

On the bead

GARY LEWIS
ON THE TRAIL

This is one of those years when steelheaders don't talk to each other. Oh, they talk, but they don't talk fishing. They chat about the chukar numbers or bemoan the elk they missed. Word has come down from on high that steelhead numbers are down. One of those years when a lot of guys stay home while other anglers quietly go to the river and then lie about it.

It reminds me of the day we fished with Adam Hocking on the Snake. In Lewiston for a visit one January, my friend Kris Bales and I planned a day with Adam Hocking of Steel Dreams Guide Service. We would run the Clearwater or the Snake, depending on the weather.

I called Adam the night before. "Meet me at Heller Bar at eight o'clock," he said.

I expected to see two dozen anglers on the bank and two dozen trailers in the parking lot. Instead, it was just Adam, his brother-in-law Carl Welch and Tiller, the springer spaniel.

We would side-drift yarnies and beads, Hocking said. If we could hit the seams where steelhead hold, we would have a decent chance at getting fish to grab.

How they roll

Fish take beads for the same reason they bite salmon eggs. Steelhead, salmon and trout are programmed to eat fish eggs. And eggs tumble along the bottom.

Putting beads in front of fish is a deadly technique.

Most species in our steelhead streams are gravel spawners and the eggs that don't make it into the 3/4-minus tumble down with the current. Neutral-buoyant, they



Kris Bales/Contributed Photo

Adam Hocking with Gary Lewis and Tiller on the Snake River on an early January day.



Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

A road trip to the Snake in December or January can pay off with good steelhead action. This Snake River steelhead fell for a side-drifted rig in very shallow water.

stay close to the bottom and get vacuumed up by everything from suckers to sturgeon.

For the bottom-bounced bead presentation there is a variety of opinion on where to peg the sphere. Some say three inches, while others like to set the bead

two inches from the hook. Instead of eyeballing it, try to set the bead about two fingers' width away from the hook. Why is this important? A bead set too far away is likely to result in an outside-the-mouth set, which is considered snagging in some locales.

At the hook-set, the line slides through the bead and the hook usually plants inside the corner of the mouth.

To fix the bead in place, use a toothpick and break it off, slide the bead over a bobber stop knot, or use a threaded rubber band.

The drift

Prospect in fairly straight classic drifts. Watch for water that moves at about the speed of a fast walk.

Many guides prefer a nine-foot spinning rod and a reel that can hold about 160 yards of eight- to 12-pound test main line. High visibility lines are good to give the boat operator a quick sight reference. For leader, use 48 inches of six- to 10-pound clear mono or fluorocarbon, knotted to a No. 4 single hook. In clear water, step down a size to a No. 6.

In the weight box, keep up to five different lengths of pre-cut hollow core pencil leads. Or tie up with a sliding snap swivel on your main line and connect it to a pre-tied "slinky" weight.

Use just enough weight that your pencil lead or slinky ticks the bottom every two or three seconds.

In a jet boat, set up to drift downriver stern first, with the bow slightly angled into the run. At the head of the slot, start the kicker before shutting down the big motor. The rearmost angler (often the boat operator) should make the first cast.

See, *Steelhead*/Page B6

Fall rains bring flush of new grass

Fresh growth will help deer, elk and upland birds prepare for winter

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — When Brian Ratliff gazes at the south-facing slopes that loom above the Snake, Powder and Burnt rivers in Baker County he's gratified by the soft green haze he sees.

Better than brown.

Or, worse still, white.

The green fuzz — detectable even from miles away — reveals a crop of tender grass that has sprouted, nourished by the periodic rains that arrived in North-eastern Oregon soon after the conclusion of a summer defined by severe drought.

This forage, coming as it has before snow has accumulated at the lower elevations that serve as winter range for many species, could spare deer and other wildlife from the potentially fatal deprivations of winter, said Ratliff, the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Baker City office.

"Right now it's great," Ratliff said Nov. 10. "If we had had a dry fall and then gone right to snow, we would be in a lot worse shape. I'm very, very happy that we got



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

New grass growth greens a slope near Brownlee Reservoir in eastern Baker County on Sunday, Nov. 7. Wildlife biologists say the flush of grass will help deer, elk and upland birds add fat layers that will give them a better chance to survive winter's deprivations.

(the fall grass)."

That grass is especially vital for deer, Ratliff said.

The source of nutritious food allows deer to amass a layer of fat that can sustain them during the frigid weeks and months to come. Fawns are particularly vulnerable due to their smaller body mass, which can't generate as much heat.

But Ratliff said bucks, which are in the rut now and thus burning more calories than usual, are also vulnerable to dry falls when most of the available forage has been left desiccated by the hot, dry summer.

Dry grass isn't as nutritious as the new flush of growth spurred by rains in October and early November.

Elk and bighorn sheep tend to be harder than deer, but those animals also benefit from the crop of nutritious grass just before winter descends.

Ratliff said he would have preferred to see the greenup begin a bit earlier, in late September or early October, which would have given animals more time to pack on pounds.

Although daytime temperatures have been near average, Ratliff said frequent sub-freezing nights have limited grass growth on north-facing slopes, which get much less sunlight.

Most of the new grass is confined to south slopes, with winter ranges in the Snake River country

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— **Matt Keenan**, district wildlife biologist, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, La Grande

faring better than along the lower Powder and Burnt rivers, Ratliff said.

The situation is similar in Union County, said Matt Keenan, district wildlife biologist at ODFW's La Grande office.

"We're definitely seeing a fall greenup, and it's a pretty welcome sight after such a dry summer," Keenan said on Wednesday, Nov. 10. "It's definitely going to help. It's super crucial for deer and elk to add to those last-minute fat reserves."

Like Ratliff, Keenan said the rain would have been even more beneficial had it arrived earlier in the fall, when warmer temperatures would have yielded a more bountiful grass crop.

See, *Green*/Page B6