

Wallowa County Fly-In puts on a soaring spectacle

By JACK PARRY
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — Planes lined the tarmac July 9 at the airport in Joseph as families, aerodynamic fanatics and other spectators filed through the gates to catch the Wallowa County Fly-In and Airshow.

Vendors sold a slew of foods and iced treats and pilots sat next to their planes, free to answer questions from curious attendees as the Joseph State Airport set the stage for an event that had been in the making for months and months.

Requiring tons of Federal Aviation Administration regulations and with more than 100 volunteers helping to put the event together, it was finally coming to fruition. The Wallowa County Fly-In and Airshow were about to begin.

J.D. Clay, the chairman of the North East Oregon Aviation Foundation, explained it had to make a three-dimensional box in the sky and evacuate everyone who lives under that box. Just another example of the work and coordination this tiny airport in Joseph needs to do to make the show possible.

"It takes a lot of work to make something like this happen. You just don't see it at smaller airports, especially an airport this small," Clay said.

One of the most unique air shows in the northwest, part of the allure for pilots and spectators comes from the stunning view that gives the airshow its setting. A bright yellow field of flowers sits below the Wallowa Mountains just south of the airport to create a beautiful scene for pilots to pierce through.

"I've been to quite a few airshows, but I've never been to one in this dramatic of a setting. The backdrop, it is incredible," said Brent Blakely of Sandy, who accompanied friends to the show.

Gary Miller came from Bend to watch the show, and keeps coming back after previous years partially because he admires the scenery so much.

"It's just a beautiful airshow in a beautiful location. Look at those mountains, I mean really," Miller said.

For visitors such as



The West Coast Ravens lay down smoke in formation during their performance at the Wallowa County Fly-In in Joseph on July 9, 2022.



Stephen Christopher and Todd Rudberg of Undaunted Airshows create a loop of smoke during their performance at the Wallowa County Fly-In in Joseph on July 9, 2022.

Blakely, the friendly vibe from the local volunteers and vendors makes this air show a lot more authentic than others he's attended.

"It's a neighborhood event, it's not so much a commercial event," he said.

Mike Webber from Tucson, Arizona, and his family were one of the groups

of related spectators who turned up to the event which entertained those of all ages.

While he most enjoyed the noise and horsepower, he recognized that his little ones were enjoying themselves as well, especially his daughter and her sno-cone.

"Oh yeah they're having fun," Webber said.

For these reasons and others, this event is one that tends to bring out the whole community. Clay mentioned that they usually have around 1,000 people on the tarmac each year.

"That's a sixth of the county," he said, "so that's a huge number."

Around 10 a.m., everyone

either in chairs, standing or laid out on the grass shifted their attention to the skies as the West Coast Ravens started to leave the runway. They did a six-plane performance that included different feats of formation flying.

The performance that seemed to stun the audience the most was the tandem

two-airplane display from Undaunted Airshows, which included some creative smoke drawings like a giant loop right above Chief Joseph Mountain.

"I liked the two-ship (performance,)" Miller said. "I thought they were very nice. Really tight and you know, lazy-playing and enjoying themselves up there."

Stephen Christopher pilots one of the planes along with his partner Todd Rudberg, who both travel all across the Pacific Northwest doing air shows and showing off their act. Being a professional, he finds it difficult to compare the feeling of flying a plane to anything else.

"Getting the experience of being up in the air, with the movement and motion of seeing everything, it's very special," he said.

He described Joseph as one of his favorite small town venues in the area, and he flew in the show last year when there was smoke coming from the fires.

"The farm community, the backdrop, the enthusiasm of the families and the kids," Christopher said.

Luckily on a clear day, the plains and mountains are beautiful for everyone to observe on the ground. But Christopher's view during some of his stunts in the atmosphere is breathtaking.

"I get to see most of that when I'm upside down. I get to see the world spinning by as a backdrop," he said.

The show wasn't just a meaningless display, the North East Oregon Aviation Foundation was fundraising for the STEM career technical program at Joseph High School to help expose students to aviation employment possibilities.

For the first time a four-dimensional experience from the U.S Air Force called "Operation Shadow Strike," which simulates a special operations mission, was stationed toward the front of the tarmac. One of the event's organizers, Joe Basile from Joseph, said that the purpose of the inclusion wasn't just for entertainment purposes.

"The Air Force needs pilots, they need mechanics, they need technicians," Basile said. "It's a recruiting tool."

Better news for some Baker County bighorn sheep

Lamb survival improves for some groups of bighorn sheep plagued by bacterial infection

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Baker County's biggest herd of bighorn sheep, plagued for more than two years by a bacterial infection that leads to fatal pneumonia, seems to be thriving in some places, but the situation is much less promising in others.

The difference is dramatic, said Brian Ratliff.

