

## A flight among birds

Who among us has never dreamed of flying? How can you have watched vultures soar, hummingbirds hover and swallows dart through the air without imagining their view of the world?

Humans have joined the fish in the sea, nameless creatures below the surface of the earth and aliens in space but nothing has captured the essence of our species' imagination as the act of unaided flight in the skies above us.

I have limited experience in unpowered flight—a couple hops in a glider—but the near total silence high above the earth was fascinating and hypnotic. It was almost perfect, except for the limitations inherent in its name. By definition, a glider is headed downward, and increasing altitude and flight time depends upon finding and utilizing updrafts, an uncertain process at best.

I've spent a lot of time flying helicopters and light fixed-wing aircraft, however, and was always struck by the similarities between my aircraft and different birds. I had the good luck to begin my flying career in UH-1E (huey) gunships.

Terribly underpowered, especially when loaded with forward firing guns and rockets, as well as machine guns in each door manned by a crew chief and gunner, we were like albatrosses in our take-off profile. If you've never watched an ungainly, almost laughable albatross take-off, you should Google a video.

In the summer and at higher elevations, when the air was thinner, we had to reduce our payload dramatically, and even then we could rarely hover above two feet. Higher than that we quickly lost the beneficial effect of the bubble created by the rebound of our rotor wash from the ground. So, our procedure was to come to a two-foot hover, then ease forward, gently, gently, staying on the bubble, until we reached about 16 knots of airspeed, when we received the gift of translational lift. At that point we achieved unfettered forward flight and got as close as we ever would to the effortless beauty of an albatross on the wing. In real terms, translational lift is an improvement in lift a helicopter experiences as it escapes the disturbed air created by hovering. For us it was simply magic, a gift from the helicopter gods.

We referred constantly to power-required charts based on a two-foot hover over a flat, level surface in no-wind conditions. I often wished I could be more of a seat-of-the-pants pilot, able to get the job done like birds do, without the charts and double-checking. I specifically remember during one late-night bull session saying "Eagles and ospreys don't check charts and they don't have any trouble." Not long afterwards I saw photos of drowned ospreys and eagles in lakes, still attached to fish that proved too heavy for them to lift. Since then I've seen doves, as gifted flyers as there are, killed by impact with an easily visible power line when the bird misread strong, gusty winds.

After that I was pleased to have the charts, and depended on them religiously. A bit too religiously, as it turned out. Once on a training hop high in the Nevada mountains I checked my charts carefully and decided we had enough power to land and take off from a certain small zone.

My charts didn't take into account the fact that sagebrush in the area grew to four feet. Unable to get my skids high enough to clear the vegetation, I was effectively stuck...until I came upon a novel way to reduce my payload. Out went my somewhat offended gunner to await my return a few hundred pounds of fuel lighter. I suspect an albatross would have regurgitated its last meal to achieve the same thing.

Pat Wray is an outdoor columnist for the *Corvallis Gazette-Times*. This submission was shared via the *Associated Press*.



PAT WRAY  
Comment



Photo by Bob Swingle of ODFW

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife employees handle a bighorn sheep during a capture on Jan. 3 in the Deschutes River Basin.

# Bighorn sheep get new home

By MARK FREEMAN  
Mail Tribune

MAUPIN — Jim Bittle's participation in one of Oregon's greatest wildlife success stories came strictly from behind.

The Central Point man parlayed his position on the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission into a key role during the capture of 20 California bighorn sheep from the Deschutes River Canyon and their release in Oregon's John Day River Basin.

"I was a tail-gunner," Bittle says. "I had to take the temperature and collect fecal matter."

Monitoring a sheep's temperature with a rectal thermometer is vital to ensure it survives the capture, testing and helicopter flight to its new digs.

And the fecal testing checks for potentially infectious and deadly diseases such as pneumonia that can wipe out sheep herds.

When the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife field biologist meted out duties for this well-oiled operation Jan. 3, it was perhaps fitting that the commish got the crap job.

"Go ahead, laugh all you want, but you talk about the opportunity of a lifetime," Bittle says. "It was incredible."

Last week's relocation was the latest chapter in a decades-long collage of projects that make the reintroduction of bighorn sheep one of Oregon's greatest wildlife success stories.

Bighorn sheep once roamed vast areas of Oregon. Two subspecies of bighorn sheep roamed Eastern Oregon, with the Rocky Mountain subspecies in the northeast corner



Photo by Bob Swingle of ODFW

Two bighorn sheep are prepared for transport during a capture on Jan. 3 in the Deschutes River Basin.

of the state and the California subspecies throughout southeast and south-central Oregon, as well as deep in the John Day and Deschutes drainages.

But settlement of the West brought over-hunting, habitat loss, domestic livestock and associated diseases that led to the disappearance of native sheep by the end of World War II.

Reintroduction began in 1954 when the first California bighorn sheep were brought in from British Columbia. The population since has grown to 3,500 to 3,700 among herds in southeast Oregon, with another 800 or so Rocky Mountain sheep since the first 40 animals were transplanted from Canada's Jasper National Park in 1971.

ODFW's yearly capture and transplant operations help thin herds considered too large for their

habitat, and supplement herds that need more numbers to increase genetic diversity.

