

The Pileated Post

Quarterly Newsletter Friends of the Little Pend Oreille NWR

http://www.refugefriends.com

Number

30

Annual Meeting

On Saturday, 19 September, we will gather at 9:30 at the fire cache, just west of Refuge Headquarters (watch for signs on Bear Creek road), for our Annual Meeting of Friends. Our speaker will be Ray Entz, Director of Wildlife and Terrestrial Resources, Natural Resources Department of the Kalispel Tribe. He holds B.S. and M.S. Biology degrees from EWU, and specializes in riparian, wetland and floodplain restoration ecology. Following the meeting and lunch, all are invited to hike the new and improved Mill Butte Trail. This event is open to the public.

Refuge Update August 2009

So far the most significant thing about this summer is the amount of moisture we have received. I really can't remember a July or early August when temperatures have been so moderated by overcast and rain, but I like it! Naturally this has made the fire season less intense in terms of severity, but more significant in terms of lightning activity. We have had four "starts" on the Refuge this year and all have been handled routinely and well by our fire personnel or our cooperators. Of course we still have many long dry days of summer and early autumn to contend with so fire activity may increase outside of what we think of as prime time. A late season dry spell is not that uncommon.

Speaking of fire, it seems like most of the PNW has experienced similar weather to what we have had in our small portion of it in that fire activity is generally down. As a result fire crews have not roamed as widely as in past years and their assignments seem to be shorter. Still the work has been steady enough that someone is usually gone. Presently, we have two people in California and one just returned from Oregon.

Two firefighters from Region 4 (Southeast Region) detailed to us for two weeks in July as they did last year. It is great to have their help and such assignments provide FWS fire folks a welcome chance for new experiences and broadened horizons.

Thinning projects primarily directed at hazard fuel reduction and habitat improvement are continuing along the Auto Tour Route and other areas. The units along the Auto Tour have made some of the outstanding vistas of fabulous old growth ponderosa pine more visible. Look for them on the east side of Rookery Road at the south end of the beaver ponds.

Jerry Cline has been busy this summer directing the removal of thousands of feet of interior fences both on the LPO and the Kaniksu Tract. He has had the help of Boy Scouts, Don Tryon with Friends members and others.

Jerry predicts that by the end of September there will have been somewhere on the order of 35,000 feet of fence removed; amazing! Equally amazing is that this just scratches the surface of the amount of fence we have yet to remove. Eliminating mile upon mile of this superfluous and hazardous wire is exciting for us. Can you imagine hiking for many miles through the forest and never crossing a fence? We hope to be there someday and this summer is a great start.

The Washington Trails Association (WTA) was here for one week in June and completed another segment of the Mill Butte Trail. There still remains about a third of a mile to construct. The YCC crew set carsonite trail markers so the route can be easily distinguished by first time hikers and make it easy to follow when snow covers the ground.

Roger Hauge from Eastern Washington University made his annual pilgrimage with 28 graduating elementary education students from EWU to explore forest habitat management from a wildlife habitat management perspective. We discussed fire and its role in natural ecosystems and how we use it to work for us as opposed to against us. We also had a great discussion about old growth dry forest types and why we should maintain them. Many of these students, perhaps most of them, seem to have only a rudimentary knowledge of ecology and the importance of forestlands to people in general. It is good to have them here even if it is only for a few hours.

In a similar, but more intensive educational outing, the Refuge was visited by enrollees in the Washington Agriculture and Forestry Leadership Program. Beginning in 2003, the Refuge became the host field exercise site for this group's Seminar for Eastside Forest Management. This program is on a three year cycle so we hosted the field exercise for them for the third time this past May. The Eastside Forestry Seminar portion of this two year program is designed to expose people from a variety of disciples to forest resource management as viewed from the perspective of large industrial forest landowners, small private forest land owners, and State and federal land managers. Mentors are selected from each of these four categories to guide a group of students through an exercise which requires them to develop a plan for a selected tract of land based upon the policies and guidance that the group's mentor must operate under. Naturally, as a FWS mentor, the organizers see that my group is made up of ranchers, orchardists, industrial foresters and the like. The results are always interesting and it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to present forest resource management from a wildlife management point of view to people who have had little or no exposure.

Administratively, Linda Midkiff is sorely missed at the LPO, but Barbara Harding and Kathy Lindgren (Turnbull NWR) have combined their extensive knowledge and talents related to Refuge administration to make the transition as painless as possible. We could not get by without them. Apparently Linda doesn't miss us. No one has heard from her except for some rumors that she is always at the lake growing flowers and vegetables, kayaking and fishing. What's up with that?

