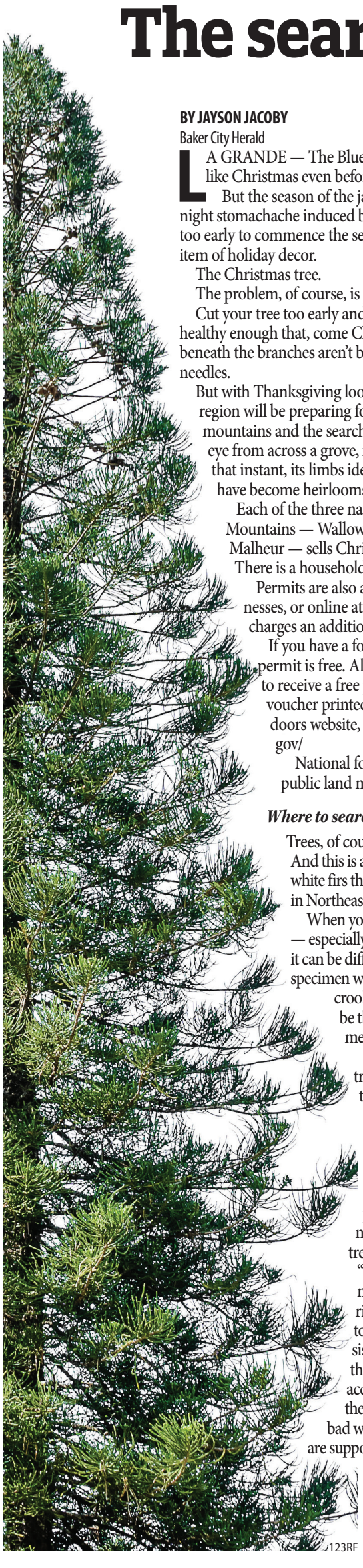
Holiday hunting

The search for the perfect Christmas tree



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BY JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

LA GRANDE — The Blue Mountains started to look like Christmas even before Halloween this year.

But the season of the jack-o'-lantern, of the overnight stomachache induced by too many fun-size bars, is too early to commence the search for the all-important item of holiday decor.

The Christmas tree.

The problem, of course, is preservation.

Cut your tree too early and you'll struggle to keep it healthy enough that, come Christmas, the presents stacked beneath the branches aren't buried in drifts of desiccated needles.

But with Thanksgiving looming, families across the region will be preparing for their annual trip to the mountains and the search for the tree that catches the eye from across a grove, its shape seemingly perfect in that instant, its limbs ideal to hold the ornaments that have become heirlooms.

Each of the three national forests in the Blue Mountains — Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur — sells Christmas tree permits for $5. There is a household limit of five permits.

Permits are also available from many businesses, or online at recreation.gov (which charges an additional $2.50 processing fee).

If you have a fourth grader in the house the permit is free. All fourth graders are eligible to receive a free permit by presenting a paper voucher printed from the Every Kid Outdoors website, https://everykidoutdoors.gov/

National forest permits are valid only for public land managed by the Forest Service.

Where to search, what to look for

Trees, of course, tend to grow in groves. And this is a typical trait for the grand and white firs that are a favorite Christmas tree in Northeastern Oregon forests.

When you come across a cluster of firs — especially if they're slathered in snow — it can be difficult to distinguish between a specimen with gaping gaps in its limbs or a crooked trunk, and one that would be the crowning holiday adornment for your living room.

Lest anyone worry about contributing to deforestation by cutting a Christmas tree, quite the opposite is true, Forest Service officials say.

Removing a small-diameter tree can improve forest health by reducing the competition for sunlight, water and nutrients, allowing remaining trees to grow faster.

"In most parts of the forest, removing small trees reduces the risk of wildfire, helps other trees to grow larger and more fire-resistant, and creates open areas that provide forage for wildlife," according to a press release from the Forest Service. "So don't feel bad when you cut that little tree. You are supporting a healthy forest."

National forests in the Blue Mountains are amply endowed with multiple species of conifers that are suitable for Christmas trees.

You're not likely to find the symmetrical specimens of tree farms or sales lots in towns, to be sure.

But browsing the orderly rows can't fairly be called an adventure.

Acquiring a tree in the forest, by contrast, often involves trudging through snow, over the hills and through the woods, with the likelihood of getting sticky sap on your hands and clothes.

If you do venture into the forest, prepare for slippery roads and chilly temperatures. Bring food, warm drinks and extra clothing, and make sure somebody knows where you're going and when you expect to return.

