

Agency Creek awash in salmon

Fish return a testament to Tribal management efforts



After it was measured, marked, gendered and counted, Tribal Fish and Wildlife Coordinator Kelly Dirksen releases a Coho salmon into Agency Creek from inside the Tribal fish weir on Monday, Nov. 9.

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Through the first week of November, some 700 Coho salmon passed through the Tribal weir on Agency Creek.

Another hundred came through the following week.

The Tribe has never seen so many salmon come so far up Agency Creek.

This year also marked the biggest run in the history of counting adult Coho salmon in the Willamette River system. As of Nov. 12, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife counted 25,003.

The next largest run, in 1970, numbered 17,902. Tribal Fish and Wildlife Coordinator Kelly Dirksen said.

Tribal biologist Rebecca McCoun, biology technician Lawrence Schwabe and Dirksen worked weekends, holidays, nights and every day to ensure the salmon weren't stuck for too long in the weir.

"They've been unbelievable troopers," said Dirksen. "This might be an once-in-a-lifetime event and the crew has been up to the challenge. We've all put in some all-nighters to make sure that every last salmon is counted."

The weir captures salmon heading upstream, holds them until they are counted and then, once released, the weir prevents the salmon from washing back downstream where they might otherwise be counted as they come through again.

The Tribe installed its weir and began counting in 2007.

On their way upriver, every fish caught is counted, measured and marked with a hole punched through its gill cover. The punched hole also helps the researchers ensure that

they're not counting fish twice. A genetic sample of each fish also is taken as part of this scientific count.

The fish are then released to travel upstream as far as they can go, where they lay eggs and die.

"(Tribal member) Jake (McKnight, Forest Patrol officer) spotted one this year as far as six (road) miles up Agency Creek," said Dirksen. "That's as far up as we've seen them."

When the young are born, they make their way back downriver to the Pacific Ocean. They spend two winters in the ocean before they come back up to where they were born to lay and fertilize eggs for the next generation.

On hand to watch the historic count this year were 10 students from the Chinuk kindergarten class at the Tribal Education Division. They stood behind a railing and watched the proceedings. Tribal member and Kindergarten Language teacher Kathy Cole asked the children what they had learned.

"They live in water," said Tribal member Mason Mercier, 4.

"They're cold-blooded," said Tribal member Audrey Mercier, 5.

"They have gills," said Tribal member Noah Larsen, 5.

"They have scales," said Tribal member Ashten Leno, 5.

"It was perfect timing," said Cole. "We're learning about salmon in our classroom."

"It's nice having the rail up for the little guys," said Dirksen. "It would have been hard to fish them out with the net."

The week before, a group from Chemeketa Community College had been out for a visit, said Dirksen.

These fish were first tracked coming up over the fish ladder at Willamette Falls toward the end of October, said



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Lawrence Schwabe, a biology technician for the Tribe, places a Coho salmon on a board to be measured as Chuck Chapin, the Tribe's interim Silviculture crew foreman, waits to mark it while counting fish in the Tribal fish weir on Monday, Nov. 9.

Dirksen, but few made it up Agency Creek as far as the weir through the first days of November.

Then the rains came and with them the salmon.

The 800 that made it up to the weir at Agency Creek represent more than 3 percent of the 25,000 salmon that came up over Willamette Falls

this year. At the same time, Agency Creek accounts for barely 3/10ths of 1 percent of the Willamette Basin.

"That's a huge testament to the Tribe's management of their lands," said Dirksen.

The Natural Resources group will be working at the weir, rain or shine, through the end of November. ■

Elders slate Christmas events

Tribal Elders have scheduled a Christmas Party and Open House for the weekend of Dec. 18-19.

The Elders' Christmas Party will be held at 5 p.m. Friday, Dec. 18, in the Elders' Activity Center. Tribal Elders 55 and older and a guest are invited to attend. RSVP by Monday, Dec. 14, to 503-879-2233. An optional gift exchange will be held with presents not to exceed more than \$10 in value.

The Elders' Christmas Open House will be held 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 19, in the Elders' Activity Center. There will be a Festival of Trees, silent auction, food and drink. Everyone is invited to attend. ■

Christmas tree contest

The Elders' Activity Center is looking for teams to decorate a Christmas tree.

Voting will be conducted by people who come into the Elders' Activity Center. Prizes will be \$100 for first place, \$75 for second place and \$50 for third place.

The trees then will be sold by silent auction.

Decorating will begin at 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 6.

Call Elder Activity Assistant Daniel Ham at 503-879-2233 to sign up your team or call Tribal Elder Louise Medeiros at 503-879-4312 for more information. ■