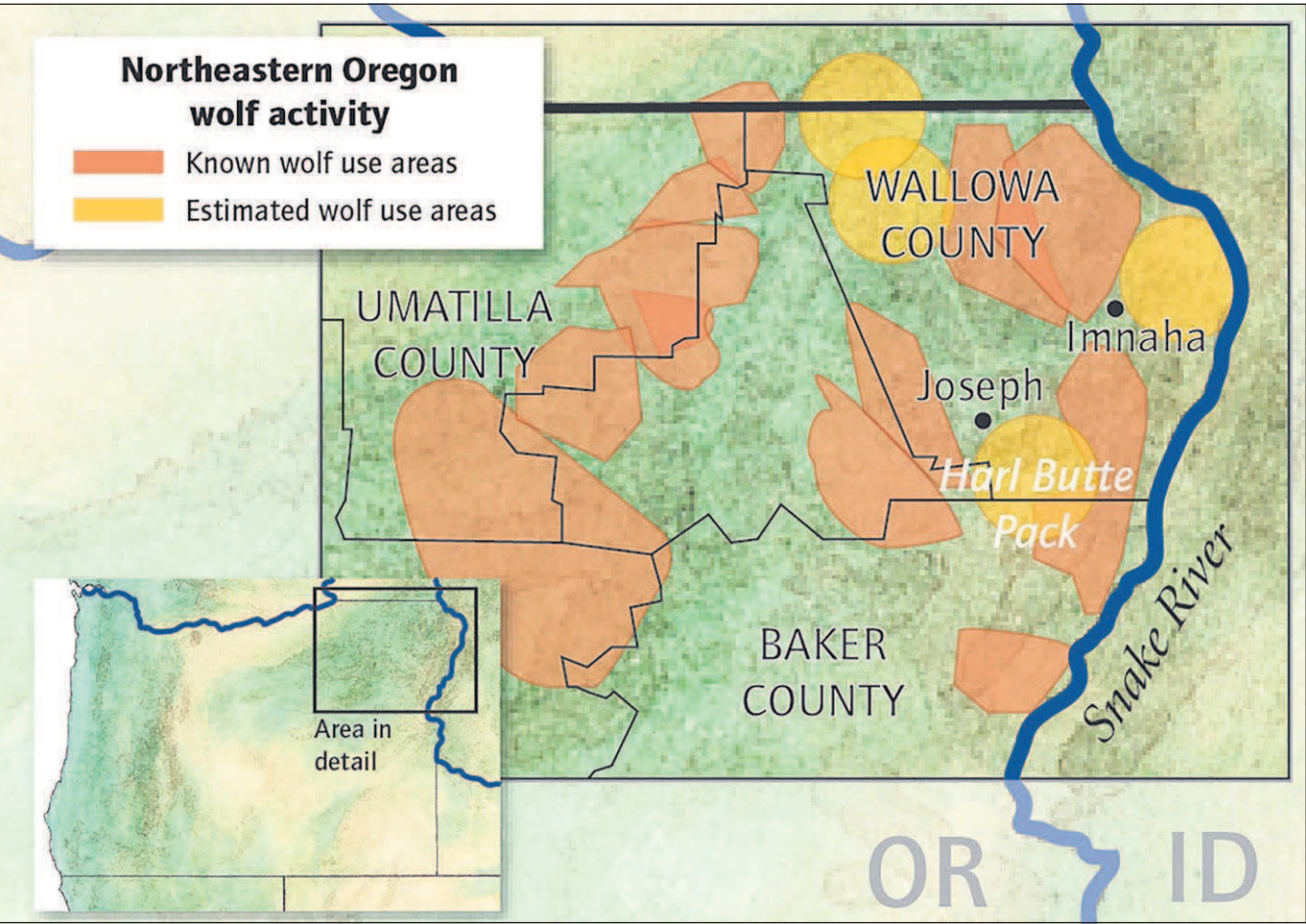




WOLVES: Missing cattle claims skyrocket

Continued from 1C

meandered from Hawaii to Vietnam to a Chinese commune in Inner Mongolia, now runs hundreds of cows in northeastern Oregon, with many grazing up in the Harl Butte area.

The trouble with compensating only for confirmed losses, Sheehy said, was that the region’s dense forests and rocky canyons were too rugged for ranchers to be able to find all the livestock that wolves may have killed. Paying for missing animals is “about the only way you can have any possibility of accurate compensation out in the Marr Flat, Snake River and Hells Canyon areas.”

The program that Oregon ultimately developed, overseen by the state Department of Agriculture, gave ranchers what Sheehy advocated for. Based on their record-keeping, they would be compensated in full for missing livestock if, after wolves appeared in their area, their losses climbed above their documented historical average.

Under the program, county-level wolf committees would vet claims for missing animals and review investigation reports before applying for state grants to cover claims for confirmed losses based on market value. An additional 30 percent of funding over the county’s total annual claimed amount was added to help ranchers pay for deterrents, such as range riders to monitor cows, and fladry, colored flagging that scares wolves away from fence-lines. An Oregon Department of Agriculture official would provide oversight, but authority lay largely with the counties.

Sheehy showed me the creased notebook where he tracks his cows. Other ranchers joke that he has fewer losses because his animals wear Alpine-style cowbells, “like Heidi.” So far, he’s requested compensation only twice. That’s true for many ranchers — though some claims stand out.

On a blue-sky fall morning, wolf advocate Wally Sykes, 72, drove into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, dodging deer hunters and cows, including two of Sheehy’s belled animals, then hiked through thick pine forest to Marr Meadow, not far from where Todd Nash’s calf was killed two days earlier. A faint howl drifted through the trees.

Though Sykes has seen wolves in the wild only a half-dozen times, he’s devoted a lot of time to them, serving seven years on the Wallowa County Wolf Committee. The program’s enabling legislation requires all the committees to include one county commissioner, two livestock producers, two wolf conservation advocates and two county business representatives. But Sykes said Wallowa’s committee is biased by local anti-wolf politics, with the other con-

servation post historically filled by someone associated with agriculture, not wildlife conservation.

Sykes believes that’s led to questionable decisions. In one case, the Wallowa committee approved a \$1,000 compensation request and passed it to Jason Barber, the state official who oversees the program, for a calf killed by a wolf while illegally grazing on an allotment the Forest Service had already closed. The state paid the full amount.

Baker County has been unable to fill its wolf-advocate posts, which are currently empty. In 2016, concerns were raised when the committee agreed to compensate for 41 missing calves and 11 missing cows, valued at more than \$45,000.

At the time, there had been only one confirmed wolf kill in Baker, in 2012, and according to the state wildlife department, no pack had yet denned there. That cast doubt on the size of the claim. But the rancher who filed it, Chad DelCurto, said wolves had been active on his allotment for three or four years. Come fall, most of his calves were missing.

“I hadn’t had problems in the past, until these wolves started coming in so thick,” DelCurto said.

The committee’s response so alarmed Mike Durgan, one of Baker’s business representatives, that he quit.

“Nobody believed (DelCurto’s claim) except our committee,” said Durgan.

He worried that it signaled a bigger problem: The county lacked a consistent, defensible procedure for obtaining accurate documentation from ranchers.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett acknowledged the case had problems, but said DelCurto hadn’t been using that allotment long enough to have historical loss numbers. When Barber began asking questions, the committee revised its ask, and DelCurto ultimately received \$9,540.

Critics believe the case could embolden others. Ranchers can only receive money for missing livestock if their animals are grazing in areas of known wolf activity — currently eight counties — as designated by the state wildlife department. But wolves are fanning out, and more counties will soon be eligible.

Even in more moderate Umatilla County, there are concerns about the limits of oversight. The county’s committee has two wolf advocates, and for major claims, it closely investigates ranchers’ routines for monitoring cows and locating missing ones, says county commissioner and committee member Larry Givens. But there’s only so much vetting they can do. Givens worries wolves are getting blamed for cougar and bear kills, as well as cattle rustling.

