

# Feeding time

## Elkhorn Wildlife Area includes 10 elk feed sites in Baker and Union counties

BY JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald

**B**AKER CITY — The feast for elk was laid on in time for Thanksgiving, but the elk pay no heed to holidays. They know when December begins, however.

At least the elk that Dan Marvin deals with recognize the arrival of the last month of the year.

Marvin manages the Elkhorn Wildlife Area. It's a series of 10 winter elk-feeding stations, ranging from Old Auburn Lane southwest of Baker City to Shaw Mountain in Union County, operated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW).

ODFW started the wildlife area in 1971. Its purpose isn't what it might seem to be, though.

The state agency started setting out alfalfa hay for elk not to stave off starvation during the long Northeastern Oregon winters.

Elk, as a general rule, can withstand all but the worst winters.

ODFW's goal was to prevent the animals from gobbling the hay that ranchers put up to feed their cattle.

The challenge is that unlike some parts of the state, there is little of what amounts to a buffer zone of winter range, a place between the mountains and the valleys where elk can congregate and get enough to eat without plundering ranches.

ODFW in effect created that zone with the feeding sites.

The idea, which has been largely effective over the past half century, is to entice the elk with alfalfa while they're migrating from their summer range in the mountains.



**ABOVE:** Rocky Mountain elk eat alfalfa hay during a past winter at the Elkhorn Wildlife Area feeding site west of North Powder.

**BELOW:** Elk gather during a previous winter at the feeding site near Old Auburn Road, southwest of Baker City.

S. John Collins/Baker City Herald, File

Once the elk become accustomed to getting an easy meal, they tend to return to the same spots every year.

Some elk still bypass the feeding sites at times, but they take a much smaller toll than they otherwise would.

Marvin's hay ledger proves the point.

Each year he lays in a supply of about 1,100 tons — the capacity of the barns at the feeding sites.

"We like to start winter with full barns," said Marvin, who is starting his fifth winter as the Elkhorn Wildlife Area manager. ODFW buys that hay from local ranchers.

"We have some established vendors in the valley we work with," Marvin said. "We pay market price."

The feed sites are closed to the public from Dec. 1 through April 10.

Because there are elk hunting seasons going on through No-

vember (and even later, in some places), elk tend to be moving around a lot until Dec. 1, Marvin said.

But once that day arrives, and the hunting pressure eases, the elk are all but certain to start strolling into the feed sites, where the hay will be ready.

"They know the time frame," he said.

In years when snow comes early — 2020 was an example, with a couple feet of snow accumulating in the mountains the first half of November — elk will wander into some of the feed sites before Dec. 1.

This year, though, with heavy snow in late October and early November but almost none since, Marvin said the elk have stayed away.

The elk that congregate at the Anthony Creek feed site, near the wildlife area headquarters west of North Powder, tend to be the most consistent when it comes to the Dec. 1 arrival, Marvin said.

Elk that migrate to the other feeding sites, by contrast, often don't show up in large numbers until snow begins to pile up.

During mid-winter, the Wildlife Area crew feeds more than 1,000 elk, including about 500 at the Old Auburn Lane site and 250 or so at Anthony Creek.

A few of the feed sites also attract deer.

See **Elk** / B2



# 23 (fish species) and me: a record-setting day in Thailand

**LUKE OVGARD**  
CAUGHT OVGARD

**R**AWAI, Thailand — I've always been one to test my jeans while working on one project or another, but for a few years there, everyone with disposable income was testing their genes. You certainly know people, and there's even a chance you were one of those people who paid AncestryDNA, FamilyTreeDNA or 23AndMe to categorize them based on their genetic code.

My brother Gabe was one of those people who paid for 23AndMe. This led us not only to a surprise cousin, but we also found out that our genetic makeup was even more mixed than we'd previously thought. The Slovenian and Norwegian bulk of our heritage paired with a lot more Austrian than we'd previously accounted for, as well as minuscule percentages from all around northern and central Europe.

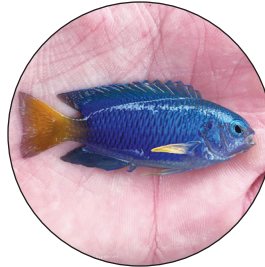
Most shocking of all was that my own experience with 23AndMe involved a country not European at all. My 23AndMe experience tied me to Thailand. Not only that, it could be geographically narrowed down not just to the country, but to a small fishing village on Phuket Island called Rawai.

### Rawai

While 23AndMe's mail order system typically uses saliva, my own experience with it involved blood, sweat and tears. While my brother was off raising his family, I was off on another adventure, this time to Asia.

I had comparatively little information about where to fish in Thailand, so I'd done my best to mark locations that looked viable purely from the "Satellite View" of Google Maps. Just like 23AndMe, I replaced oral history and word of mouth with digital technology to secure the results I wanted.

Websites like iNaturalist and Fishbrain use crowdsourced data from users to paint a composite picture. Think of like a puzzle. If one person drops a data point, a single puzzle piece, the picture isn't terribly clear. But as more and more data points are added to the dataset, and the puzzle gets ever closer to completion, the power of the software grows exponentially, and the puzzle becomes a pic-



Fish Luke Ovgard caught in Rawai, Thailand, from left to right: cinnabar goatfish, damselfish, cardinalfish, milkspotted puffer.

Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo



The pier at Rawai, Thailand.

Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo

ture. 23AndMe operates the same way.

Unfortunately, neither of my

go-to sources has reached critical mass in Thailand yet, so I spent a lot of time puzzling. I marked

places and simply hoped they'd work out. Several didn't, but as it happened, my very first pin did.

The pin I placed on the pier in the little town of Rawai was my first stop.

It was also the most productive place I've ever fished in terms of fish diversity, boasting species variation that made me drool.

### Hours

As with most of southeast Asia, the day does not begin at 8 a.m. in Rawai. With few exceptions — like gas stations and coffee shops — most businesses open at 10 or 11 a.m. in Thailand. You're more likely to find a sit-down restaurant or tourist shop open after midnight than before noon, so it was fortunate I'd done my shopping the night before.

I bought shrimp, ice and a bucket at Lotus, the Thai answer to Walmart, after my plane landed. This meant I was ready to hit the water when I pulled up to the Rawai Pier around 8 in the morning. The town was

still asleep, so I parked about 50 feet away from the pier on an empty street and hit the water. There was a sign on the pier that read "NO FISHING," and it almost stopped me. It was a loading pier for local ferries and tour boats, so I fully expected to get kicked out once the first group of sunscreen-soaked tourists showed up. Still, with no recreational fishing regulations to speak of in Thailand, I took my chances.

The sky was a dense cotton wall, overcast and drizzling, so I didn't see another person for hours. In that time, I caught fish after fish after fish.

By the time I broke for lunch around 2 p.m., less than a dozen people had braved the rain and ventured onto the pier. I'd taken shelter between the two small canopies topping the area where passengers stage when loading onto boats, but in those two small areas, I'd caught dozens of fish. Still, the cold and constant action burned all of my reserve calories, and my stomach forced me to leave the fertile seas.

I stowed my gear in the car and strolled to the live seafood markets framing the base of the pier. Tents covered bins of live lobsters, crabs, tiger prawns, mantis shrimp, group, horseshoe crabs, snapper, clams and almost everything else that swims or scurries undersea.

See **Pier** / B2