RECREATION REPORT

WASHINGTON ELK CONFIRMED TO HAVE HOOF DISEASE

SPOKANE, Wash. — Test results from an elk shot by a hunter in Walla Walla County earlier this winter have confirmed the presence of elk hoof disease, known scientifically as treponeme-associated hoof disease (TAHD).

A muzzleloader hunter shot the cow elk on Jan. 17 in the Pikes Peak area of the Blue Mountains. After noticing that the hooves were deformed, he submitted the hooves to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

Samples were submitted to the Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory at Washington State University, where TAHD was confirmed through diagnostic testing. WSU's veterinary college is where the state has based a program to monitor and research elk hoof disease.

First documented in the early 2000s, TAHD has since spread to 14 counties in Washington, and has been found in Oregon and Idaho.

Between 2013 and 2017 there were 14 confirmed cases of the disease in these counties: Baker (1 case), Union (5), Wallowa (3), Morrow (3), Umatilla (1) and Grant (1).

There have been more than 30 confirmed cases statewide.

More information is available at www.dfw.state.or.us/wildlife/health_program/docs/elkhoofdisease-factsheetfinal.pdf

Last April, WDFW confirmed the presence of the disease in Klickitat County — the first such finding in Washington state east of the Cascade Range.

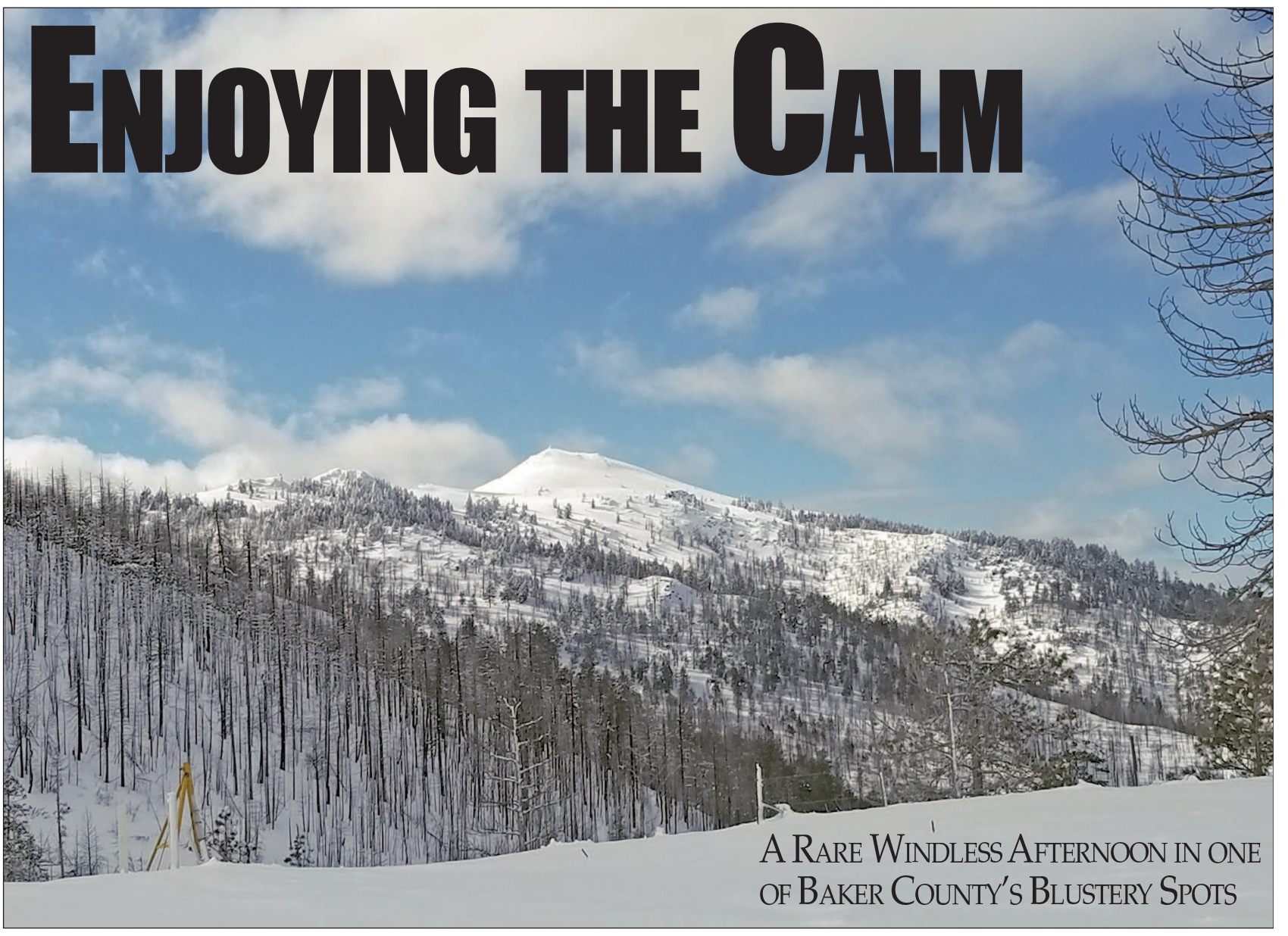
The disease causes hoof deformities, which can make elk walk with a pronounced limp. Elk may eventually slough the infected hooves, threatening their survival.

