

WASHINGTON MAN WANTS TO START BLUE MOUNTAIN CHAPTER OF FIRE LOOKOUTS ASSOCIATION

ON THE LOOKOUT

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

Bob Bonstead has an affinity for buildings whose function might seem as outdated as a rotary dial telephone.

Bonstead likes fire lookouts. He is decades too late to fully indulge in this interest, since only a relative handful remain of the 1,451 structures that once stood atop high points in Oregon and Washington.

But Bonstead, who lives in Walla Walla, Washington, is determined to help preserve, and perhaps find new uses for, the lookouts still standing in the Blue Mountains well into the era of aircraft and orbiting satellites.

Bonstead hopes to inflame interest among enough people to start a Blue Mountains chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association.

The nationwide organization, founded in 1990, “promotes the protection, enjoyment and understanding of lookouts,” according to its website, www.ffla.org.

Bonstead, whose interest in wild-fires dates to his work as a member of a federal Hotshot firefighting crew in the 1960s and 1970s, has scheduled public informational meetings late this month in both Baker City and La Grande.

The schedule:

- La Grande, Monday, April 29, 6:30 p.m. at Eastern Oregon University’s Cook Memorial Library, Colleen Johnson Community Room
- Baker City, Tuesday, April 30, 6:30 p.m., Riverside Room at the Baker County Library, 2400 Resort St.

Bonstead joined the national group in October of last year. Annual mem-

berships start at \$15.

He soon learned that although the Forest Fire Lookout Association has an Oregon chapter, there is no regional chapter dedicated to the Blue Mountains. During the heyday of lookouts — roughly the 1920s through the 1950s — more than 150 lookouts in the region were staffed every summer to watch over millions of acres of forest and rangeland.

But today fewer than 30 are still in use across the Blue Mountains. Most of the lookouts that were discontinued were torn down, burned or otherwise removed.

Many of the surviving lookouts on the Wallowa-Whitman are still staffed each summer, including Mount Ireland near Granite, Summit Point near Halfway and Table Rock near Unity.

The BLM operates a seasonal lookout on Big Lookout Mountain south of Richland.

Bonstead’s proposed Friends of Blue Mountain Lookouts would cover the four national forests where most of the Blue Mountains’ remaining lookouts stand — the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla, Malheur and Ochoco — as well as other public lands in the region.

Although the organization will focus on lookouts, Bonstead said its mission also extends to guard stations and to cabins at some lookout sites that served as living quarters.

The goal, he said, is to assemble a cadre of volunteers available to help federal agencies restore lookouts and other buildings, and even to staff lookouts if necessary.

For buildings that are no longer needed for official purposes, Bonstead



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald file photo-2009

Desolation Lookout, on the Umatilla National Forest about 12 miles west of Granite, sits atop a 67-foot tower built in 1961.

said he hopes the Forest Service and other agencies can add those structures to the roster of properties available for rent.

There are many lookouts in Western Oregon open for rent, but the only one in the Blue Mountains is Fall Mountain on the Malheur National Forest southwest of John Day.

National forests in the Blue Mountains do offer for rent several cabins and guard stations, including

the Anthony Lake Guard Station and Peavy Cabin, along the North Fork John Day River.

More information about this month’s public meetings is available by calling Bonstead at 509-964-5739.

For more details about Oregon lookouts, including the hundreds that have been removed, go to <https://oregonlookouts.weebly.com/>. The site includes photos from many lookouts as well as excerpts from contemporary newspaper articles dating to the early 1900s.

ODFW releases draft version of wolf management plan

SALEM (AP) — With Oregon’s wolf population growing, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on Monday issued a draft conservation and management plan that established a new timetable involving when wolves can be killed for preying on livestock.

The old plan allowed for hunts after two confirmed wolf depredations of livestock in an area. The new plan would allow hunts only after two confirmed depredations within a nine-month period, said Derek Broman, state carnivore biologist.

The new plan also includes a hefty section on how to attempt to

resolve conflicts involving livestock without killing wolves, which environmental groups prefer, Broman said.

The goal of the 160-page proposal remains the same as previous plans issued in 2005 and 2010: “To ensure the conservation of gray wolves as required by Oregon law while protecting the social and economic interests of all Oregonians.”

It says the wolf population in Oregon is expected to grow and expand its range.

The new plan, which faces a June 7 vote by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission, contains mostly

minor changes from a draft issued in 2017, officials said. Broman said the plan continues to reflect unresolved conflicts on numerous issues, despite years of negotiations.

Environmentalists worry it doesn’t do enough to protect wolves.

