

SHED HUNTING THE WHEAT COUNTRY

By **BRAD TRUMBO**
For the East Oregonian

PENDLETON — March is a fine time to work a bird dog on the Palouse. With the upland season a couple months past and the snow freshly off the wheat fields, my girls and I took to a secluded parcel for a run and maybe put up a rooster or two. A bitter wind howled across the emerald green of the thriving winter wheat, battling the warmth of vibrant sun rays cast sharply from a bluebird sky.

Approaching an island of black locust and wheatgrass about 20 acres in size, a white object caught my attention. Beneath a golden fold of grass mashed flat from its former snow blanket shone a heavy chunk of what appeared to be bone. “How sweet would it be if that were a giant shed!” I thought to myself as I approached. You can imagine my surprise when I unearthed the only drop-tine whitetail antler I will ever lay hands on, complete with a split brow tine and soda-can base circumference.

The antler was weathered and cracked and had clearly lay there for several years. I wondered where that buck had come from. There was no other cover for miles and we were nearly 20 miles from a brushy river corridor in any direction. How had that buck dodged the modern firearms seasons so many years to put on such character?

I may never have such fortune to stumble upon a better shed in my lifetime. Whitetails are known for their adaptation to postage-stamp, patchwork covers. True to form, this guy clearly followed the playbook, shedding where no one would think to look in a relatively tiny and inaccessible patch of cover.

Bagging elk sheds is exciting, but in my experience, it's deer in the wheat country that offer the best shed hunting. A solid rule of thumb is to seek out bedding and feeding areas. South and west aspects are the warmest this time of year and typically offer better food sources. Deer spend the majority of their time in these areas and are more likely to shed there. While well-worn travel routes are hard to pass up, I have found so few sheds on trails that a nice walk or the occasional small forky antler is about the main prize.

You can dodge the masses by knocking on a few doors and maybe find some ground all to yourself. Small woodlots and eye-brows with a few trees to provide a windbreak should be given fair inspection. Deer will paw at the ground around these trees to create flat beds on steep slopes.

Deer generally shed their antlers from late December through March. Mule deer tend to yard up in large, visible groups on the



Photo courtesy of Brad Trumbo

A common find — a fork-horn mule deer shed below a wheat field eyebrow.



Photo courtesy of Brad Trumbo

A fine pair, but better sheds can be found in the wheat country.

open, grassy slopes, while white-tails commonly feed in the unseen crevasses of wheat fields this time of year.

Cabin fever pushes most big game hunters to wit's end by now, and the prospects of shed hunting are too enticing to ignore. However, there is an ethical consideration to early shed hunting. March on the Palouse can be a deadly month for wildlife, as they have hit rock bottom on fat reserves and food sources. A year like the present causes little winter kill as snow accumulation is minimal and temperatures are generally mild. But

tough years with lingering deep snow and single-digit temperatures can take its toll on a deer herd.

Waiting to hunt sheds until about the time that spring gobbler opens is a best practice to leave critters unperturbed when they cannot afford to suffer additional stress and energy expense. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife doesn't enforce restricted shed hunting seasons, but does offer tips to keep wildlife healthy, such as not pushing a herd too hard or pursuing them over consecutive days. One advantage to shed-hunting the wheat country is being able



Photo courtesy of Brad Trumbo

A four-point mule deer shed found on a flat spot at the base of an evergreen.

to spot sheds in stubble or green wheat with binoculars before hiking through feeding or resting critters with nothing to show for it.

Additionally, respect for public and private land and landowners is paramount. Sheds are the property of the landowner where they fell, requiring permission to collect them on private land. If you run a shed-hunting dog, ensure that it doesn't run deer or elk as you hunt for antlers.

Bottom line: Shed hunting is a lot of fun and a great way to get outdoors, kick the cabin fever, and grab some sun and exercise while

waiting on spring gobbler or fishing seasons. Load up your pack, grab the binoculars, and enjoy the warmth of the sun on your back for a welcome change from winter. You just might find that shed of a lifetime.

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CAUGHT OVGARD

A boy and his rod at the end of the world

By **LUKE OVGARD**
For the East Oregonian

Without a doubt, I always expected the events of Sept. 11, 2001, to be the cause of the single greatest crisis Americans would face in my lifetime. I no longer believe that to be true.

When this whole COVID-19 business got off the ground, my immediate response was to dismiss it out of hand as political maneuvering and overreaction to what is to the vast majority of those infected: a milder version of the common cold.