He's the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office.

Ratliff has been tracking the bacterial outbreak in the Lookout Mountain bighorn herd, in far eastern Baker County, since February 2020. The herd is not only Baker County's, but it has also been Oregon's largest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

The disease also spread to the county's other herd of the agile sheep, which roams in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Bridgeport.

The sheep in the Burnt River herd are California bighorns, a different subspecies than the larger Rocky Mountain sheep that inhabit the Lookout Mountain and Brownlee Reservoir.

The strain of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* bacteria was first detected in the Lookout Mountain herd, which



Nick Myatt/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, File

A bighorn sheep ram stands in 2011 in the Burnt River Canyon.

included about 400 bighorns, in February 2020 when dead sheep were found near the Snake River Road above Brownlee Reservoir.

Lab tests of tissue samples from dead sheep confirmed the strain of bacteria, the first time it had been found in bighorn sheep in Oregon.

During an aerial count in late 2018, biologists counted 403 bighorns in the Lookout Mountain unit.

A survey in late 2020 showed about 250 sheep, and a count in 2021 turned up 274 animals.

In Lookout Mountain, different herds, different results in 2022

First the good news — and it's quite good, Ratliff said.

Two groups of sheep, one frequenting the upper reaches of the Connor Creek Canyon, the other in upper

Soda Creek, about midway between Huntington and Richland, have produced a good crop of lambs this year. And unlike the previous two years, these lambs seem to be doing well.

The ratio among those groups was about one lamb per ewe, Ratliff said.

"Clearly we had some lamb survival," he said on July 5.

In 2020, by contrast, biologists were initially optimistic because they didn't find any dead lambs in Lookout Mountain as of mid June. They knew, from earlier testing, that ewes don't infect their lambs prior to birth.

But later in the summer of 2020, as ewes and lambs congregated in what biologists call "nursery groups," those lambs started to sicken and die across the

Lookout Mountain area.

Ratliff and other biologists concluded that all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the unit during the spring of 2020 died from bacteria-induced pneumonia, along with an estimated 75 adult bighorns.

The situation wasn't much better in 2021.

After seeing quite a few lambs in late spring and early summer, by late August biologists knew of just five lambs that had survived from that year's group.

During an aerial census late in 2021, Ratliff counted just four lambs.

This summer, the ewes and lambs are in nursery groups in upper Connor and Soda creeks, but the lambs, unlike in 2020 and 2021, are surviving.

The situation is quite dire, however, for another group of

bighorns, Ratliff said.

This bunch, which generally stays at lower elevations near the Snake River Road, which runs along Brownlee Reservoir between Richland and Huntington, had lambs this spring, just as in the previous two years.

But earlier this month, Ratliff said, biologists didn't see a single lamb in the area, where they counted 67 ewes.

Biologists did see lambs earlier this year, he said.

They also saw several ewes with swollen udders, indicating they had recently been nursing a lamb that, presumably, had died.

Tracking 'chronic shedders'

The key to combating bacterial infection, Ratliff said, is finding sheep that carry the bacteria and can infect others through nose-to-nose contact.

These "chronic shedders" often don't get sick themselves.

But even a lone shedder can rapidly infect a large group of bighorns, many of which are quite susceptible to the illness, Ratliff said.

Chronically shedding ewes are especially troublesome because they mingle with other ewes, and lambs, much more than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams most of the year.

ODFW's strategy for finding chronic shedders is labor-and time-intensive, requiring that biologists trap as many bighorns as possible, test them for the bacteria, and fit them with tracking collars so they can be captured and tested again.

Sheep that are twice deter-

mined to be shedders will be euthanized.

So far, ODFW has euthanized two ewes, one from the Lookout Mountain unit and one from the Burnt River Canyon, after they were tested twice and shown to be chronic shedders of the bacteria both times. Both were killed in early spring of this year.

(Several sheep that were shedding during a first test were no longer shedding the bacteria during a subsequent test. Other chronic shedders died naturally before they were tested twice.)

However, Ratliff said he's concerned about one ewe that has been seen recently by multiple people near the Snake River Road, in the vicinity of Big Deacon Creek, which is between Connor and Soda creeks. That ewe is clearly sick, he said, with obvious symptoms such as coughing and a snotty nose.

Although it's not certain that the ewe is infected with the *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* bacteria, that's plausible, and of great concern.

One infected sheep "could wipe out that entire nursing group," Ratliff said.

He said two other ODFW biologists recently found a ewe that was suspected of being the ill sheep, as it was in the same area where the sick sheep had been seen the previous day, but it's not clear whether the ewe they found was the same.

The ewe the biologists saw was decidedly spry, Ratliff said.

The sheep actually jumped into Brownlee Reservoir and swam faster than the biologists could run along shore to track it, he said.