During the capture operations, a helicopter is used to locate sheep and capture them with a specially fitted gun that fires a net over an animal. Once netted, the sheep are blindfolded and restrained to calm them before they are placed in a sling and hoisted by helicopter to a landing location where they are processed by ODFW biologists and veterinarians.

That's where Bittle and fellow commissioner Bruce Buckmaster of Astoria came into the picture.

Getting invited to a bighorn sheep transplant is one of the plum volunteer opportunities within ODFW, and there were two slots open this year for commissioners.

Bittle says he jumped at the chance to join field biologists in the transplant of 20 pregnant ewes

from the Deschutes to the John Day.

"Usually, we as commissioners end up mostly seeing reports," Bittle says. "It's kind of valuable for the commissioners to see up front what the department does, and good for the department to see the commissioners, too."

When a ewe hit the landing zone, Bittle helped the biologists carry the blindfolded animal to an examination table, where the sheep had its nose swabbed and its rectal work done. Every other ewe was fitted with a GPS-transmitting collar so biologists can keep tabs of the herds, which live in some of Oregon's most remote and rugged country.

"There's a beauty to that barren, old land out there," Bittle says.

After that first sheep was whisked away, Bittle and his crew processed four more before their day in the high desert ended.

"To go out in the field and experience that really was something," Bittle says.

Bittle, who owns and runs Willie Boats in Medford, says the interaction with field biologists was "enlightening," and experience with these relatively rare animals a bit mesmerizing.

"I know when I take people fishing that, if it's quiet all the way home, I know they're thinking about what we did, reliving the moment," Bittle says. "That's what I did."

Perhaps if Bittle gets another chance to partake in the moment, he could parlay his experience into a promotion from fecal collector to nose swabber.

"That was fun," Bittle says. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

## PENDLETON

### Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation hosts kids event

By TIM TRAINOR  
East Oregonian

For the first time in Eastern Oregon, the Montana-based Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has organized an event geared toward future hunters and conservationists as young as six years old.

The Eastern Oregon youth skills day is Feb. 10 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Pendleton Convention Center. It is free to participate.

The event includes short seminars on elk bugling, advice for how to film your own adventure, wilderness survival tips, public lands information from Backcountry Hunters and Anglers and the U.S. Forest Service, as well as presentation on trail cameras and skull identification.

It also features plenty of giveaways for participants, including from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Tactacam and Yeti — items ranging from coolers to binoculars and backpacks to elk bugles.

The event was the brainchild of Korie Campbell, a Pendleton resident who

now attends the University of Montana in Missoula, where the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is headquartered.

Campbell has been leading youth-oriented events there, which include presentations on being bear aware, art projects and conservation information. She is also the daughter of Tim Campbell, who leads the foundation's Pendleton chapter.

"This is really her idea, and she is spearheading the whole thing," said Tim Campbell.

Korie said she is studying wildlife biology but hopes to specialize in wildlife education. She said educating young people about conservation and their public lands is critical to helping protect hunting rights and opportunities.

"Personally, I think the next step for conservation is interacting with the younger generation," she said. "It kind of goes for all ages, but I think a lot of people are uneducated about conservation and how hunting is conservation."

All youth are welcome to the event, but only those aged 6-16 are eligible for prizes.

## Sea lions bound back along West Coast

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ  
EO Media Group

California sea lions are doing just fine. Thanks for asking. More than fine, actually.

The sea lions have fully rebounded with an estimated population of more than 250,000 in 2014, according to a recent study by scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In 1975, the population was estimated at less than 90,000.

The study reconstructed the population's triumphs and trials over the past 40 years.

"The population has basically come into balance with its environment," co-author Sharon Melin, a research biologist at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, said in a statement. "The marine environment is always changing, and their population is at a point where it responds very quickly to changes in the environment."

The rebound is a victory for the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 that makes it illegal to kill or harass sea lions. But as in other instances of animal populations beating the odds — wolves, for example — it's a success story that comes with challenges.

As the California sea lion population has grown, the animals have expanded their range, bringing them into conflict with humans and endangered fish.

In Astoria, male California sea lions have taken over an entire stretch of docks at the Port of Astoria's East Mooring Basin. Port employees have

attempted numerous deterrent tactics over the years, everything from fluttering wind dancers to a fake killer whale. Nothing has really worked.

Upward of 1,000 pinnipeds were recorded in a single daily count at the mooring basin in 2015. While fewer sea lions returned this spring, plenty showed up in the fall and many have stuck around through the winter instead of leaving like they have in the past, said Janice Burk, marina manager.

## SKI REPORT

**Anthony Lakes**  
North Powder, Ore.  
Snow this week: 7"  
Base depth: 30"

Conditions: Early season conditions exist. Eastern Oregon Backcountry Festival and the Kip Rand Memorial Backcountry Race this weekend.

**Ski Bluewood**  
Dayton, Wash.  
New snow: 2"  
Base depth: 24"  
Conditions: Snow at lodge Thursday, hard pack rain throughout resort

**Mt. Hood Meadows**  
Government Camp, Ore.  
New snow: 1"  
Base depth: 40"  
Conditions: Groom is packed powder. Off piste is a thin layer of fresh over refrozen granular.