Steve Pedery, conservation director for Oregon Wild, said it “continues to ignore science and the public while keeping Oregon on an uninterrupted march to wolf hunting and trapping.”

It says the wolf population remains relatively small and is concentrated in forested parts of eastern Oregon and the Cascade

Range. The plan said it’s unclear if the animals will expand into the Oregon coast range.

Last week, the agency reported that Oregon was home to a record number of wolves, 20 years after the species returned to the state.

The number of known wolves in Oregon at the end of 2018 was 137, a 10% increase over the previous year. There are likely even more wolves because not all individuals or packs are located during the winter count, the agency said.

Confirmed wolf attacks on domesticated animals increased 65 percent from the previous year, with 28

confirmed incidents, most of them on calves. But the attacks have not kept pace with the increase in the wolf population over the past nine years.

Oregon delisted wolves from its Endangered Species Act in 2016, though they’re protected statewide as a special status game mammal. Wolves in central and western Oregon continue to be federally listed as endangered species.

In March, the U.S. Interior Department proposed lifting protections for gray wolves across the Lower 48 states. That would let states hold wolf hunting and trapping seasons.

SURPRISE

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I went on with my hike and although I didn’t see anything quite so striking as the pond I was surprised several times by other sights, ones which also seemed downright peculiar in a landscape which in my experience is either snowy or dusty, but rarely is anything like the soggy place that I encountered.

I can’t offer an educated guess as to how often this area reaches such a level of saturation, being all but ignorant of such relevant matters as hydrology and the science of soils and their water-holding capacities. But pressed for my untutored estimation I would say it’s an exceedingly rare situation — one that doesn’t happen at all during years when the snowpack isn’t so bountiful and the spring

weather quite less damp than this one has been.

Several times while taking a step I instinctively yanked my boot back just before it touched down, as though I had been preparing to tread on, or at least distressingly near, a rattlesnake.

(I suspect I must have looked exceedingly silly, and possibly in the throes of a terrific seizure, in these moments. I lack grace under the best of circumstances, which these were not.)

My reflexes in each case were tweaked not by a venomous reptile but by a patch of waterlogged ground — one that looked wholly capable of sucking in my boot and giving my foot a thorough soaking despite the fabric’s advertised waterproof qualities.

These patches, like the pond, were in places that my brain — and, by nervous

system necessity, my feet — insisted were inconsistent with anything of the sort.

It is not abnormal to find a skim of water clogging a low spot, of course — the very definition of a mud puddle. But some of the squelchy bits I saw, and barely avoided, were on sloping ground covered with tufts of pine grass. I could envision water briefly flowing down these slopes during a cloudburst, but what I encountered was water welling from the ground in the manner of a sponge that’s being given a good squeeze.

I was similarly surprised by the rivulets of meltwater tumbling in their musical way along the bottom of most every draw, some carrying a considerable volume and wide enough to require a bit of a leap to clear.

Ephemeral streams are common in our region, to be

sure — topographic maps generally show these as a series of alternating solid blue lines and blue dots, to differentiate them from the dot-less depiction of rivers and creeks that flow year-round.

But even seasonal streams, in many cases, live their brief yearly lives only by accumulating the flow from a substantial swath of land, one with enough surface area to hold the volumes of snow required to support even a temporary trickle.

Curious, I followed a couple of these streamlets to their sources, at the heads of draws that were so small that to term them “headwaters” would be to indulge in extreme exaggeration. What I found was, well, nothing. At least nothing that would constitute a source. No flowing springs. No ponds. Not even any residual grainy snow-

drifts with water seeping from their snouts.

Yet even with no surface water to fortify their flow, these streams were carrying a notable amount of water into a nearby year-round drainage, Blue Canyon, that empties into the Powder River about 7 miles south of Baker City.

I have a habit of perusing various sources of data about snowpack and water supply — graphs and charts and comparative tables.

But statistics — and please forgive the inapt analogy — make for dry reading.

Those streams, and the startling sight of a pond among the pines, were for me much more compelling evidence of how much the onslaught of Pacific storms over the past 2½ months has done to drive back the drought.

The climate will assert

control soon, of course.

Summer will arrive with its inevitable sunshine and plummeting humidity to put paid to seasonal ponds and streams that have neither lake nor spring to tap.

By July, and like as not by June, most of the water I saw and splashed through during my walk will be gone, with little to show it had ever been there save a drift of pine needles and diminutive dunes of silt and pebbles, those fingerprints of erosion.

But I will remember.

And on some scorching August afternoon, when the only water nearby is sloshing in the bottle tucked into my pack, I’ll reminisce about that strange day when the dry woods dripped, and feel refreshed.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.