I viewed it as an inconvenience, an unfortunate reality borne of a chain of knee-jerk reactions to something that, at the current death toll, won't even break into the top 20 leading causes of death in the United States — as if there ever were an “acceptable” number when referring to the loss of human life.

But now, I view it as something that could be a turning point in the United States and the world.

While the virus itself certainly scares me — particularly for my older relatives — it is the effects of our reaction to the virus that scare me more.

Today, I'm not going to write about fishing. Well, not much, anyway. I'm going to write my reaction to the science fiction reality we're now living and how we can save our nation, our economy and

our cultural identity without losing our humanity in the process.

Books

Last year, I listened to a lot of audiobooks while fishing and traveling around the country to fish, and two of them have been on my mind a lot in the past week or two.

The first is titled “The Warehouse” by Rob Hart. It tells the story of a post-crisis United States, devastated and shaken. Though many people die, many more refuse to leave their homes to carry out basic functions out of fear. As a result, the economy collapses on a scale that makes the Great Depression seem like a slight economic downturn in comparison. Millions lose their jobs, homes and very way of life as small businesses and entire sectors of the economy simply cease to exist.

In the resulting economic vacuum, one company excels: an Amazon stand-in named “Cloud.” As Cloud grows in strength, the economy migrates almost entirely online, driven by social isolation and fear-mongering. By creating a fleet of automated drones to perform deliveries, Cloud puts logistics companies out of business. It eliminates traditional retail. It gains a market share almost overnight that makes Walmart's seem laughable. Cloud becomes the unstoppable force in the world that is ultimately more power-

ful even than most world governments, driven solely by the inertia of panic and fear, much like what we're seeing with COVID-19.

In the face of hoarding and the rampant fear of public spaces, online retail giants like Amazon are already benefiting. Amazon's stock prices were up almost 7% when I wrote this column — despite the downward spiral of most major players in the economy and some of the largest single-day drops in world history.

Tragedy has befallen us, and it's not over yet. In the United States and around the world, those who have died deserve every bit of respect and mourning they receive; however, what we cannot do is allow their sacrifice to be in vain, nor can we use it to justify a lack of humanity.

When I wrote this column, Gov. Kate Brown had just banned all gatherings of 25 or more people, limited restaurants, bars and coffee shops to takeout and delivery services only and extended the school closures through the end of April. I have mixed feelings about these actions, but I think the move will ultimately save lives at the cost of thousands and thousands of jobs, foreclosures, evictions and a rampant increase in homelessness.

This, far more than the virus itself, terrifies me.

As someone who derives most of his income from the state and federal governments (teacher and

member of the National Guard), I'm fairly blessed in these uncertain times to know I'll still be receiving a paycheck, but most people aren't so lucky.

What happens to the small business owners? The restaurant waitstaff, baristas, bartenders and everyone else who depends on the in-person, service economy? Many businesses are already laying off employees. Not because they're heartless monsters, but because they have to feed their own families and make sure they don't have to close their doors entirely. It's a horrible time, and those of us that still have access to an income must continue to support the economy, help our friends in need and do everything we can to curb the real danger of the coronavirus: complete economic collapse.

The other book I mentioned, called “A Boy and His Dog at the End of the World,” was written by C.A. Fletcher. It tells the story of a world decimated by “The Gelding,” an event that leaves most humans infertile. It is another take on the apocalypse, but rather than focusing on limited natural and economic resources like “The Warehouse,” it focuses on a lack of human resources as the titular characters range across the landscape in search of supplies while trying to find their way home.

Like most dystopian science fiction, these books are caution-

ary tales to problems we never thought we'd see. Yet here we are. We're closer than we've ever been in peacetime to the brink of collapse.

I cannot simply say “Go fishing” and, in good conscience, hope that's enough to stem what will likely be the largest quarterly spike in unemployment in Oregon since the collapse of the logging industry nearly 30 years ago.

What I can say is appreciate what you have. Tell your family members you love them. Be there for those who need you and don't be afraid to share. Help those around you, and if you are fortunate enough to catch some fish while trying to keep yourself from going mad with boredom, don't be afraid to keep them, clean them and give them to that elderly friend or neighbor or recently laid-off waiter you know.

The America we know doesn't survive with every man for himself; it survives with us reaching out and helping one another in their darkest hour. Even if we can't physically unite in solidarity, we can do it with our time, our money and the resources some of us have been so blessed with.

God bless, stay healthy and stay human.

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