

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Dealing with deer

Deer returned to Baker City Hall Tuesday after a hiatus of somewhat more than a year.

Not literally — there were no bucks bumping into councilors' microphones or anything like that.

But the topic of deer that live exclusively, or almost so, within the city limits did come before our elected officials for the first time since the Council, in late June of 2018, passed an ordinance banning residents from intentionally feeding deer.

(You're still on the right side of the ordinance if your tastes in landscaping happen to overlap with those of the deer; intention is the key.)

Robin Laakso told councilors that she wants to build a fence taller than the 6 feet the city generally allows, her goal being to keep deer from marauding her organic vegetable garden.

Councilors didn't take any action Tuesday. But Councilor Lynette Perry said she expects other residents will have questions similar to Laakso's, and Perry suggested councilors have a further discussion on the matter.

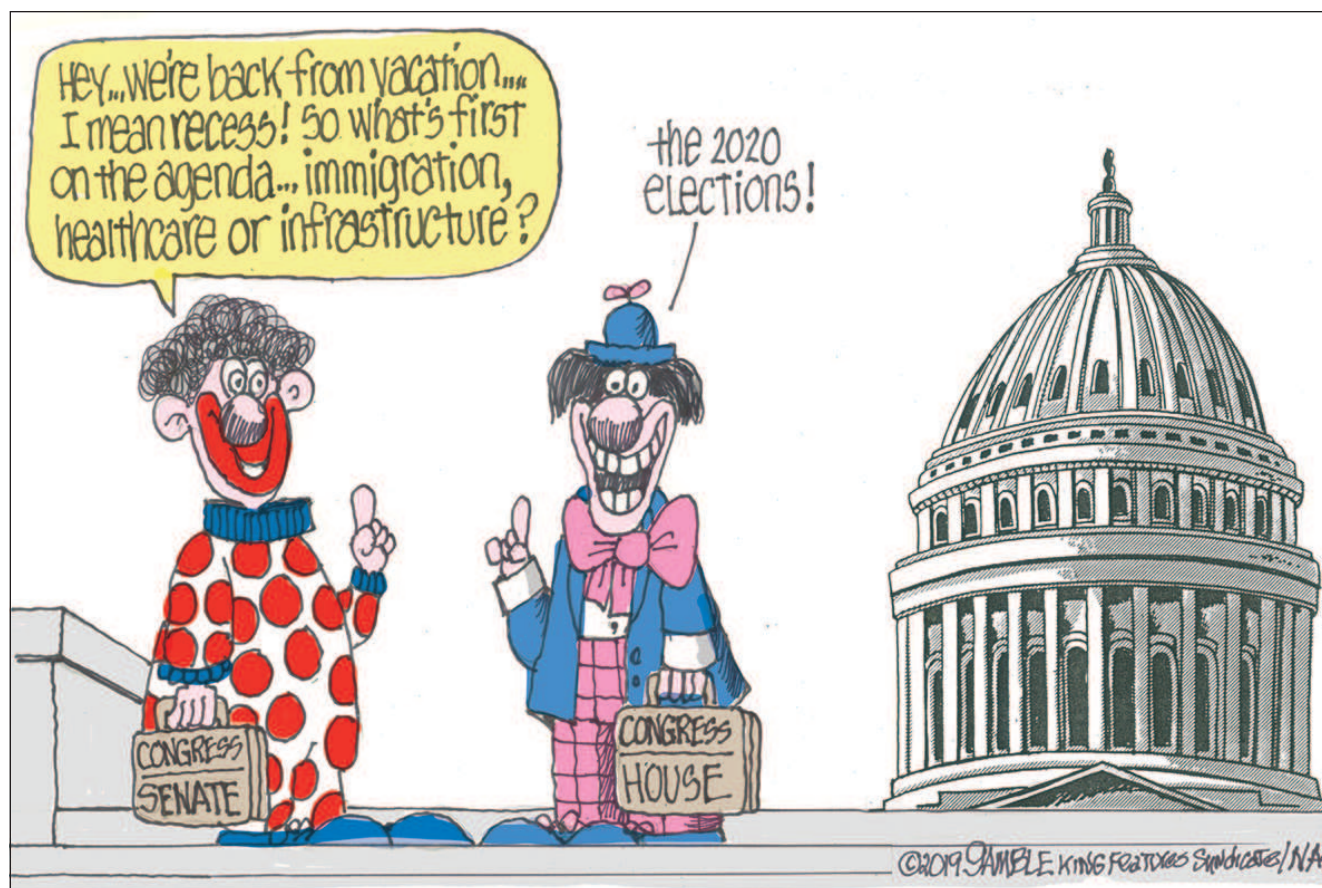
That's a good idea.

