ODFW Field Reports

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission
March 18, 2022

East Region

Nick Myatt, Region Manager

Willow-Whitehorse Lahontan cutthroat trout population estimate

A Lahontan cutthroat trout in the Willow-Whitehorse Creek area.

.Malheur, Harney, and Klamath district fish staff along with support from Native Fish Investigation and the BLM finished analyzing data from the 2020 Lahontan cutthroat trout (LCT) surveys and developed a population estimate for the Willow-Whitehorse watersheds. Located in the Trout Creek Mountains of southeast Oregon, LCT surveys in the area took place in 2011, 2015 and in 2020. This monitoring has been completed about every 5-years since 1989 and shows an increase in the LCT population. View tables and graphs from the analysis here.

Rangeland fire prevention gets $5 million for habitat projects

The High Desert Partnership and Harney County Wildfire Collaborative were awarded $5 million, via the 2021 Senate Bill 762, to reduce wildfire risk on rangelands on both sides of the Malheur and Harney County line. Funding will support activities on federal, state, tribal and private lands and will include 64,455 acres of annual grass control, 120.5 miles of roadside herbicide application, 1,000 acres of juniper cutting as well as 2,100 acres of seeding and native rangeland seed collection. With this funding, ODFW habitat program staff will assist in treating invasive annual grass (IAG) on approximately 14,000 acres of private land in the Juntura and Creston areas.

An herbicide applicator on a previous invasive annual grass control project.

Invasive annual grass continues to be one of the major threats to sagebrush steppe ecosystems in the Great Basin. Annual grasses, including cheatgrass, medusahead, and ventenata aggressively outcompete native plant species and quickly reestablish following wildfire. Due to the prolific nature of these grasses, they increase fuel continuity throughout the landscape ultimately creating larger and more frequent wildfires.

Annual winter trumpeter swan survey at Summer Lake Wildlife Area

The 2022 winter swan survey occurred on February 8 and surveyors observed 2,941 total swans. They were able to determine that 406 were trumpeter swans and 1,526 were tundra swans, though 1,009 were too far away or behavior (sleeping) precluded accurate species identification.

The relatively high number of unclassified swans and the fact that not all swans in the area can be observed from the ground suggests the actual

count of 406 trumpeters significantly underestimates the true size of the wintering trumpeter swan flock. This is the fourth

A wintering adult trumpeter swan at Summer Lake Wildlife Area, all photos by Brandon Reishus, ODFW Migratory Game Bird Coordinator.

consecutive winter that the survey crew has classified at least 400 trumpeter swans wintering at the wildlife area. During the first survey in 2012, only 93 trumpeters were observed.

A wintering family group of trumpeter swans along the Ana River at Summer Lake Wildlife Area (February 2022).

In addition to being a wintering area redistribution site, Summer Lake Wildlife Area has also been chosen as a breeding trumpeter swan restoration site. The two adult swans (white birds in photo above) were captive reared swans which were released at the wildlife area as part of the Pacific Flyway project to expand the distribution of breeding trumpeter swans in the U.S. The three gray swans are the cygnets the pair hatched at Summer Lake in June 2020.

The captive reared swans and their offspring are fitted with green plastic collars which help biologists monitor survival, movements, and behavior (social status) of the restoration flock.

A resident family group of trumpeter swans on frozen North Levee Impoundment at SLWA (February 2021).

West Region

Chris Kern, Interim Region Manager

Summary of double-crested cormorant colony monitoring in the Colombia River estuary

Avian predation staff recently finalized 2020 and 2021 survey results for double-crested cormorants in the Columbia River estuary.

The surveys suggest cormorant predation on imperiled salmon and steelhead may be the same or higher than prior to a major federal management plan that began in 2015. Results were presented to the federal Anadromous Fish Evaluation Program work group in early January 2022.

The federal management plan was intended to reduce the number of cormorants breeding on East Sand Island (a human-modified island near the mouth of the Columbia River) and thereby reduce the number of cormorants across the estuary. The plan reduced estuary cormorant numbers from about 13,000 breeding pairs in the early 2010s to 5,559 pairs in 2021.

However, the plan had major unintended consequences.

The East Sand Island colony was eventually abandoned by cormorants that took up residence

upriver on the Astoria-Megler Bridge and other colony sites. These colony sites lie within the mixing and freshwater zones of the estuary where there are fewer alternative food sources to juvenile salmon compared with East Sand Island.

As a result of the change in cormorant distribution, staff estimate cormorants now consume about three to five times as many salmon per capita than they did previously. Overall, staff estimate cormorant predation rates remain as high as 25 percent for some runs. For the ODFW hatchery at Big Creek, staff estimate cormorants annually consume about 39 percent of juvenile Tule fall Chinook released during spring.