“I think that you’re going to face some risks if you have your animals up in outlying areas,” he said.

In 2018, compensation requests for missing livestock from four counties climbed to \$42,000, far outpacing requests for direct losses, which have remained between \$7,000 and \$18,000 statewide annually.

Roblyn Brown, the state’s wolf coordinator, said that she’s not aware of any biological reason for the surge. In theory, places with high missing-cattle claims should more closely track areas that are known to have dense wolf populations or high numbers of confirmed kills.

In a case at Baker County’s Pine Valley Ranch, 24 animals disappeared without a trace in fall 2013. The rancher requested more than \$26,000. But just one confirmed wolf kill had occurred in the area, a year before.

“If the producer is checking his livestock, you would expect the producer, or other people recreating in the area, to find several injured or dead calves to correspond with the missing numbers, if wolves were the cause,” said Brown.

The spike isn’t good for either rural residents or for wolves. If wolves are solely responsible, then nonlethal preventive measures aren’t working. That could lead the state to kill more wolves. To date, the state has paid \$595,790 in state and federal funds to 13 counties for nonlethal deterrents. But because the enabling legislation that required these deterrents didn’t define what their “reasonable use” would look like, Oregon Wild worries they aren’t being deployed effectively. Fladry works in small pastures, but not large allotments. Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts says the only thing that has worked to keep wolves away there is human presence — the county’s range rider. But that’s just one person for thousands of acres.

Another possibility is that some claims are inflated, either unintentionally or deliberately, blaming wolves for animals that disappeared for other reasons. “Wolves would have to do nothing but kill livestock for 24 hours a day to get up to the numbers they’re talking about,” said Defenders’ Stone. And if defenders are submitting illegitimate, or poorly documented, claims, they’re not just taking money from taxpayers, they may also jeopardize public support for reimbursing ranchers. “That’s the kind of thing that’s going to kill this program,” Durgan said.

Some ranchers have another explanation for the discrepancy between missing cattle claims and confirmed kills: They believe there are more wolves in Oregon than acknowledged, and that the wildlife department is attributing actual wolf kills to other causes. They feel betrayed.

Cynthia Warnock lives in Imnaha, her home overlooking rolling hills dotted with Indian paintbrush. She, her husband and brother-in-law have been some of Wallowa’s most frequent claimants for confirmed losses, receiving more than \$4,000.

In late 2016, when wolves killed one of their calves and maimed two others, the Warnocks asked officials to kill the offenders. They had lost more than four animals in the previous six months to wolves — the number legally required for a lethal removal permit. But the state declined because the season was almost over and the cows would be moved soon.

In another case, Cynthia Warnock found a calf covered in bite marks. But investigators said they weren’t wide enough to be from a wolf and more likely came from a coyote. A month later, the Warnocks found a partially eaten cow, but the state ruled that wolves had scavenged an already-dead carcass.

Cynthia didn’t trust the findings; like other ranchers, she felt investigators were biased in favor of the wolves the department is charged with protecting. Producers want Wildlife Services, which handles many rancher-wildlife conflicts, often by killing predators, to take over.

Phase three of Oregon’s wolf management plan, which Eastern Oregon entered in 2017, does allow Wildlife Services to conduct investigations once staff complete required training. That prospect worries Oregon Wild’s Rob Klavins. Roughly a quarter of Wildlife Services’ budget in Oregon comes from livestock and agricultural producers.

“There’s an incentive to make a different decision,” Klavins said.

And with such investigations ultimately leading not just to a payout, but deciding if wolves will live or die, the stakes are high.

Cynthia Warnock was clear on what she wants.

“If we have a pack that predares on livestock, then we eliminate the pack,” she said. “Compensation helps us adjust financially, but that’s it. ... You can’t pay for what we feel.”

