

IMPROVING FISH HABITAT ALONG THE GRANDE RONDE RIVER NEAR BIRD TRACK SPRINGS

History guides projects to return river to natural state

By Katy Nesbitt

For WesCom News Service

LA GRANDE — Engineering rivers the way nature intended is big business in the Blue Mountains. At a cost of \$2.6 million, 2 miles of the Grande Ronde River near Bird Track Springs, west of La Grande, is being restored to benefit fish.

Giving rivers the ability to flow, flood and change course naturally is the intent behind restoration projects all over the region. On the drive from the La Grande District Office of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to the project site, fish biologist Sarah Brandy explained how she used aerial photography to learn the historical routes of the Grande Ronde, its tributaries, and their connections to adjacent floodplains.

“Our aerial imagery shows old channel scrolls all over the meadows,” Brandy said.

After settlers moved into the region, they often straightened rivers to make way for roads, railroads, mining and agriculture. This caused streams to flow faster, increasing erosion of their banks.

Beavers were trapped, eliminating their dams that slowed the current and created seasonal flooding that recharged the groundwater in the floodplain.

In the absence of beaver



Photo by Katy Nesbitt

Equipment is moving rocks and trees to create water diversions, resting pools and hiding habitat for fish in the Grande Ronde River.

dams water levels dropped and conifers that thrive in dry soils began growing in traditionally wet sites.

“As the floodplain becomes higher and drier we are seeing lodgepole popping up creating forested meadows,” Brandy said.

Other habitat restoration projects on the La Grande District have shown favorable results, Brandy said. Where streams were reconnected to their floodplains the encroaching lodgepole were waterlogged and begin to have similar effects to beaver dams, backing up spring flows and increasing the floodplain’s water storage.

“Using drone photography and snorkeling after just one year we saw a drastic response in juvenile chinook numbers,” Brandy said.

To reconnect a stream or river to its floodplain the water flow needs to be slowed.

Workers use rocks and trees to create water diversions, resting pools and hiding places from predators. Brandy said small limbs called “racking material,” similar to the small trees and branches used by beavers to make dams, work well to replicate nature as do small and medium diameter ponderosa pines.

On a chilly, late summer

morning Brandy drove into a cattle feedlot turned staging area for the Bird Track Springs project, which runs through both national forest and the privately owned Jordan Creek Ranch.

Three thousand trees, harvested from nearby private land and with their roots still attached, were stacked in decks awaiting their burial into the river’s edge, their root wads submerged to slow the river’s flow and create hiding cover.

Jake Kimbro of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation said burying the trees into the streambank “roughens” the channel, slowing the flow,

increasing channel complexity and creating tiny fish condos in the tangle of roots. Side channels reconnect the river with the floodplain, decreasing water temperatures for fish and aquatic species that need cold water.

As a land manager, the Forest Service is responsible for fish habitat on the national forest. Efforts are often focused where there are endangered species. The Grande Ronde is home to three — Snake River chinook and steelhead, and bull trout. For the people of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla, habitat for the fish on which they live is essential, especially ones in peril.

“We consider physical and biological processes as the framework for protecting and restoring habitat and their ecological functions,” Kimbro said.

Before the bulldozers rolled into the former feedlot and the river was diverted for construction, fish were electro-shocked, collected and moved to another stretch of the river.

Kimbro said he was happily surprised to find juvenile Pacific lamprey and freshwater mussels in the collection. The lamprey are the progeny of adult lamprey taken from the lower Columbia River dams and transplanted into the Grande Ronde by the Umatilla Tribe. The mussels, Kimbro said, are indicators

that the water in this reach of the Grande Ronde is of high quality.

The contract for the project went to Steve Lindley, who is well-experienced in river restoration. A crew member in an excavator lifted and moved large sandbags used to divert the river during the instream work, but the log decks look as if they have barely been touched.

Brandy said construction will continue into the winter and through the end of 2019. In addition to reconstruction on two miles of the mainstem of the river nearly three miles of side channel construction will be completed.

While mechanized equipment does the heavy lifting on the Bird Track Springs project, Brandy said native streamside vegetation species such as willows are being planted as soon as this fall to stabilize the bank.

According to the project’s outline, the site was chosen because it had a high likelihood of success to lower stream temperatures and improve habitat for fish and wildlife dependent on the habitat. With more than a year left to go, there is evidence that beavers are in the area. Perhaps when the bulldozers and excavators pull off the river the forest’s civil engineers will be back at work.

ADVENTURE

Continued from Page 1B

This road, originally used in 1873 to haul wagons through on the Oregon Trail to Walla Walla, Washington, follows Little Philips Creek up and around the appropriately named Huckleberry Mountain. The climb continues for 10.41 miles of 4-percent grade and gains 2,101 feet of elevation. The road gets a fair amount of holiday traffic so it is best to avoid this stretch on any holiday weekend. This slow grind allows for much self-contemplation, wildlife watching, including bears, and the occasional rest at the numerous graveled pullouts.

