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David Johnson, director of the Global Owl Project, holds a trio of 6-day-old owlets.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Giving a hoot

Owl expert David Johnson makes annual trek to Depot

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — David H. Johnson found his passion for owls one moonlit night in Minnesota.

Now, an international owl expert, Johnson was only 11 then, camping in a pup tent. He heard the whinnying sound of a descending screech owl, and then the bird landed. He could see the owl's silhouette through the canvas.

"For 20 minutes, he called," Johnson said. "I was inside. He was outside. We were inches apart."

From that time on, he said, owls became "ever-present in my life." He loves their silent flight, eye structure, predatory nature and diversity around the world.

Johnson, the director of the Global Owl Project, jokes that he even looks like an owl with his body shape, Groucho Marx eyebrows and nocturnal tendencies.

Johnson started coming to the former Umatilla Chemical Depot in 2008 to rescue a fading population of burrowing owls. On this windswept sagebrush prairie dotted by concrete bunkers that once held deadly chemical weapons like sarin and mustard gas, the owls once thrived. When the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife relocated some pronghorn antelope there, things changed. The antelope did well at first, then declined, probably because of inbreeding in their isolated territory. Coyotes were blamed initially though, Johnson said, and trapping began. Badgers got caught up in the traps along



David Johnson, director of the Global Owl Project, checks on the health of a juvenile burrowing owl as his intern, Anya Nelson, looks on while banding the birds recently on the former Umatilla Chemical Depot outside of Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

with the coyotes, and since burrowing owls depend on abandoned badger dens for nesting, the owl population crashed to only two or three nesting pairs.

Johnson and others came to the rescue, placing artificial burrows made of buried 55-gallon barrels, 10 feet of flexible drainage pipe and a plastic bucket. A mesh floor prevents pocket gophers from stealing eggs.

The next year, the number of pairs rose to nine and continued improving each year.

"We had a high of 65 pairs," Johnson said. "We're now hovering between 43 and 55 pairs."

What started as a rescue mission evolved into a research opportunity. Johnson and his fellow scientists banded the birds, recorded their calls and attached geolocators to determine their migration routes.

Sites, in neighborhoods of two or

three burrows, are spaced about a quarter-mile from one another. On Wednesday, Johnson and his intern, Anya Nelson, checked on four of the 43 active nesting sites. At one of the locations, they parked their van and trekked to the first site and its two burrows. Johnson carried a pair of 10-foot-long plungers. Nelson lugged a bucket filled with tools for banding and digging. Johnson kneeled in the sandy soil and inserted a plunger in the front entrance of one burrow and slowly pushed it through the tunnel. The procedure gently herded the owls into an inner chamber. That done, Johnson popped out a plastic bucket serving as a cork to the chamber and reached in. Soon, he held a wide-eyed owlet in each hand. Nelson quickly banded them on their left legs. Johnson set them in front of the tunnel entrance and they scurried

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Federal judge dismisses suit over driving suspensions

Two members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation among plaintiffs

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

PORTLAND — A federal judge recently shot down a class action lawsuit seeking to end Oregon's practice of suspending driver's licenses for people who can't pay fines. Two members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were among the six plaintiffs suing Oregon over "traffic debt."

The nonprofit Oregon Law Center filed the lawsuit in September 2018 in federal court in Portland on behalf of Cindy Mendoza and Gloria Bermudez of Portland; Jeremy Chase of Vancouver, Washington; Karl Wade Roberts of Baker City; Rebecca Heath of Pendleton; and Cekais Toni Ganuelas of Mission. According to the complaint, the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles Division "suspended Oregonians' driver's licenses 334,338 times for failure to pay fines, costs and fees arising from minor traffic citations, and the

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GOP strike in Oregon enters 5th day

Senate unable to conduct business because of Republican boycott

By SARAH ZIMMERMAN
Associated Press

SALEM — Republican state senators in Oregon who walked out to thwart landmark climate legislation didn't show up for work for a fifth day on Monday, with the GOP insisting they'll continue to stay away and Democrats saying the minority party was stirring up "dangerous sentiments."

The 11 GOP senators, who are in the political minority, fled the Oregon Legislature on June 20 to deny Democrats the quorum that's required to vote on any legislation. Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, activated the state police to seek out the rogue lawmakers and bring them back to the Statehouse for the vote, but on Monday the senators were still absent.

Many have fled the state, where the Oregon State Police has no jurisdiction.

The debate over the cap-and-trade bill gets at the heart of a widening gap between the liberal priorities of Oregon's populous urban centers, such as Portland, and much of the rest of the state where conservative causes hold sway with most rural residents. It has become a flashpoint for both sides.

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Wildhorse begins entertainment expansion

Arcade, food court, 24-lane bowling alley among projects to be constructed

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

MISSION — The Wildhorse Resort and Casino expansion is still in

its early stages, but it's already experienced its fair share of twists and turns.

According to June 20 press release, Lydig Construction of Kennewick has already erected fences and moved equipment in anticipation of working on Wildhorse's latest expansion.

In the coming months, Lydig will expand existing features, like the cineplex lobby and children's entertainment center, and build new ones, like an arcade, food court, and 24-lane

bowling alley.

Sometime after that, Lydig intends to move forward with plans to build a second hotel tower and a new events center.

Wildhorse CEO Gary George said Wildhorse's facilities will stay open during construction, but how customers access the building will change.

The main entrance to the movie theater will be relocated and a walkway rerouted. Construction will close

off some parts of the parking lot, but Wildhorse is building a new parking lot south of the cineplex, which is set to open in September and will remain open after construction ends.

The projects are meant to bolster the ascent of the resort and casino, which has helped the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation become the largest employer in

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