See **Trees** / *B6*

Christmas tree permit vendors

Baker City
Bi Mart
D&B Supply
York's
The Gold Post, **Sumpter**
Burnt River Market, **Unity**
Hitchin' Post Grocery, **Richland**
Halfway Market, **Halfway**
Wallowa Food City, **Wallowa**
Dollar Stretcher, **Enterprise**
Sports Corral, **Joseph**
La Grande
Bi Mart
Miller's Home Center
Hometown Hardware, **Union**
Island City Market & Deli, **Island City**
Pendleton
D&B Supply
Bi Mart
Southgate Minimart
Hermiston
Smitty's Ace Supply
Ace Hardware
Pilot Rock
Mentzer & Elliott
J&D's Foodmart
Heppner Mobil, **Heppner**
Alpine Outpost, **Tollgate**
Zip Zone II, **Milton-Freewater**
Elgin Food Town, **Elgin**
Athena Convenience, **Athena**
Rhode's Supply, **Ukiah**
Ace Hardware, **Boardman**

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald, File

Searching the woods near Phillips Reservoir, southwest of Baker City, for a Christmas tree during a previous December.

Spring was snowy but Central Oregon glaciers still lost this year

BY MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

In the battle against global warming, glaciers in the Central Oregon Cascades have not fared well in 2022. Collier and Bend glaciers, two massive sheets of moving ice high in the mountains west of Bend, lost an average thickness of 11 feet this summer.

"It was another lousy year to be a glacier in Oregon," said Gordon Grant, a Corvallis-based research hydrologist with the U.S. Forest Service.

Glaciers are critical features of Central Oregon's ecosystem as their late summer melt helps bring cool, clear water to rivers and streams in the fall months, sustaining habitat for fish and other aquatic wildlife.

The availability of water for irrigation districts in Central Oregon is also threatened by the loss of glaciers as they provide the farming community with a steady source of late-season run-off.

"These hot summers are dramatically removing the ice volume in the Central Cascades," said Anders Carlson, president of the Oregon Glaciers Institute, a nonprofit that documents Oregon's glaciers, measures their health and projects the future of the state's glaciers. "This isn't just warm summers causing glacier margins to retreat to higher elevations. The summers are melting the glaciers away at all elevations."

Anders Carlson/Oregon Glaciers Institute

Thinning on Bend Glacier resulted in the glacier being cut in half as bedrock knobs melted through the ice and cut off the lower part of the glacier from its upper reaches where snow accumulates. Now the glacier usually does not accumulate any snow.

The loss of 11 feet of ice from Collier Glacier alone equates to 18,000 city buses, said Carlson. Converted to water, 400 million gallons melted away, enough to fill 650 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Glacial melt has been intense in each of the past three summers and four out of the last six, Carlson said. The glaciers are melting in part because snowpack that normally rests on top of the glaciers — protecting them from the sun — has dwindled under the intense summer heat.

Carlson said just 4% of Collier Glacier had snow on it by the end of this past summer. A healthy glacier should have 70% of its surface covered by snow at the end of summer, he said. Any amount less than that results in a net loss of glacier volume.

High elevation thinning of glaciers expose bedrock, effectively splitting up the glaciers into separate chunks. When the lower and upper parts of a glacier are disconnected, it prevents ice in upper areas from replenishing the lower reaches, hastening their disappearance.

"This already happened in Bend Glacier and is occurring right now on Collier and Hayden glaciers," Carlson said.

A century ago Oregon was home to at least 43 glaciers. There are just 27 left according to the institute. Glaciers have been shrinking for decades, but their rate of decline has accelerated in recent years, Carlson said.

"This makes three years in a row with no or minimal accumulation of snow on Collier. In fact, we now have six years of satellite measurements of snow cover for Collier and four out of those six years are abysmal," Carlson said.

Collier Glacier did gain mass in 2017 and 2019, but those gains were wiped away by intense summertime heat each summer since 2020.

"Central Cascade glaciers are almost literally a block of ice taken out of the freezer and plopped on your kitchen counter where it melts on all sides, not just the lowest elevation side," Carlson said.

The glacial melt this year came during one of the hottest summers on record in the Pacific Northwest. In August, Oregon's average temperature was 6.6 degrees above normal, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

This year's high temps follow the heat dome event in June of 2021, which shattered temperature records. In 2020 the Pacific Northwest also experienced a long, hot summer that culminated with the extreme Labor Day forest fires.

While this year's snowy spring and cool June held promise for a better year for glaciers, the hot August temperatures and warm autumn reversed those gains.

Summers are also growing longer in duration, Carlson said, with the month of October being unusually dry in recent years.

"I really thought we'd have a year of net gains on the glaciers, or at least not insane losses of mass, as the snowpack was quite high coming into the summer due to that cold and snowy spring," Carlson said.

"Even when you think the cards are dealt in your favor, global warming has some trump cards up its sleeve."