The original wagon trail was improved by the Sumnerville Walla Walla Road Company to haul freight and travelers between the Walla Walla and Grande Ronde valleys in 1875. The road was then handed over to Dave Woodward to be

maintained and tolled by the Woodward Road Company. Woodward and his wife set up a prosperous summer community and toll gate just past the 5,158-foot summit at the headwaters of Looking Glass Creek. Dave Woodward disappeared the winter of 1896. Though his body was never found, his snowshoes were located in the vicinity of the current Andies Prairie. Andies Prairie is a winter snow park with a couple of vault toilets but no water.

Mrs. Woodward continued maintaining the trail and hosting travelers in her beautiful meadow until 1918, when the Blue Mountain Highway Association built a better road that skirted around the Woodward property and abolished the toll. Mrs. Woodward then sold her homestead to a successful Walla Walla businessman, John W. Langdon. Langdon, a proponent of the Walla Walla city parks, worked toward developing the area

into a recreation playground for those on the west side of the mountain. He and his investors dammed Looking Glass Creek to create a shallow lake in the meadow and commenced selling off individual plots of land around the private lake in 1922. Much later, 1937, the final improved road reached Elgin.

Once the 10-mile climb has been conquered, enjoy four miles of rippling fun and vistas. At one viewpoint, the majesty of the

North Fork Umatilla River winks approximately 2,000 feet below the Umatilla Rim and reinforces the pride of accomplished elevation gain. Note the glittering Langdon Lake as you wheel past it to Woodward Campground. The campground is run by the Forest Service and currently costs \$12 a night to stay. The amenities are potable water, vault toilets, picnic tables and fire rings. Langdon Lake itself is off limits due to the privatization of the lake but

it is still beautiful to look at and can be seen from a number of the camping sites. Once there, sit back, relax, congratulate yourself on surviving the first of four climbs and enjoy the moisture-loving plants and hopefully a few huckleberries.

Should there be a need for more, the community of Tollgate is less than a mile to the west and has a general store and restaurant to soothe any caloric deficit that may have been created.

CUTS

Continued from Page 1B

HINDQUARTER

With the stomach cavity facing you make a cut down the inside of the femur bone starting at the knuckle bone down to the ball joint. On the outside go an inch or two below the knuckle bone and there is a seam separating the knuckle and the outside round. Remove the knuckle.

On the backside there is a seam separating the gooseneck and the top round. Make a cut along the femur bone and hit that seam in back. Remove the top round. I pull the top muscle off the top of the top round and slice into chicken-fried steaks.

Remove the gooseneck. I used to make deer roasts but now I use the knuckle and outside round for jerky or sausage since they are so lean.

On the chuck (forequarter) bone this out. I use this for sausage.

MISCELLANEOUS CUTS

OK, we’ve covered the major muscles. Now for the fun part. Let’s save some unique cuts. On deer these will be

small but on elk and moose of course a lot larger, comparable to a cow.

First let’s cover the flank steaks. Where the stomach wall ties into the hindquarter. Right where you start making the incision between the hind legs to open up the stomach to remove the guts you will cut between two tear-shaped muscles. (Oblique abdominal muscle.) Cut these out and remove the tough tissue on top. Now remove the flank steak from the tough yellow tissue on the bottom.

• Tri-tip — Before you remove the knuckle as described above, halfway down the knuckle under the knuckle bone you’ll see where an ice cream cone-shaped muscle is attached. Mark it and remove it.

I sprinkle both with coarse McCormick Steak Seasoning and smoke. On the flank steaks I lay on them some chopped green peppers, onions and jalapenos. Roll it up and pin together with toothpicks.

Smoke semi slow until done. Slice paper thin and serve as hors d’oeuvres. You’ll love these!

Hopefully this is enough to get you started.

Time for a fall clearout?

What you should know about the disposal of household hazardous waste.

What is household hazardous waste?
HHW is anything labeled toxic, flammable, corrosive, reactive or explosive. These materials can threaten family health and the safety of pets and wildlife.

What are some examples of hazardous waste?
Aerosols, Bleach, Drain Cleaners, Metal Polishes, Moltsballs, Oven Cleaners, Toilet Bowl Cleaners, Ammonia-based Cleaners, Mercury Thermometers, Wood Polishes, Waxes, Fertilizers, Insecticides, Herbicides, Rodenticides, Spa and Pool Chemicals, Roofing Compounds, Antifreeze, Batteries, Motor Oil, Paint Strippers and Thinners, Gasoline and more.

Where can I safely dispose of my hazardous waste?
La Grande Facility: Open to any resident of the three counties every other Tuesday, 8am-12 noon. By appointment, however, small labeled quantities accepted daily. (541) 963-5459.
Baker City Facility: Open the first Wednesday of each month, 10am-12 noon. By appointment only. (541) 523-2626.
Enterprise Facility: Open the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month 10am-12 noon. By appointment only. (541) 426-3332.



Americans generate 1.6 million tons of HHW per year!

The average home can accumulate as much as 100 pounds of hazardous waste.

PICK'N PATCH

We will be OPENING on October 5th!

Where: Corner of Booth Lane and Lower Cove Road

When: Friday and Saturday: 9am-6pm
Sunday: 10am-4pm
Monday-Thursday: By appointment

What you will find:
Small corn maze, several varieties of pumpkins and gourds, straw bales, corn stalks.

If you would like to schedule a school field trip or other event, please call the number listed below.

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Please call 541-786-2421

