

# Tribe commemorates opening Wapato Lake refuge

By Danielle Harrison

*Smoke Signals assistant editor/staff writer*

GASTON – It took almost 10 years, but Wapato Lake National Wildlife Refuge has officially opened to the public.

Approximately 200 people, including several Grand Ronde Tribal members, attended a grand opening event held on Saturday, March 18, in Gaston to celebrate the milestone. The Tribe has been involved with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, helping to reclaim the lake as a source for the traditional first food it is named after.

Wapato Lake became a designated wildlife refuge in 2013, but has been slow in opening to the public due to the lake and the land surrounding it needing rehabilitation, including the restoration of the wetland, lake bed and native vegetation.

In April 2022, Tribal members helped plant approximately 3,000 wapato bulbs at the lake. The lake's first stewards were the Native Atfalati, who wintered around Wapato Lake because the root vegetable prospered in the area and played an important role in sustaining the Indigenous peoples. Later, they were remanded to the Grand Ronde Reservation after signing the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855.

The refuge opened to the public on Feb. 1, but the official celebration was postponed to avoid poor weather. It was held at Gaston Junior-Senior High School and included an open house, welcome ceremony and refuge tours.

Tribal members Jesse Norton and Tynan George, Tribal Council member Jon A. George, Tribal Cultural Policy Analyst Greg Archuleta and Cultural Resources Manager David Harrelson drummed and sang a welcome song.

Harrelson talked about how the Tualatin Kalapuya chose Wapato Lake for themselves and it was where they wanted to stay.

"This is an important place," Harrelson said. "Out of their entire homelands throughout the North Willamette Valley when they were going to be placed in one location, the place where they wanted to be at was surrounding Wapato Lake. There were villages all around Wapato Lake. This is where the Tualatin Kalapuya wanted their



Photos by Dean Rhodes

**Tribal member Jesse Norton staffed an informational table about the Grand Ronde Tribe during the Wapato Lake National Wildlife Refuge open house held in Gaston on Saturday, March 18, as Gaston resident John Sissoyev examines some of the material.**



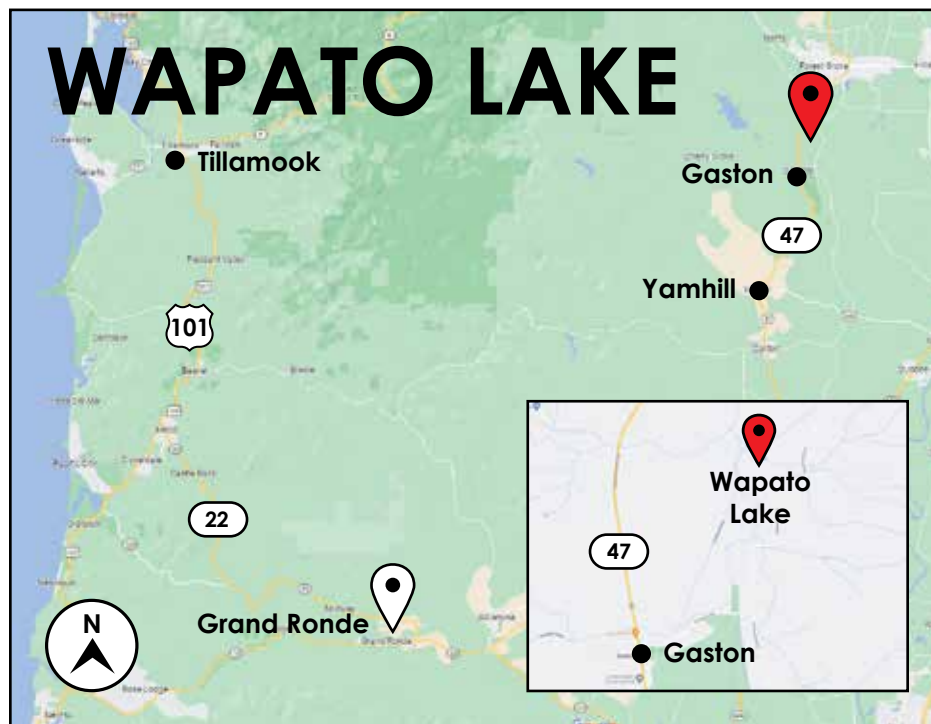
**Tribal member Tynan George hugs Wapato Lake National Wildlife Refuge Manager Rebecca Gomez Chuck after gifting her a necklace during the refuge's open house held in Gaston on Saturday, March 18. Tribal Council member Jon A. George, left, looks on.**

reservation to be, but in 1855 they signed a new treaty and were remanded to the Grand Ronde Reservation."

Harrelson said that when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approached the Tribe about a partnership for the new refuge, they insisted on one thing: wapato.

"We're still linked to this place

today and I remember that I was fortunate enough to be a staff person when we heard word that Fish & Wildlife was going to start purchasing property and that they were looking to do this project," he said. "The first thing that we told them is you have to get wapato back. We are so grateful that we've been a part of this journey and process. I hope we see the beauty of our ancestors in this place."



Map created by Samuel Briggs III

Then, Jon A. George and his son, Tynan, gifted Wapato Lake National Wildlife Refuge Manager Rebecca Gomez Chuck with a beaded necklace in thanks for the partnership between the refuge and the Tribe.

"This partnership is a link for us, and we give thanks for the partnership and the friendship that we have today," George said.

Chuck thanked the Grand Ronde Tribe and other partners who contributed to the refuge becoming a reality.

"I am humbled by all of the support from all of you," she said. "From our residents, neighbors and our partners, and all the organizations that are represented here today. As stewards of this place, U.S. Fish & Wildlife is committed to working with all of you. The refuge is a place where all people are welcome."

Hugh Morrison, the Pacific regional director for U.S. Fish & Wildlife, said that Wapato Lake is the newest refuge in Oregon and also has the distinction of being open year-round for public use.

"I'm thrilled to be here today to be part of the welcome ceremony and the open house, and to begin celebrating Oregon's newest national wildlife refuge," he said. "It's also an outstanding example of conservation built around community engagement, where it builds around community, engages with conservation and provides a broad range of benefits for a variety of interests. ... Also, I'm so grateful to the original stewards of this place who have been here since time immemorial."

After the opening ceremony concluded, attendees perused an open house in the adjoining gym or visited the refuge. Booths at the open house included the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Tualatin Kalapuya First Foods, Tualatin Soil & Water District, Friends of the Refuge and others.

In addition to drumming for the ceremony, Norton also helped staff the booth for Tualatin Kalapuya First Foods, where he applied temporary lamprey tattoos. He also helped design the artwork for giveaway reusable bags.

"I enjoyed the connection and relationship building with my fellow artists that comes with the artwork process," he said. "Also, the continued building of relationships with our first foods like wapato and camas." ■

**Creativity in Recovery**

Friday  
Time: 6-7pm  
Where: Behavioral Health group room

Children Welcome But  
No child care provided

**TEACH** our children our stories

**BECOME A TEACHER. APPLY TO AITP**  
[www.pdx.edu/aitp](http://www.pdx.edu/aitp)

AMERICAN INDIAN TEACHER PROGRAM