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OUR VIEW

Our next governor needs a plan for education

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Let's repeat that.

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Plenty of goals, plans, programs and initiatives are out there. Almost every legislative session something new and different gets passed. State employees and school district officials then go off to add the latest churn on top of the churn.

Having a broad, statewide plan is no guarantee of success. But Oregon does need a long-term approach to education goals. It needs measurements. It needs reporting requirements. It needs specifics about how funding gets us to goals and how new initiatives fit in.

Much of that exists. What is missing is how it all fits together in a detailed road map for the future. Any state plan should be heavy on goals and providing performance data and easy on district flexibility to reach goals. There also needs to be a mechanism for accountability.

What are our candidates for governor going to do? They can reflect parental dissatisfaction easily enough. What are their plans for statewide improvement? Do they believe Oregon needs a statewide education road map?

Oregon's public education is far from a mess in every classroom in every school district. It succeeds for many students. And not every education problem is directly related to bad teachers, bad curriculum or poor education investments.

But Oregon's public education system does have problems. Here are some facts from a new state audit of public education:

- Less than 25% of Oregon students meet proficiency standards in math in 11th grade.
- Oregon's graduation rate may be improving. It still has been near the bottom in the nation.
- A statewide review in 2020 found only a third of Oregon children eligible for early intervention special education programs had access to them.
- And many of the students that are performing poorly in the system are minorities or low income.

Oregon is getting its level of performance with more recent investment in education. Measure 98 was passed in 2016 to increase graduation rates and career readiness. It was essentially another \$800 per high school student per year. Oregon also established a corporate activity tax in 2019 to bring in what was hoped to be an extra \$1 billion a year to improve education in early childhood and K-12.

We are going to have that new governor in not so very many months. It looks like Oregonians will have three major candidates to choose from: Democrat Tina Kotek, independent Betsy Johnson and Republican Christine Drazan. Which one would be the most likely to deliver a plan for improving K-12 education and pull it off? We don't see anything like that on their campaign websites. Should it be?

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Spring in the Blue Mountains



BILL ANEY
THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Springtime in the Blue Mountains; I am starting to think this is my favorite time of year.

One of my goals for this spring was to see a white-headed woodpecker, the only Oregon woodpecker not on my life list. After going public with my quest for a white-headed woodpecker sighting, a couple of folks gave me a good lead. So, one day in March I headed over to Cove, in Union County, where a resident had assured me she had this species of woodpecker at her feeders year-round.

Russ Morgan, a retired Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist and another birder, joined me in La Grande and we headed out with our binoculars and bird books.

The open forest of large diameter ponderosa pine felt like the right habitat, and I was optimistic about our chances. We wandered the property for 45 minutes or so in a light snow shower, spotting nuthatches, chickadees and even a hairy woodpecker. Eventually two larger black and white birds showed up at one of the seed feeders, each grabbing a sunflower seed and flying to a nearby perch to crack and eat the morsel.

White-headed woodpecker, check. On a different birding mission last spring, my wife and I found and photographed nesting great grey owls and watched as the young owlets made some of their first explorations away from their nest site. This winter, we visited a nighttime roost site for several hundred grey-crowned rosy finches. I love these kinds of expeditions.

Bird watching is usually a benign activity, but I must admit I also enjoy more consumptive outdoor spring pursuits. Morel season is upon us by now and people have been finding them along the Umatilla River and on the Umatilla National Forest. I so much enjoy the smell of morels sauteing in butter ready for my morning egg scramble. There's just something primal about that odor.

I also enjoy turkey hunting and use my meandering during the spring gobbler season to monitor the timing of the mushroom crop. I understand that soil temperature is an important driver of mushroom fruiting, but one can also gauge the season by more right-brained cues like blooming wildflowers and singing birds.

The early blooming plants, such as grass widow and avalanche lily, may be a bit too soon for morels, but I noticed the other day that fairy slippers had started to bloom in the same places I was finding the morels. I have also been hearing and seeing chipping sparrows and mountain bluebirds but no warblers yet.

The other day we came across fresh wolf sign in our turkey hunting area. I suspect that wolves may be hard on turkey populations, as are coyotes, skunks, raccoons and other predators. However, I don't begrudge these animals the meal provided by a turkey or their eggs. These predators are native and belong here; the turkeys do not. If it comes down to a wild predator or me getting a turkey, the wild predator should have it.

Obviously, my opinion isn't shared by everyone. East of us, some people took it upon themselves to poison an entire pack of wolves in Union County and shoot several others in Baker and Union counties. The reward for information leading to the arrest of these

miscreants is substantial, perhaps enough to buy someone a new pickup, and I am hopeful that a tip will help bring those responsible to justice. By the way, the Turn In Poachers hotline number is 800-452-7888.

Simply put, killing wildlife out of season without a permit is poaching, and putting poison bait out in the field for any animal to find is incredibly irresponsible. The same for shooting wolves everywhere and every time they are seen. Wolves are currently on the federal threatened and endangered species list, which puts the federal government in the drivers' seat.

If the wolf population was healthy enough to be removed from this list, management would revert to the state of Oregon, a better situation for all of us. Poisoning an entire pack or indiscriminately killing wolves on sight in the back country only delays the recovery of wolves and keeps the federal government in control. Again: the TIP hotline is 800-452-7888.

I agree that we need to remove those that develop a taste for domestic livestock; let's call these the bad wolves. By the same token we need to allow the good wolves, those that stay out of trouble, to survive, reproduce and pass on their genes and good habits to future generations of wolves.

How did I get here? I didn't intend this column to end with a lecture about wolf management. Instead, I encourage everyone to take a walk in the woods. Get out there — whether in search of morels, turkeys, woodpeckers or owls, or just to revive your soul, take advantage of these bright sunny spring days in our loved Blue Mountains.

This land is our land — enjoy it.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

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