Staff will continue to monitor cormorant numbers and coordinate with federal partners and Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to address the cormorant situation. Over the last year, staff drafted a management plan and are nearly finished with a cormorant status assessment for the estuary.

The double-crested cormorant colony on East Sand Island moved to the Astoria-Megler Bridge and other colony sites.

It is hoped these tools will help the federal agencies fulfill their responsibility to address the cormorant issue in the estuary.

Double-crested cormorant predation on salmon and steelhead may be same or higher than before a 2015 federal management plan.

Abnormally low flows on south coast rivers

Curry County experienced the 15th driest January on record and as of mid-February, weather remained warm and dry. With little rainfall, flows on the south coast are abnormally low for this time of year, leaving native fish vulnerable to human activity. Gold Beach fish staff surveying wild winter steelhead spawning noticed recreationists driving across streams and landowners cleaning up native streamside vegetation.

Staff worked with I&E to issue a news release asking recreationists and landowners to help preserve redds and fall chinook fry by not driving across streams and cleaning up streamside vegetation. The district issued a similar news release last year in mid-April that was well-received.

Tire tracks across the tail out of Hunter Creek during abnormally low water flows in February.

Beavers relocated to remote lake

For several years, the North Willamette district staff has been working on beaver relocations with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Multnomah County Drainage District, Portland Metro, the Oregon Zoo, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife. Coordination included developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the parties (BLM, Oregon Zoo, Drainage District, Metro, ODFW) and ensuring all ODFW beaver release requirements were being met.

Recently, North Willamette Watershed District staff removed beavers from a drainage ditch along I-84 where the crew was causing problems with the roadway. The Oregon Zoo held the beavers for about two weeks for veterinary staff to ensure they were healthy for release.

South Willamette Watershed District helped with the beaver release in a lake in a remote section of BLM land in the southern Santiam Unit. There was another beaver release that took place in the same area about eight to 10 years ago. However, those beavers either died or moved on to another area and the size of the wet meadow below the lake shrank considerably.

Although releasing the I-84 beavers here seemed a good option, it took a lot of forethought and consideration to ensure the best outcome. Many releases do not end well for the relocated animal and ensuring relocation meets all the requirements gives the best chance of surviving.

A beaver ready for its new home.

The Oregon Zoo posted a video on this collaborative beaver relocation effort that discussed the project and emphasized coexistence with beavers. The video received a significant amount of positive feedback and social media traffic with over 38,000 reactions, 450 comments, and over 6,000 shares on the Oregon Zoo's Facebook page. ODFWs Facebook page saw similar public response when the video was posted there.


Four beavers were recently relocated to this remote lake in the Santiam Unit.

Information and Education

Roger Fuhrman, Information and Education Administrator

New state-level prosecutor to support anti-poaching efforts

Oregon's Stop Poaching Campaign continues to build momentum, with the Department of Justice recently hiring Anti-Poaching/Wildlife Crime Prosecutor Jay D. Hall. He previously served for 12 years as a prosecutor on the Major Crimes Team with the Lane County District Attorney's Office and was named Wildlife Prosecutor of the Year by Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division in 2010.

Among his duties:

- Guide, train and assist county prosecutors in the nuances of trying fish and wildlife criminal cases.
- Assist with cases that cross jurisdictional lines.
- Advise law enforcement agencies in evidence collection, case process and penalty options.

In other campaign news, contracts for a public opinion survey and paid advertising campaign are progressing. The Department of Administrative Services (DAS) is managing the Request for Proposal process for these services.

The advertising contract will include a variety of tactics to increase awareness of poaching, the Turn In Poachers (TIP) Line, rewards/preference points for reporting poaching, and make it easier for the public to report poaching incidents.

In addition, several new stakeholders have stepped up to increase rewards for reporting poaching. The Oregon Hunters Association has for several years offered a TIP reward program which provides cash incentives or hunting preference points for people who help catch poachers. Additional stakeholders now offering rewards include:

- The Oregon Wildlife Coalition (9 conservation groups including Audubon, Defenders, Oregon Wild and others)
- Oregon Marine Board
- Oregon Guide and Outfitters Association.

These groups are providing $500 per animal for a long list of birds, reptiles and mammals, many of which were not formerly included in TIP rewards. For threatened or endangered species, the reward amount is $1,000. All of these new rewards are in addition to other rewards under the existing TIP program.

Oregon State Police

Captain Casey Thomas, Fish & Wildlife Division

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper made a substantial delivery and donation of court adjudicated/seized game meat to the FISH Food bank in Hood River. In total, 835 pounds of deer and elk meat were delivered to help feed families in need throughout the region. FISH food bank was very grateful for the donation.

