to the base and often clasp the stem, and with several heads on each stem.

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 and we'll publish it on this page. Call Tim at 541-966-0835 for information.



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Wildhorse grant to improve safety for tribal anglers

East Oregonian

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission has received a \$7,500 grant from the Wildhorse Foundation to help offset the cost of safety equipment for local tribal anglers, including life jackets and emergency boat beacons.

CRITFC plans to unveil its new cost-sharing program July 28 at the Indian Fishers Expo in Hood River.

"The Columbia River offers many gifts and many challenges," said Jaime Pinkham, CRITFC executive director. "Adequate safety equipment can make the difference between life and death."

The Wildhorse Foundation

grant was submitted as part of CRITFC's campaign to increase safety for tribal fishers on the river, and comes just a month after Greg George, a fishery technician for the group and member of the Yakama Nation, died after a four-person research boat he was on capsized in the Columbia River Gorge.

CRITFC is also working to establish a Columbia River Fishers Memorial at Columbia Hills State Park near Dallesport, Washington.

The Wildhorse Foundation is managed by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in partnership with Wildhorse Resort & Casino.