Oregon’s compensation program doesn’t appear any closer to achieving local tolerance for wolves — one of its key goals. If it had, you’d expect to see fewer requests for lethal removal and a decrease in poaching, said Adrian Treves, director of the Carnivore Coexistence Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2017, after Eastern Oregon passed a population threshold where the state’s plan begins to relax protections, officials killed five wolves at ranchers’ behest — the same number killed in 2016 — despite far fewer confirmed livestock losses. An additional four wolves may have been poached.

BLOOMIN’ BLUES



Photo by Bruce Barnes

American vetch, *Vicia americana*

American vetch a good luck charm

By **BRUCE BARNES**
For The East Oregonian

Name: American vetch
Scientific name: *Vicia americana*

American vetch is a widespread member of the pea family, found from Alaska to Quebec, and south to California to Texas, and Missouri to Virginia. The genus *Vicia* is the Latin name of vetch plants since early Roman times. There are about 200 species of vetch worldwide. This vetch covers most of the upper 2/3 of the continent, easily earning the name American. It is not the most common vetch of the six in northeast Oregon, but can be found in scattered locations in the Blue Mountains at middle-elevations, usually blooming in mid-summer.

Vicia americana is not weedy, and nothing like the aggressive vetch that makes large purple, tangled patches several feet across on the lower levels of Cabbage Hill near Pendleton. American vetch is a low, scrambling vine that seldom grows over 2 feet long. It has pinnately compound leaves, each

leaf having 8-12 slender, linear to narrowly lance-shaped leaflets lined up opposite each other in 4-6 pairs. The tip of each leaf ends in a tendril that often branches into 2-3 grasping tips.

The flowers are borne in small clusters of about 4-6 small, blue to purplish pea-like flowers. The fruit is a linear pod about 2-3 inches long with several seeds inside.

Vicia americana has been used by several southwest and northwest Indian tribes for a variety of purposes. Medicinal uses included treatment for soreness and spider bites, as an eyewash, a “life” medicine, and as a “love” medicine. Several tribes used the plant for food, including cooking it or as greens, and preparing the stems and pods by boiling or baking. It was also used as fodder for horses and cattle. The fibrous roots were used to tie objects and also as a good luck charm when gambling.

Where to find: Look for it along roadsides in shady woods around 5,000 feet elevation. It is one of the few perennial plants that hasn’t dried up yet this summer.



David Ellifrit/Center for Whale Research via AP

In this photo taken Tuesday provided by the Center for Whale Research, a baby orca whale is being pushed by her mother after being born off the Canada coast near Victoria, British Columbia.

Orca whale continued to carry her dead calf

SEATTLE (AP) — For two days she has grieved, carrying her dead calf on her head, unwilling to let it go.

J35, a member of the critically endangered southern resident family of orcas, gave birth to her calf Tuesday only to watch it die within half an hour.

All day, and through the night, she carried the calf. She was seen still carrying the calf on Wednesday by Ken Balcomb, founder and principal investigator of the Center for Whale Research.

“It is unbelievably sad,” said Brad Hanson, wildlife biologist with the Northwest Fisheries Science Center, who has witnessed other mother orcas do the same thing with calves that did not survive.

Robin Baird, research biologist with the Cascadia Research Collective in Olympia, in 2010 watched L72, another of the southern residents, carry her dead newborn in 2010.

“It reflects the very strong bonds these animals have, and as a parent, you can only imagine what kinds of emotional stress these animals must be

under, having these events happen,” Baird said.

“You could see the calf had not been dead very long, the umbilical cord was visible. When we were watching, all the rest of the whales were separated by a distance, and they were just moving very slowly. She would drop the calf every once in a while, and go back and retrieve it.”

J35 is doing the same thing, carrying her calf by balancing it on her rostrum, just over her nose. She dives to pick it back up every time it slides off.

Scientists have documented grieving behavior in other animals with close social bonds in small, tightly knit groups, observed carrying newborns that did not survive.

Seven species in seven geographic regions covering three oceans have been documented carrying the body of their deceased young.

“It is horrible. This is an animal that is a sentient being. It understands the social bonds that it has with the rest of its family members. She carried the calf in her womb from 17 to 18 months.”