



In SPORTS, A6

Wrestlers win title at tourney

Baker City Herald

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QUICK HITS

Good Day Wish To A Subscriber

A special good day to Herald subscriber Doreen Riggs of Baker City.

Publication schedule for New Year's week

The Baker City Herald will publish issues on Tuesday, Dec. 28, Thursday, Dec. 30 and Friday, Dec. 31. There will not be an issue on Saturday, Jan. 1.

Oregon, A3

Oregon's COVID-19 omicron hospitalization peak won't be nearly as bad as forecasters predicted a week ago but could still overwhelm the health care system within weeks with about as many people needing hospital beds as did during the delta wave.

BRIEFING

Baker County GOP hosting forum for gubernatorial candidates Jan. 4

The Baker County Republican Party will host a gubernatorial forum on Tuesday, Jan. 4 at 6 p.m. at the Baker Elks Lodge, 1896 Second St. All 11 Republican candidates who have filed have been invited, as of last week, eight of the 11 have responded to the invitation, and six have confirmed. State Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, whose district includes Baker County, will moderate the event. For more information, call Suzan Ellis Jones at 541-519-5035.

WEATHER

Today

19 / 13
Mostly cloudy



Wednesday

20 / 5
Morning snow



The space below is for a postage label for issues that are mailed.



Bighorns and bacteria

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald, File

A group of bighorn sheep, including a lamb, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County on June 20, 2020.

■ Illness continues to threaten future of Baker County's two bighorn sheep herds

By JAYSON JACOBY
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As the helicopter flew over the ridges and canyons of eastern Baker County recently, Brian Ratliff was seeing more bighorn sheep than he expected.

But the news wasn't exclusively of the good variety.

It was the sheep Ratliff didn't see during the flight over the Lookout Mountain unit — lambs — that define the continuing threat to the future of Oregon's biggest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Ratliff, the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department

of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Baker City office, counted just four lambs during the aerial census.

All of those lambs, born in 2021, were in small groups of sheep in the northern part of the unit, which is bordered on the north by Highway 86 and on the south by Interstate 84.

The scarcity of lambs shows that a bacterial infection remains widespread in the Lookout Mountain unit and puts the long-term health of the herd in peril.

ODFW biologists believe all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the unit in the spring of 2020 died due to the same strain of Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria.

It was first detected in the Lookout Mountain herd, which included about 400 bighorns, in February 2020 when dead sheep were found near the Snake River

Road above Brownlee Reservoir.

Lab tests of tissue samples from dead sheep confirmed the strain of bacteria, the first time it had been found in bighorn sheep in Oregon.

During an aerial count in late 2018, biologists counted 403 bighorns in the Lookout Mountain unit.

A survey in late 2020 showed about 250 sheep.

Ratliff said he expected about 225 in this year's count, so he was somewhat pleased by the total of 274 animals.

About 62% of the bighorns, however, were distributed among several large groups in one canyon in the south part of the unit.

Ratliff didn't see any lambs in that area.

See, **Herds** / Page A3

Locals rescue snowmobile riders lost in snowstorm

By JAYSON JACOBY
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A group of Baker County snowmobile riders rapidly shifted from recreationists to rescuers the day after Christmas when a group of riders from Washington got lost during a blizzard in the Wallowa Mountains north of Halfway.

The locals, members of the Panhandle Snowmobile Club in eastern Baker County, found the five snowmobilers, none of whom was injured, and escorted them

back to a parking area about four hours after the rescue operation started.

The episode showed the value both of the GPS-equipped emergency transmitter the Washington snowmobilers carried, and of having a local cadre of riders who are familiar with the terrain and willing to help others, Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash said on Monday, Dec. 27.

"They made a pretty seamless transition from enjoying their day to a rescue mission," Ash said of

the Panhandle Snowmobile Club members.

The incident started about 5:28 p.m. Sunday when Ash received a phone call from Brandon Christensen, a Washington man who is friends with the five snowmobilers.

Christensen told the sheriff that his friends, who had limited cell service, had called to tell him they were lost in the Fish Lake area, about 14 miles north of Halfway.

