

10 pioneer-era apple types thought extinct found in U.S. West

■Largest haul ever boosts rediscovered total to 23 varieties

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

PORTLAND— A team of retirees that scours the remote ravines and wind-swept plains of the Pacific Northwest for long-forgotten pioneer orchards has rediscovered 10 apple varieties that were believed to be extinct — the largest number ever unearthed in a single season by the non-profit Lost Apple Project.

The Vietnam veteran and former FBI agent who make up the nonprofit recently learned of their tally from last fall’s apple sleuthing from expert botanists at the Temperate Orchard Conservancy in Oregon, where all the apples are sent for study and identification. The apples positively identified as previously “lost” were among hundreds of fruits collected in October and November from 140-year-old orchards tucked into small canyons or hidden in forests that have since grown up around them in rural Idaho and Washington state.

“It was just one heck of a season. It was almost unbelievable. If we had found one apple or two apples a year in the past, we thought



AP Photo by Gillian Flaccus

This Oct. 23, 2019, photo shows apples collected by amateur botanists David Benschoter and EJ Brandt of the Lost Apple Project in an orchard at an abandoned homestead near Genesee, Idaho. Benschoter and Brandt recently learned that their work in 2019 has led to the rediscovery of 10 apple varieties in the Pacific Northwest that were planted by long-ago pioneers and had been thought extinct.

were were doing good. But we were getting one after another after another,” said EJ Brandt, who hunts for the apples along with fellow amateur botanist David Benschoter. “I don’t know how we’re going to keep up with that.”

Hard work, tech key to search

Each fall, Brandt and Benschoter spend countless hours and log hundreds of miles searching for ancient — and often dying — apple trees across the Pacific Northwest by truck, all-terrain vehicle and on

foot. They collect hundreds of apples from long-abandoned orchards that they find using old maps, county fair records, newspaper clippings and nursery sales ledgers that can tell them which homesteader bought what apple tree and when the purchase happened.

By matching names from those records with property maps, they can pinpoint where an orchard might have been — and they often find a few specimens still growing there. The pair carefully note the location of each tree using GPS and tag the tree with

MORE INFORMATION

- Find the Lost Apple Project on Facebook at www.facebook.com/lostappleproject/

a plastic band before bagging the apples in zip-close bags and shipping them to the Oregon experts for identification.

“When I find an apple that’s lost, I want to know who homesteaded it, when they were there, who their children were, when they took their last drink of water,” Brandt said. “We cannot afford to lose the name of even one of these landowners.”

In the winter, they return to the trees to take wood cuttings that can be grafted onto root stock to propagate new trees of the varieties that come back as “lost” specimens.

The task is huge. North America once had 17,000 named varieties of domesticated apples, but only about 4,500 are known to exist today.

The Lost Apple Project believes settlers planted a few hundred varieties in their corner of the Pacific Northwest alone as they moved across the U. S. West to try their hands at the pioneer life.

Latest find includes ancient species

These newcomers planted orchards with enough variety to get them through the long winter, with apples that ripened from early spring until the first frosts. Many were brought with the settlers in buckets from their homes on the East Coast and in the Midwest. Then, as now, trees planted for eating apples were not raised from seeds; cuttings taken from existing trees were grafted onto a generic root stock and raised to maturity. These cloned trees remove the genetic variation that often makes “wild” apples inedible.

With the 10 latest varieties identified, Brandt and Benschoter have rediscovered a total of 23 varieties. The latest finds include the Sary Sinap, an ancient apple from Turkey; the Streaked Pippin, which may have originated as early as 1744 in New York; and the Butter Sweet of Pennsylvania, a variety that was first noted in a trial orchard in Illinois in 1901.

Botanists from the Temperate Orchard Society identified them by comparing the collected apples to watercolor illustrations created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1800s and early 1900s and by poring over written

descriptions in old botany textbooks and reference guides, some of them more than 150 years old.

One apple, the Gold Ridge, was particularly hard to identify because the experts couldn’t find any illustrations or descriptions of it anywhere. Finally, botanist Joanie Cooper went page by page through a reference book written by a botanist who died in 1912 until she found it.

“It’s the luck of the draw,” said Shaun Shepherd, another Temperate Orchard Conservancy botanist. “And we learn more as we go along.”

Spring means work ramps up

With spring underway, the Lost Apple Project will soon enter its busy season as apple trees everywhere blossom and prepare to fruit. As they wait, Brandt and Benschoter are busy grafting wood cuttings from the newly discovered “lost” apple trees onto root stocks and updating their records from the last season.

Their nonprofit took a hit when they had to cancel an annual fair where they sell newly grafted “lost” apple trees and a class on how to graft wood to grow a new apple tree because of the new coronavirus. The two events fund much of their \$10,000 annual budget.

TAKEOUT

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Options: Takeout or delivery (no charge).

Mamacita’s International Grill

Where: 2003 Fourth St., La Grande

Hours: 4:30-7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday.

Contact: Call the restaurant (541-963-6223), staff are willing to walk you

through menu choices, tell you the cost of your order, take your name and give you an approximate time the order will be ready.

What’s available: Limited menu (can visit zmenu.com/mamacitas-la-grande-online-menu to see what there is).

Options: Takeout.

Frontier Express

Where: 781 Campbell St., Baker City

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., 5-7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday.

Contact: Phone in (541-

523-6695), drive up, Facebook Messenger (search Frontier Express). Currently about 50-50 split on customers calling in or coming by.

What’s available: Full menu (available at zmenu.com/frontier-express-baker-city-online-menu or Facebook). Turnaround time is usually about 10-15 minutes.

Options: Takeout or delivery (through Baker City To Go; cost is \$3.99 for first four miles from restaurant, \$1/mile additional after up to 9 miles).

SNOW

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and gradually, it could be a boon for irrigators.

“It represents a lot of potential water for runoff,” Oviatt said.

Despite relatively strong snowpack, the optimism is tempered by lower-than-normal total precipitation, Oviatt said, which remains at 80% statewide.

The driest areas are in southwest Oregon, where the Rogue and Umpqua basins are at 69% of average precipitation and the Klamath Basin is at

68%. Gov. Kate Brown has already declared a drought emergency in Klamath County. Stream flows are expected to range between 42% to 90% in the region, and average to above-average in basins farther north.

Reservoir storage is a mixed bag around the state. As of April 1, Clear Lake in the Hood, Sandy and Lower Deschutes basins was storing less than half the normal amount of water for this time of year. Reservoirs in the Rogue and Umpqua were also filling behind schedule at 71% of average.

Elsewhere, reservoirs range between 80% and 116% of normal, and up to 121% at Lake Owyhee in southeast Oregon.

There still is time for areas facing water shortages to recover, with a cooler spring and timely rains, Oviatt said, though the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Prediction Center is calling for higher temperatures and decreased precipitation over the next 8-14 days.

“We’re not necessarily in complete dire straits,” he said, “but time is running out.”

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