There is currently no vaccine to prevent TAHD, nor are there any proven options for treating it in the field. There is no evidence that the disease affects humans.

Kyle Garrison, WDFW hoof disease coordinator, said the department plans to increase efforts to identify other diseased elk in the Blue Mountains, and will look for limping elk early next month during scheduled aerial surveys.

Wildlife managers in Oregon and Washington ask hunters and other members to report any observations of limping elk, or elk with abnormal hooves.

ENJOYING THE CALM



Lisa Britton/For WesCom News Service

Bald Mountain is the high point, at 6,668 feet, on the divide between the Powder and Burnt rivers south of Baker City. This view, from along the Skyline Road west of Dooley Mountain Summit on Highway 245, includes, in the foreground at left, some of the area burned during the Cornet/Windy Ridge fire in August 2015.

ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

I stepped out of the car and instinctively winced, my eyes squinted to slits, as I braced for the bite of the winter wind.

But the air was as still as a corpse.

The silence was the unique silence of the snowbound woods, the only intruding sounds the crackling crunch of my boots on granular ice and the rhythmic tick of the cooling engine.

I have hiked the Skyline Road in all seasons and the commonality, whether in skin-searing August or nostril-clenching January, is the wind.

Restless air is the essential, indeed the inevitable, product of the confluence of topography and climatology here on the spine of high ground south of Baker City that divides the Powder River to the north from the Burnt River to the south.

Ridges tend to be buffeted more frequently than valleys, in part because the higher you go the less friction there is from the ground.

And gaps in a ridge — known also as passes, saddles, notches and cols, of which there are several along the Skyline Road — exacerbate this phenomenon much as the narrowed neck of a funnel accelerates the speed of flowing water.

(Air, though we may think of it as utterly different from, say, water, is, scientifically speaking, a fluid.)

Anyway it blows often, and hard, along the Skyline Road, which, as its name implies, meanders along or near the crest of the divide.

Also known as Forest Road 11, it runs west from Dooley Mountain Summit on Highway 245, about 20 miles south of Baker City.

(Road 11 also continues east from the summit, where it's known as the East End Road.)

The area is so reliably blustery that it's become my favorite place to see how wind sculptures snow.

My wife, Lisa, and I drove up there last Saturday to have a look after a February that brought considerable amounts of both snow and wind to Northeastern Oregon.

The evidence of previous gales was plentiful. In places wind had scoured the road to bare gravel on the inside slope while piling it up to depths of 6 feet or more on the outside.

But the afternoon of our visit was so calm that not even the fragile flakes of hoarfrost on the surface of the snow were being dislodged.

The absence of wind contributed to what was a nearly perfect day for snowshoeing.

The temperature was far enough below freezing — the thermometer in our rig showed 27 when we parked — that the snow was dry and powdery and so not prone to clogging snowshoes as happens when it's in the 30s.

Lisa Britton/For WesCom News Service

Snowshoe tracks along the Skyline Road west of Dooley Mountain Summit.

(I very much enjoy snowshoeing, but sticky wet snow sorely tests my patience. In especially poor conditions the experience is roughly equivalent to walking with a soft rubber ball glued to the center of the sole of each boot. Only heavier.)

The persistent wind has another effect, and it's one that renders snowshoeing notably less taxing (alas, also less beneficial in a cardiovascular sense, but life is but a series of tradeoffs).

Wind consolidates snow considerably. The result is not an icy crust, such as can form in spring when the daily freeze-thaw cycle is extreme, but a relatively firm surface into which snowshoes sink a few inches rather than a foot or more as happens in the sort of fresh, loose powder that downhill skiers pine for.

I like wind-packed snow because it's quiet — snowshoes make only a soft whoosh as you move along.

In spring, by contrast, the shoes' plastic decks clatter off the snowpack's icy shell, fatiguing to feet as well as ears. It's as peaceful as wading through a vat of corn flakes.

Our time was limited and we made it only a mile or so, to the saddle — normally blustery but blissfully still — where there is a fine view to the west of Bald Mountain's white dome.

Bald Mountain is an overused name but in this case at least an apt one. The peak, the apex of the Burnt-Powder Divide at 6,668 feet, has no trees within a few hundred vertical feet of its summit.

We could see, on the crest of the ridge below the mountain, scattered trees that appeared so thoroughly coated with snow and rime that no trace of bark or needle was likely visible.

Skyline Road, and the Burnt-Powder Divide on both sides of the highway, are quite different places than they were less than four years ago.

The agent of change was the Cornet/Windy Ridge fire in August 2015. Both were sparked by lightning. The Cornet Fire, which started near a creek of that name south of the divide, roared up the ridge and crossed both the Skyline Road and Highway 245 before embracing the combustion of the Windy Ridge fire to create the biggest blaze, at 104,000 acres, in Baker County history.

Little remains of the dense forest that crowded the Skyline Road. The flames also killed most of the trees on the south side of the divide.

Only on the north slopes, which are comparatively cool and moist, did any significant section of forest survive.

The scattered mature ponderosa pines fared especially well due to the thick bark that protects the living part of the tree beneath, and by their lack of low-lying limbs to serve as a ladder for flames to climb into the crown.

Lisa Britton/For WesCom News Service

Although the August 2015 Cornet/Windy Ridge fire scorched most of the trees along the Skyline Road, some of the larger ponderosa pines lack low-hanging limbs that can serve as a ladder for flames to reach the trees' crowns.