Oregon State Police Fish (OSP) and Wildlife Trooper donating game meat.

Multiple Fish and Wildlife Troopers, along with a Douglas County Marine Deputy returned to a swamped boat on the South Umpqua to recover it. Working together, the Troopers were able to block the water from running into the boat and use a pump and bucket to bail the water out of


Boat recovery by OSP and Douglas County.

the boat. Once the majority of the water was out of the boat it was pushed off the rocks and rowed through the remaining rapids. The boat was loaded back on the owner's trailer and he took it home after expressing his sincere gratitude.

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper and Sergeant investigated a report of a bull elk killed during the first Bull Elk season in the Northside Unit where a non-resident hunter never purchased an elk tag. Investigation revealed the non-resident hunter shot a 4x5 bull elk on October 30, 2021, and only possessed a non-resident hunting license. The hunter had drawn a private lands Northside Elk tag but never purchased it. He then transported the bull elk back to Idaho and reported the incident to ODFW about 2 weeks later after taking the elk to a processor in Idaho. The hunter claimed he thought he had purchased the elk tag but never verified before hunting and also admitted knowing he had no tag to validate after harvesting. He stated he did not report not having a tag because he had other hunts to go on and was too busy. The hunter agreed to meet the Fish and Wildlife Sergeant at the Ontario OSP office after returning from vacation out of state. The hunter brought the remaining processed meat and antlers which were seized, and he was cited for Unlawful Take/Possession of Bull Elk and warned for Hunting without a Valid Big Game Tag.

Bull elk taken in Northside Unit without an elk tag.

Conservation Program

Andrea Hanson, Oregon Conservation Strategy Coordinator

Pygmy rabbit arboreal activity

The East Region Conservation Biologist and field staff continue pygmy rabbit research and have expanded efforts into Lake County. ODFW's pygmy rabbit technicians documented arboreal activity by a pygmy rabbit. The image of a rabbit climbing sage brush was captured on

trail camera as part of on-going survey efforts to document occupancy of North America's smallest rabbit and only arboreal rabbit species in the world. Pygmy rabbits will climb sagebrush to forage green leaves, but this activity is rarely seen in the field or documented with a photograph.

Photo provided by ODFW Pygmy Rabbit Technicians.

Ocean Salmon and Columbia River Program

Tucker Jones, Ocean Salmon and Columbia River Program Manager

2021 Stock Assessment of Bonneville Reservoir White Sturgeon

White sturgeon stock assessments are conducted on a three-year rotation between Bonneville, The Dalles, and John Day reservoirs. These stock assessments have been an ongoing joint effort since the late 1990s by staff from the Oregon and Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW; WDFW) as well as tribal staff and fishers from the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) and the Yakama Nation (YN).

Multiple sampling periods within a specific reservoir are used to mark and recapture white sturgeon to evaluate abundance and population dynamics. During 2021, contracted tribal fishers used gill nets to capture and mark 2,977 white sturgeon within Bonneville Reservoir with Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags during the first sampling period.


White sturgeon being PIT tagged.

Biologists from ODFW, WDFW and YN then used setlines during subsequent sampling periods to recapture previously tagged white sturgeon as well as PIT tag any unmarked individuals. From May 24 – August 25, 443 lines were set and a total of 4,472 white sturgeon were caught, of which 3,852 were also freshly implanted with a PIT tag.


White Sturgeon stock assessment sampling in Bonneville Reservoir, 2021.

For Bonneville Reservoir in 2021, the total estimated abundance of white sturgeon greater than 21 inches fork length (FL) was 215,650; a 13% decrease from the 2018 estimated abundance (n = 248,772). Although down from 2018, the 2021 estimate was the fourth highest estimate since assessments began in 1999. Additionally, legal-size white sturgeon (38 – 54" FL in Bonneville Reservoir) increased 22% from the 2018 stock assessment.
Because each PIT tagged fish can be tracked and measured over time, the evaluation of the multi-year mark-recapture data also provides a foundation for ODFW to assess growth patterns of white sturgeon by size class and predict future abundances. White sturgeon typically exhibit rapid growth in their first year of life (up to 12 inches), after which their growth slows substantially for the

next several years. Annual growth slowly increases until they approach sexual maturity, after which it slows again as sturgeon devote more energetic resources to reproduction.

Mean growth rates, coupled with annual survival rate parameters, are used to project abundance of various size classes and approximate recruitment into the spawning population. Jointly, all elements of the stock assessment allow managers to make informed decisions that fulfill both conservation and harvest objectives.

End of field reports for March 18, 2022