Finally, Karl Mallory, Gary McKinney, Roger Hansen and the YCC have been very seasonal with mundane tasks like grounds keeping, invasive plant eradication and road work. This is a great segue into something I would briefly like to say about maintenance. Maintaining public lands and facilities is mostly routine and earthly work. When any of us are out and about on the Refuge we take it for granted that the roads are drivable, the campgrounds are clean, the buildings are maintained and signs are posted and in good order. We expect it and we should, but none of that happens by magic. It is a team effort led by our fine maintenance staff and enhanced by other Refuge staff and Friends contributions of time and talent. If you have ever been to a public place that has been neglected for whatever reason you know what I mean. When you visit, think about that sometimes and keep in mind that the condition of this Refuge is a collective effort of those who care. We are truly all in this together.

Come visit your Refuge soon.

Steve Fowler, Refuge Manager

Nature Sightings on the Refuge

As I recall, the first few weeks of spring brought all kinds of weather from pouring rain and spitting snow to hail. We have been getting the rain showers and hail—can the snow be far behind? But before we cycle into winter again, let me tell you what has been occurring on the Refuge this spring and summer.

On the last day of March we did get rain, snow and hail. I heard a Red-tailed Hawk cry and saw it flying towards the HQ pond. It looked like it was carrying something in its talons. Next an immature Bald Eagle took off after it. I raced around to different windows and only saw shadows. Then I saw the eagle fly over HQ so I rushed outside and saw the hawk circling high trailing something that looked like a piece of grass with the eagle below trying to gain altitude. Finally the hawk dove down towards the eagle and out of sight. The eagle did gain altitude and flew north and the hawk stopped its pursuit. I'm not sure what that interaction was all about but raptor sightings were abundant late winter into early spring.

I did see two Golden Eagles flying near HQ the end of February. The dead Cottonwood tree behind HQ most always has a Bald Eagle or two perched on its branches. Early March there were 2 immature Bald Eagles in that tree - one had a dark brown back with white spots on the nape and body and the other was smaller and lighter brown with a dark tail with some white on it and a dark head with no white spots. Later I saw an immature and adult Bald Eagle in the tree. Then another adult eagle came in and bumped the immature off its perch. After that I saw an adult with bloody tail feather two days in a row. When I talked to Dan, whose office is at the Fire Cache, he told me eagles were feeding on a deer carcass by the Bunkhouse where he also saw a Northern Goshawk.

Four days later I took my lunch walk down Bear Creek Road and saw an adult Bald Eagle perched in a tree by the corral and wondered why. Then I saw a deer carcass in the field with some canine feeding on it. I went back to HQ to get my binoculars. When I returned I flushed some raptor off a fence post. Thirteen corvids—probably ravens-- were on the ground nearby waiting their turn. A coyote was pulling pieces of flesh off the carcass then ran off with a piece and ducked when a corvid followed it and swooped.

In mid March I observed Red-tailed Hawks and adult Bald Eagles in the Cottonwood tree behind HQ. I watched the hawk push the eagle off its perch by flying in and landing where the eagle was perched. That surprised me. The next day I saw the hawk chase the eagle

out of cottonwood tree twice in the same way. There were two hawks that I suspect were a mated pair, but I don't know why they kicked the eagles out of the tree. They do not nest in that Cottonwood. Any ideas? Has anyone else observed this behavior?

Early April a Red-tailed Hawk landed in the Cottonwood Tree and a Black-billed Magpie kept diving at it until it moved to the other side of tree. I guess no species is immune from harassment. I also saw a pair of Kestrels foraging from the Cottonwood Tree and checking out an old nesting cavity. I think they did nest there, but I moved my desk back to the north side of HQ and could not observe them daily to learn the outcome. On one lunch walk toward Chimney Pasture I saw two Redtailed Hawks circling and screaming and thought I found the nest tree. I did not want to disturb them so I stayed away from that area. I did go back late May and saw a Red Tail carrying a snake which it transferred from its beak to its talons (in mid-air) so it could scream at me.

Switching to a smaller species, a male Calliope Hummingbird was the first to visit the feeder at HQ on April 20. On April 23 a male Rufous Hummingbird arrived. When I arrived at the office April 24th, the hummingbird feeder was slush. There were no hummers most of the day until finally a male Calliope showed up late afternoon. I was afraid they had succumbed to the freezing temperatures. It took me until May 11 to finally identify a Black-chinned Hummingbird at the feeder. I think he had come a few days earlier but he kept feeding at the back port of the feeder so I could not see him well enough to get a positive i.d.