Justin Primus, assistant district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, said the urban deer population isn't likely to shrink soon, even with the anti-feeding ordinance in place. Even without having food set out for them on purpose, the animals have ample food sources. And besides cars, they face few threats.

On the positive side, Primus said that although deer can clear a 6-foot fence, that's high enough to potentially deter some of the animals and convince them to seek easier pickings elsewhere.

Based on the comments from residents last year, there doesn't seem to be widespread support for the city to take the more aggressive action, as allowed under a 2017 law, of asking ODFW to kill deer within the city. But it's reasonable for councilors to discuss fence heights and other issues related to deer and their effects.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

We must never forget 9-11-01

Driving down Second Street on Wednesday, Patriot Day, I encountered the beautiful American flag display in front of the fire station. Turning onto Main Street, all I could think was, "Where are the flags?" Later in the morning my husband and I drove to La Grande, and saw flags flying all down the main thoroughfare. Listening to radio and TV remembrances of 9-11-01 reaffirmed my conviction that the tragedy of that day as well as many heroic actions of our citizens must continue to be commemorated, so that our children and grandchildren realize that freedom must not be taken for granted. Patriot Day is another occasion for that immortal phrase: Lest we forget.

Julie Jeffs
Baker City

Wishing people had more respect for flag

I was honored to be at the Baker City Fire Department for their ceremony honoring September 11. However, I was very dismayed at the number of people, fire and police personnel, media and civilians that were not respectful by either being

quiet and removing their hats, or put their hands over their hearts when the large flag was being raised on the fire truck.

I was raised and taught that WHENEVER the American flag was raised, you stood up, were quiet and respectful when the flag was presented. No, it was not part of the ceremony, but it still went up! People acted like, so what?

During the ceremony, many people were talking. Only when they asked for a moment of silence, were they. When they raised and lowered the flag on the flagpole, yes, the women and men in uniform were at attention, but others were talking. I was in a position to see that I and one other person, stood and put our hands over our hearts.

Maybe next year or the next time they do this, the fire department should ask the military to join them and show them how it's done!

I wonder how many there, were there just to say they went.

Respectfully,

Cindy Abbey
Veteran
Baker City

Letters to the editor

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- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the

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- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do

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- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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Hurricane highlights the limitations of science

Weather forecasters can spy on storms from space, and they have some of the cleverest computer models at their disposal, but the atmosphere still throws them an occasional curveball.

Or curving hurricane, to be more precise.

The saga of Hurricane Dorian exemplifies the fickle nature of, well, nature even in our era of weather satellites and Doppler radar.

It also highlights the immense complexity of trying to figure out how multiple discrete factors spread over thousands of miles — air and water temperatures, jet stream wind speeds, air pressure — will combine to determine where a hurricane will hit and how strong it will be.

(And who knows, perhaps the flutter of a single butterfly's wings will influence the course of events as well.)

I have immense respect for the science of meteorology.

I indeed I'd rather be a forecaster than almost any other profession, except I can't do the math.

(Frankly I can't do much of any math. But the equations that meteorology mandates will forever remain so far beyond my intellectual reach that they might as well be fictitious. I am in fact incapable even of describing them coherently.)

In common with field goal kickers and pest control experts, weather forecasters tend to get more attention when they screw up than when they succeed.

This is unfortunate.

Meteorologists are in fact quite reliable, it seems to me, in answering the questions most of us have.



JAYSON JACOBY

We just want to know whether it's likely to be rainy or fair over the next few days, balmy or frigid, and generally forecasts fall within spitting distance of reality.

