

LISTENING TO THE LAND

A roadmap for saving the state's coho salmon

By **KATHERINE LACAZE**
For Cannon Beach Gazette



Katherine Lacaze

Kenneth Phippen, Oregon Coast Branch Chief for NOAA Fisheries, presents on "Breathing Life Into the Oregon Coast Coho Salmon Recovery Plan" on Wednesday, Feb. 20, at the Seaside Public Library as part of the Necanicum Watershed Council's Listening to the Land lecture series.

Coho Salmon Recovery Plan, which was finalized in December 2016. The plan builds on past and current efforts to restore the coho salmon, particularly with a call for "continued actions to repair the ecosystem processes that influence the health and stability of the

rearing habitats for juvenile coho salmon," according to a plan summary. Using the plan as a foundation, the department can develop focused annual work plans with specific milestones.

Too often, Phippen said, bureaucrats put together plans that sit on the shelf without leading to tangible action, when "they're supposed to be living documents." Nine months after the recovery plan was approved, the Oregon Coast Coho Salmon Workshop Team worked to develop a vision statement to ensure the document remained tangible and fresh.

Additionally, the plan is supplemented by a Recovery Implementation Strategy, which includes excerpts for each of the five strata on the Oregon Coast. Clatsop County is in the North Coast Stratum, which includes the Necanicum, Nehalem, Tillamook and Nestucca rivers.

What does a recovery plan do?

Out of 28 salmon species from the West Coast

currently listed as endangered or threatened, the coho is relatively the closest to recovery, Phippen said, adding there is still work to be done.

While there are multiple variables at play, he added, "We really need to dig down deep and figure out what we as NOAA Fisheries can do to implement the plan." To that end, the agency developed a ground strategy with several proactive and specific goals, one of which is managing the riparian area along rivers and streams and increasing the quality, quantity and diversity of winter and summer juvenile rearing habitat.

Other goals include establishing focused protection and restoration efforts within forestry and agriculture; promoting actions that strengthen coho populations along with sustainable local community and economies that rely on working lands; and enhancing monitoring programs and science.

"We're actually making very specific commitments in our daily work in

association to our recovery plan," Phippen said, adding the ground strategy does not amend or revise the recovery plan, but rather "identifies and prioritizes actions NOAA will take unilaterally or in partnership with others."

For the first time, he added, NOAA Fisheries is developing its annual work plans alongside the agency's Restoration Center staff to ensure their work is complementary and progressing toward similar objectives.

As Phippen pointed out, success is not measured by merely getting coho salmon de-listed as an endangered species, but also through creating the infrastructure and environment for the species to continue thriving so it does not become re-listed a few years down the road.

Making a difference

Phippen said they have seen success in the state when a couple smaller watershed councils or other conservation organizations build a coalition and con-

solidate their efforts. His agency can provide support through funding and by helping groups identify opportunities for working together.

Additionally, community members can contribute to the recovery effort by sharing detailed information at the population level to help develop and implement strategic action plans alongside the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and other agencies and local stakeholders.

"You know that ground," Phippen said, adding that level of localized familiarity is especially valuable. "The bottom line question is, are you going to continue this exciting journey with us?"

The Listening to the Land series runs through May. Each lecture takes place at 6 p.m. at the library. In March, Jakob Shockey, a wildlife biologist and the owner of Beaver State Wildlife Solutions, will present on "Resolving Conflicts with Beaver using Natural Science and Design."

Elk tracking: The traveling patterns of the local herds

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**
The Daily Astorian



Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

Corrine Bird, left, and Carla Cole count elk during a survey of the herds around the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park.



Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

Photographer and naturalist Neil Maine watches a group of elk graze in the dunes near Gearhart with a map he uses to track their movements.

There are several ways to track elk in Clatsop County, official and unofficial.

Combined, these efforts reveal just how much — and how little — North Coast residents know about animals they may see almost every day. But the answers, and questions, have gained a new urgency as city leaders struggle to address public safety and property damage tied to urban elk populations in Gearhart and Warrenton.