Roger Hansen, our YCC Crew supervisor, has had quite the summer of black bear viewing. It started in early May even before he was on staff. He had just started hiking the Mill Butte Trail with family when they came across a large adult black bear with 3 very young cubs and a nearby yearling bear. She (the adult bear) was on a ledge about 15' above them snarling and making multiple lunges. Needless to say, they turned around and headed back, much to the disappointment of an out-ofstate relative. The next day Steve Fowler, our Refuge Manager, walked the Mill Butte Trail to check it out prior to the WA Trails Association crew's arrival. He got to see 3 very young bear cubs climb a tree and took pictures of them- 2 black, 1 cinnamon, probably the same cubs Roger saw the day before. They were so close to HQ you can see the kiosk parking area in the background. He did not see mamma bear and did not stick around to look. Last year I had seen lots of bear scat in that area just above the creek and I wanted to see if they were using that area again. So the next day I walked down to the corral on Bear Creek Road the bushwhacked up to the Mill Butte Trail talking in case any bears were around. I figured I was giving the area they had been

seen in a wide berth. As I was walking down the trail I heard a sound I did not recognize and stopped to listen. It sounded like scratching on bark - I was sure it was the bear cubs scrambling up a tree. With my binoculars I saw the light colored backside of a bear at the base of a tree. I turned around and left, still hearing the scratching sound but not seeing the cubs. Later I found out the adult bear Roger had seen was blond not black. If you want to hear more of his bear sightings stories, give him a call.

Later in the summer Roger was hiking up the Mill Butte Trail flagging the unfinished portion of the trail when he saw a cow elk. She started pacing back and forth, pawed the ground, snorted, looked at him then ran off and started bawling while pacing frantically. He could still see her but since she had run off the trail he continued. Then he saw her calf but his excitement drained away when he realized it was dead and had a chunk removed from its rear flank. He thought it had very recently been killed, probably by a bear.

Throughout the summer staff members have continued to see this bear and all 3 cubs, so the family is doing well.

Just a reminder if your family comes out to visit the Refuge. Hunting seasons open September 1 for mule and white-tailed deer (archery); black bear; cougar (archery); grouse; and small mammals. A complete listing of hunting seasons on the Refuge is available at the kiosks and Refuge HO.

Barbara Harding, Refuge Staff



Detecting Lynx on the Refuge

Editor's Note: This article was submitted last winter and is included now because of lack of space in the last two issues..

Wildlife track surveys are winter projects that help pass the season until spring arrives. Mostly we're looking for Canada lynx; tracks in the snow, seen above) are one of the best ways to know they're in the area. It's also a good way to get a general feel for what's happening in the 'hood. There's no way to objectively measure things like changes in snowshoe hare populations based the number of tracks. However, I do develop a feel for where animals are spending the winter, noting things like moose in new places or where cougars are hunting (hint: anyplace there's deer!).

Anticipation's high for this winter's lynx track survey since some Forest Service folks photographed a lynx crossing Highway 20 adjacent to the Refuge last summer. In January Dana Base, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist, encountered what he thought were lynx tracks on the Refuge near the photo site, and I found newer possible lynx tracks in the same place a week later. By the way, this is very close to the site that Kelly Knutson, our refuge law enforcement officer, serendipitously videotaped a lynx while surveilling a Refuge sign vandalism case. So we're pretty sure there's a lynx at least passing through the area.



Now we're trying to take things a step further. We've set up an automatic camera, commonly called a trail cam, to try photographing the animal. This camera snaps a digital photo when sensing both infrared heat and motion within its focus area. We've also deployed a few scratchpad hair collectors (photo above) to gather lynx hair follicles for DNA analysis. If you have a cat at home you'll quickly understand how these work. Several roofing nails are pushed through the back of a small piece of thick, carpet-like material about 4 inches square so the nails' points stick out of the front. We fasten this prickly looking thing to a tree about lynx head high. Lynx lure, a viscous liquid with a sweet smell reportedly irresistible to cats, is poured on the fabric to attract the animal. Lastly, an aluminum pie plate is hung with monofilament fishing line from a nearby tree branch where it swings in the wind and flashes in the sun. The smell of the lure or flash of the pie plate captures the cat's attention, exploiting a cat's innate curiosity. The adage "curiosity killed the cat" is true. Fortunately for this cat inquisitiveness isn't fatal! The lure entices the cat to rub its face or body on the smelly fiber pad, leaving behind hair follicles with DNA attached to the nail points and carpet. We then collect the evidence àla CSI-Stevens County and send it to a lab to learn if it's a lynx

(obviously bobcats and cougars might also fall for our devious trap). With this evidence we can determine if there's more than one animal, its gender and possibly its familial relation to other lynx. But not if it murdered Colonel Mustard in the library with a pipe!

So far we haven't collected any photos or hair hare samples from a lynx. But we'll continue trying at least until the snow melts.

Jerry Cline, Refuge Staff

The Exorcist – Revised.

"Devil's Rope" - a demonic sounding epithet for barbwire. Spend much time within spittin' distance and you'll agree it's an appropriate moniker. Although appearing innocuous, drop your guard for just a humming-bird's heart beat and it will lash out, snagging your clothes or worse yet, your hide. How do you recognize a fellow 'wire warrior? Look for the blood and scars.