I'd wager that most people who habitually belittle forecasters' skills, if they ever tracked in detail the difference between what was predicted and what happened, would be surprised at how minor the difference actually was.

(And those who endured a downpour without an umbrella will continue to disparage the supposed experts who let them down.)

I'm not writing a dissertation or anything but I'm confident in asserting, based on my rather obsessive interest in the subject, that major forecast blunders — utterly failing to identify an approaching snowstorm, for instance, or calling for a high temperature of 75 when it only gets to 55 — are exceedingly rare.

But the accuracy of a forecast, as I suspect even most nonscientists understand, usually diminishes in proportion to how far in advance it's made.

And the uncertainty is greater still when it comes to a particularly complex phenomenon — the track of a hurricane being a proximate example.

fail to understand this crucial fact, which leads to reporting that, though not grossly irresponsible, underestimates the range of possible outcomes that, from a forecaster's viewpoint, are basically equally plausible.

Which of course is another way of saying that sometimes even the degree-laden experts don't really know what's going to happen, an admission that doesn't often get into the newspapers.

I perused news stories from a variety of sources, dating back to the last week of August when Dorian was beginning to brew in the Atlantic.

Even then, when the hurricane was hundreds of miles from America's East Coast, forecasters, though they emphasized the considerable danger the storm posed for Florida, were also acknowledging the evidence — primarily from certain of the computer models that are integral to weather forecasting — that hinted Dorian might veer away before pummeling the Sunshine State.

Floridians certainly were justified in feeling frightened. Dorian was an unusually powerful storm when it struck the Bahamas. And for many people the memories of Hurricane Irma in 2017 and Matthew in 2016, both of which caused damage in Florida, were no doubt vivid.

What struck me, at least based on my admittedly limited sample size, is that references which tilted toward predicting disaster were in many cases paraphrases from journalists rather than direct quotes from meteorologists.

By contrast, the scientists, when

actually quoted at length, frequently noted that Dorian, though a scary storm, was not quite an inevitable disaster for the U.S.

An Aug. 29 story from The Associated Press, for instance, pointed out that "some of the more reliable computer models predicted a late turn northward that would have Dorian hug the coast, the National Hurricane Center said. (Which is pretty much what happened.)"

The story quoted Jeff Masters, meteorology director for Weather Underground, who said "There is hope."

Yet the next paragraph describes this as a "faint hope," without saying whether Masters added the critical qualifying adjective, or indeed whether he believed it was appropriate.

Later, after describing the clash between low and high pressure that ended up stalling Dorian over the Bahamas and, eventually, keeping it off the Florida coast, the story concludes, again without any quotes from an expert, that "whichever one of those forces wins — the blocking high or the pulling low — Florida is likely to lose."

A story published Aug. 31 in the New York Times gave readers a much more thorough sense — which is to say, a more accurate picture — of the uncertainties.

The Times did so by eschewing the predictive paraphrasing that I think muddied the message in the AP story, and potentially misled readers about what the experts truly believed about Dorian.

Of course the Times reporters had the advantage of, well, time —

their story ran two days later than the AP's, and the Times' sources had the benefit of computer models that strengthened the case for predicting that Dorian would strike Florida at worst a glancing blow.

But I also appreciate that the Times story included quotes from scientists that, to me, underscore why phrases from the AP article such as "faint hope" and "Florida is likely to lose" were inappropriate.

Mike Brennan, who leads the Hurricane Specialist Unit at the National Hurricane Center in Miami, told the Times, in response to a question about whether forecasters can responsibly give precise answers to questions about a hurricane's track or severity, that "The limitations of the science run up against the demands of society."

The Times story also quoted Lauren Rautenkrantz, a meteorologist at First Coast News in Jacksonville, Florida, who addressed the limitations of computer models.

"It's just, we don't want people to latch onto one specific computer model and think that's a forecast," Rautenkrantz said. "It's guidance."

I welcome the humility.

I understand people want confident proclamations, devoid of ambivalence — particularly when a hurricane is involved, quite possibly a matter of life and death.

But when such certainty isn't warranted, to imply otherwise, when the more measured opinions of experts are readily available, is unfortunate.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.