Official efforts include things like annual helicopter surveys state wildlife biologists just completed of herds in the larger Saddle Mountain management unit. Or the driving surveys park staff and volunteers at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park conducted last week on public roads around the park's borders.

Unofficial efforts look like a Facebook group former Warrenton resident Lena Weil created in 2014 with traffic safety in mind. Though the group — Clatsop County Elk sightings! — has since morphed into more of a celebration of local elk, Weil believes it gives the community a sense of when elk are on the move or near roads.

But despite all the eyes focused on elk, many questions remain, and understanding the movements of the Clatsop Plains elk in particular presents a unique challenge.

Driving surveys

Early one morning in late February, Carla Cole and Corinne Bird pointed their binoculars at a herd of elk grazing on a hill on the other side of Alternate U.S. Highway 101 Business, not far from the turn-off to Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, where Cole works as the natural resources project manager and Bird volunteers. They tallied the number of bulls, cows and calves they saw and recorded the herd's location.

The information is just another data point to show where elk have been seen around the park over the last 10 years.

For now, the park employs two methods to track elk herd numbers and movements: driving surveys, done at sunrise every other month throughout the year on public roads around the park's borders, and elk fecal pellet surveys, done on foot in park property by staff and volunteers willing to poke at poop and bushwhack through dense forest.

The driving surveys provide far less concrete data than the elk pellet surveys, but they are a low-effort way to gather a little more information. Park staff can say with confidence where they have seen — at least from the road — a lot of elk over the years, where they have seen only a few and where both sightings and abundance seem to be changing.

The national park's tracking work is, in part, an effort to untangle anecdotal information and pin it to data. Because, as Cole said, "Everyone's memory is faulty."

The journals of the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark pro-

vide a glimpse at what elk abundance around the modern-day national park looked like before European settlement. But since then, Warrenton has undergone rapid large-scale development in areas that were historically forests and fields.

Many of the conversations Cole hears now about elk in the area — and what constitutes normal herd sizes or travel patterns — seems to be set in a shorter, more recent time frame.

"What people are remembering is from their own lifetimes and that's not necessarily the best indication of what 'normal' is," she said. "There could be pretty wide fluctuations in both herd size and abundance and distribution and patterns of use across the landscape. Those are the questions we're really just trying to get more information on."

Park staff are in the process of refining the most recent years of driving and pellet survey data, and are interested to see what trends emerge when this data is contextualized within 10 years of information. A plan to fit up to six elk in the park with radio collars this year could reveal even more detailed information about how the

animals use the park.

For now, Cole and Bird will keep driving.

'Reasonably predictable'

Clatsop County's herds are folded into a large group known as the Saddle Mountain unit. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife manages many of the populations in the unit for hunting, keeping an eye on the ratio of bulls to cows and calves to cows.

Though biologists use helicopters — and have experimented with drones — to survey herds in some parts of the unit, driving is really the only way to survey the Clatsop Plains elk. These herds inhabit a mix of forested, agricultural and increasingly developed and urban lands crossed with public roads and divided by

a busy highway.

"Most herds don't freak out if you fly over them, but if they do, they run through fences or essentially stampede," said Herman Biederbeck, district wildlife biologist. "And that's the last thing we want to do in that area."

Like the national park's driving survey crews, state trackers are limited by what they can see from the road and in open areas. Then, of course, there is what they hear from people who live in Gearhart and Warrenton who deal with the Clatsop Plains elk regularly.

"We get reports of the size of the Gearhart elk herd and some people who don't like the elk all that much have a tendency to give inflated numbers," Biederbeck said.

He often relies on meticulous observers, like former

biology teacher and nature photographer Neal Maine, to ground-truth the claims.

While there is pressure on local city leaders to address the elk herds, it does not affect Maine. After 30 years of teaching biology, he's more interested in looking at all the variables and letting people decide for themselves.

For years, he's kept an eye on the Gearhart elk and his efforts to track them fall somewhere in the middle between official and unofficial. He knows the herds' usual routes, and believes the community could find ways to better predict when elk will pop up at places like the golf course and use this knowledge to plan ahead.

"They have patterns — they break the pattern all the time — but it's reasonably predictable," he said.

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