We've spent a large part of the summer exorcizing "devil's rope" from the refuge. The last newsletter explained the reasons why we want to purge most of the existing barbwire from the refuge. Here's an update on our progress.

Our five-person Youth Conservation Corps. (YCC) Crew worked several days pulling staples and winding wire, removing approximately 2 miles of fence. They would have removed more, but a sow black bear scolded them for being too close to her cubs. They wisely decided to leave that fence to her and her youngsters for now!

The LPO NWR Friends group, ramrodded by Don "high tensile" Tryon, and aided by Conservation Northwest and our refuge fire crew, have to date rid the refuge of about 6,000 feet of unwanted fencing. His eclectic crews have included a laid-off timberworker, a natural resources intern, a high school French teacher (originally from France no less), a bored high school student (my son Nathan; honest, he volunteered!), two broken down refuge employees and Don's wife Mimi.

Unlikely sources of help included a citizen required to perform court mandated community service. Demonstrating an excellent work ethic and a graciously positive attitude, he single-handedly removed over 4500' of nasty, brushy fence over the course of three hot summer days. If you read this, you know who you are. Thanks again!

Not restricting ourselves to local help, we employed an Eagle Scout candidate from Spokane who tackled some challenging combination woven wire and barbwire fence on the Kaniksu Unit near Deer Lake. This motivated young man, with the help of parents, grandparents and several members of his pizza and ice cream fueled Boy Scout troop, hauled away almost a mile of fencing material over a 3 day weekend. A few yellow jacket nests and a prematurely naked nudist even added a little spice to their weekend!

Retaining the fence guarding the flanks of our vehicle exclusion gates is a necessary evil. We temporarily modify these fences to minimize wildlife impacts by removing the top and bottom wire strands, making it easier for deer and other wildlife to go over or under them. The YCC and Don's motley crew have so far modified 5,300' of these fences. In the future these old barbwire fences will be replaced with large boulders or new two-strand smooth wire fences to control traffic while minimizing impacts to animals.

Thanks to many people, we've made significant progress this summer improving the refuge by removing unneeded fencing. With continued support from the Friends Group, Conservation Northwest, Boy Scout troops and other volunteers the day will come when the last of the "devil's rope" is banished from the Little Pend Oreille NWR.

Jerry Cline, Refuge Staff

Trails Update

Well, by now I had hoped to be able to report that the McMEET was finally complete. But alas. Getting the schedules of all of the various parties to coincide has been a bit difficult this summer so we have not made as much progress to date as I had hoped. However, it is not all woe and gloom. Due to the expert and cheerful efforts of Ladell Black, Joel Anderson, and Kyle Moore, the footpath from the far end of the McDowell Lake damn back to the trailhead is now completely constructed. What was a bushwhack over uncertain ground will now be a delightful stroll along the backside of the wetland and through some magnificent ponderosa pines. Furthermore with much help from Lynn O'Connor, owner of Colville Sign, and Vaughn Ruppert at the F&WS regional office, the McMEET sign should be delivered to the Refuge sometime in mid-September. The sign, along with the Kiosk that we bought to display it will provide an informative and stunning entrance to the trail. Finally, the stars are scheduled to align sometime in September, which will allow us to finish the observation blind on the

marsh. With just a little more luck an sweat we should be ready for the grand opening next spring!

Our second trail project, the Mill Butte Trail, received a third visit from the fabulous folks from the Washington Trails Association in June. After a week of solid work, this year's crew came ever so close to completing this beautiful loop trail. The trail is close enough now that the Friends should be able to put the finishing touches on this trail for a second grand opening next spring. Thanks again to the WTA; without their efforts this trail would still be on the drawing board.

If you want to work on the trails or would like more information about them, please call Rick at 685-0478.

Rick Moore, Board Member

2009 Photo Contest Winners

Thanks to our judge, Scott Price, we are able to announce the winners of the 4th Annual Friends' Photo Contest.

In the Student category, the winner was Jessica Brummer-Levy of Colville with her picture "Turtle Hanging Out." The best in the Animal category was the photo "Breakfast on the Boardwalk" by Rette Bidstrup of Colville. In the Plant category the winner was Joel Anderson with his photo, "Fall Contrast." Finally, the winner in the Scenic category, which had the most entries, was a repeat winner, Gary Kok of Spokane.

This year's contest was the best ever with a total of 35 photos entered by nine people. Prizes have been donated by area merchants, Clarks All-Sports, Stephanie's Oak Street Grill, Radio Shack, the Picture Frame, and Coffee and Books in Town Center. All the winning photos will be published in the Statesman-Examiner, in the North Columbia Monthly and prints will be on display at the Chamber Office.

Thanks to everyone who entered and remember, the contest for 2009-2010 began on August 16th so don't forget your camera when you visit the Refuge.

Joel Anderson, Board Member