

Start the new year with a cold swim at Wallowa Lake

Beth Gibans Memorial Wallowa Lake Polar Bear Plunge is Jan. 1

By Katy Nesbitt
Go! Magazine

JOSEPH — A long-held holiday tradition in Wallowa County is taking a dip in Wallowa Lake mid-morning on New Year's Day.

The worldwide phenomena of the "polar bear plunge" pits men and women against nature — hardy souls braving the frigid embrace of their local water source. Rich Wandschneider is a founder and annual attender of the event.

When asked why he celebrates the New Year in such bracing fashion, he said, "Because it's a helluva way to start the new year, to wash the old year away, to celebrate the fact of longer days and new life, and now, to remember those who won't be with us in 2022."

Other original plungers, Wandschneider said, are Rodd Ambroson of Joseph, and Jim Shelley, who moved to North Carolina.



Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain, File
Brave residents plunge into 2021 on Jan. 1, 2021, for the annual New Year's Day Polar Plunge at Wallowa Lake. The air temperature was a chilly 26 degrees, and Randy Greenshields observed that there was ice around the lake's edges. This year's event is Saturday, Jan. 1, at 10 a.m.

"College students coming home joined in the fun, and have often talked their parents and younger siblings into joining them," Wandschneider said.

Another of the "founders" of the Wallowa Lake New Year's

plunge was Beth Gibans, who succumbed to cancer last summer. Her husband, Leon Werdinger, said he never takes

the plunge himself but regularly photographed the chaotic few seconds of splashing of a couple dozen people at the foot of Wal-

POLAR BEAR PLUNGE

10 a.m. Jan. 1
Wallowa County Park
North end of Wallowa Lake

lowa Lake. In memory of Gibans, he said the event is now dubbed the "Beth Gibans Memorial Wallowa Lake Polar Bear Plunge."

"Beth relished swimming in lakes, rivers and oceans, both warm and cold, and was one of the original five people who started the Wallowa Lake New Year's Plunge in 2007," Werdinger said.

Wandschneider said another photographer at the event those first few years was Wallowa County Chieftain reporter Elane Dickenson, who died in early November.

"Elane used to take pictures and do a brief story on the practice," Wandschneider said.

To join in, the Wallowa County polar bear plungers meet around 10 a.m. at the Wallowa County Park on the north end of the lake to welcome the new year.

3rd Annual Holiday Decorating COMPETITION

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