See, **Rescue** / Page A3

COVID cases stay low

■ Health Dept. director awaiting omicron variant

By JAYSON JACOBY
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Baker County had another quiet week on the COVID-19 front, but Nancy Staten continues to wait, with some trepidation, for omicron.

The new variant, which is significantly more easily spread than the delta variant, already likely is the dominant strain in Oregon, according to the Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, said on Monday morning, Dec. 27, that the county has had no confirmed omicron infections.

But Staten noted that there's likely a testing backlog due to the holidays.

Also, OHA doesn't have county-level data, in terms of cases, by

variant. That information is broken down by region, and Baker County is part of a region that also includes Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties.

Another method of detecting variants is testing samples of wastewater from communities, including Baker City.

But the most recent sample from Baker City was collected Dec. 1, before omicron had been confirmed in Oregon. The Dec. 1 sample from Baker City detected only the delta variant.

"I'm curious to see what's going to happen," Staten said, referring to the effects of omicron replacing delta as the main source of COVID-19 cases.

She said she's encouraged by data from other countries that suggest omicron, though much more

infectious, also causes generally milder symptoms.

And although omicron has proved more resistant to vaccines, there's evidence that a booster dose affords greater protection against an omicron breakthrough case, and reduces the chances that an infected person will need hospital treatment.

For that reason, Staten said, the Health Department continues to urge residents to get a booster shot or start their vaccination series.

A drive-thru vaccination clinic is possible in January, and in the meantime residents can call the Health Department at 541-523-8211 to schedule an appointment, or check with their health care provider.

See, **COVID** / Page A3



Staten

Council to discuss homeless issue

Baker City Herald

Baker City Council members will have a public work session Wednesday, Dec. 29 to discuss the homeless situation, and the recent conversation among Baker County Commissioners about potentially opening a temporary warming shelter in the city.

Wednesday's work session will start at 6 p.m. at City Hall, 1655 First St.

Work sessions are open to the public but the purpose is for discussion only, and councilors will not make any decisions.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten suggested during the Council's Dec. 14 meeting that councilors schedule the work session for Dec. 29.

The work session was prompted by the county commissioners' Dec. 1 meeting, when the three commissioners concluded that Baker City needs a temporary shelter, which would be open from the evening through the morning.

Commissioners did not discuss a specific site for a shelter. Commission Chairman Bill Harvey, who spearheaded the discussion, proposed a two-pronged strategy — first, find a temporary site for a shelter for this winter, then look into a longer term facility.

Commissioners also mentioned the need to coordinate with the city and other local agencies.

In a message to the Baker City Herald on Monday morning, Dec. 27, McQuisten wrote, in response to a question about Wednesday's work session: "We hope to learn what the commissioners are thinking regarding warming stations and shelters. The City hasn't been part of that communication, and we need to be."

Wednesday's work session will happen during what's likely to be the coldest week of 2021.

The temperature dipped to 6 degrees on Monday at the Baker City Airport; the coldest temperature so far in 2021 was 5 degrees, in February.

The National Weather Service is forecasting temperatures to dip to near zero later this week.

Baker City Police Chief Ty Duby said in November that the city's homeless population has grown over the past few years. He cited his own observations, as well as reports from police officers and from the public.

Duby also said he plans to ask the City Council to approve an ordinance limiting where, and when, people can camp on public property within the city limits.

Duby said he was prompted to act by a bill that the Oregon Legislature passed earlier this year and that Oregon Gov. Kate Brown signed into law on June 23.

The law — introduced as House Bill 3115 and passed by the Democratic majorities in both the state House and Senate — is based on a 2019 federal court ruling in a Boise case that in effect prohibited cities and counties from making it illegal for people to sleep outdoors in public spaces if the jurisdiction doesn't provide indoor alternatives.

Baker County's two state legislators, Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, both voted against the bill.

The new Oregon law states that cities or counties which have ordinances that regulate "the acts of sitting, lying, sleeping or keeping warm and dry outdoors on public property that is open to the public must be objectively reasonable as to time, place and manner with regards to persons experiencing homelessness."



McQuisten



TODAY
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THURSDAY — GO! MAGAZINE ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE