

ODFW Field Reports

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission Feb 16, 2024

East Region

Nick Myatt, Region Manager

California bighorn sheep capture and translocation

Staff from Wildlife Division, the Wildlife Health Lab, East Region Research, and multiple districts coordinated with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), University of Idaho graduate students, local landowners, and volunteers from the Wild Sheep Foundation to capture and translocate California bighorn sheep on January 3 and 4.



ODFW biologists Zac Kendal (Lakeview) and Scott Torland (Ontario) review a checklist during bighorn sheep capture operations, January 3, 2024. ODFW photo.

The goal of the capture was to relieve damage to wheat crops caused by the John Day (I-84) bighorn herd and provide genetic augmentation to the Trout Creek

Mountains and Abert Rim herds, which in recent years have experienced reduced genetic diversity. In the 1980s and 90s, ODFW conducted bighorn sheep releases in these herds to help re-establish them and since then they have not had genetic augmentation. OSU researchers recently identified genetics as possible limiting factor in those herds. During the January 3 capture, all sheep were checked for general health and verified by the Washington Animal Disease and Diagnostic Lab (WADDL) as negative for Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae (M.ovi) prior to release.



A California bighorn sheep receives nasal swab to test for M.ovi., Jan 3, 2024. ODFW photo.

Fourteen bighorn sheep were translocated from the I-84 herd to Whitehorse Creek in the Trout Creek Mountains. Seven bighorns were translocated from I-84 to Abert Rim. All were fitted with VHF collars for tracking and tagged for visual identification.



California bighorn ram released at Abert Rim, January 4, 2024. ODFW photo.

WEST REGION

Chris Kern Region Manager

Training at Cascade Raptor Center

Dr. Ulrike Streicher with the Cascade Raptor Center in Eugene and ODFW wildlife staff organized a raptor rehab training session in January. The training included 12 ODFW staff from the Newport, Springfield, and Corvallis offices. The Raptor Center is the primary rehabber for raptor needs for these offices.

Staff learned how to diagnose and triage raptor injuries, how to hold animals awaiting transport to a rehab center, and best practices for raptor handling. Staff also gained a better understanding of the raptor center's capabilities which helps determine what animals are candidates for rehabilitation. The training helped bolster our relationship with the center and helped us understand how we can make their job as rehabbers easier.



Great horned owl at Cascades Raptor Center.

West Region hatcheries pull through storm with no major impacts

West Region hatchery crews spent a lot in recent weeks dealing with cold weather, snow and/or ice removal, various power outages, downed trees, and flooding. After a lot of long hours, days and nights all the facilities made it through the recent storms without major impacts. Thanks to all the staff for their efforts.



Icicles at Salmon River Hatchery in Otis.



Trees down at Minto Fish Facility in Gates.

Southwest Oregon Cascade Meadow Enhancement Project

Rogue Wildlife District staff, in partnership with the U.S Forest Service Rogue-River Siskiyou National Forest, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, and Oregon Hunter's Association are working on the final stages of a meadow enhancement project in the south Cascades.

Currently, many west Cascade meadows are heavily encroached upon by young conifers, (predominately ponderosa pine) growing in the openings, reducing the size and functions of these meadows. If untreated, the meadow habitat will shift to forest.

Deer and elk are often associated with meadow habitat and aspen stands due to the high availablity of palatable forage. In the west Cascades, it is estimated that 99 percent of montane grasslands have been lost due to fire supression, development, and other factors. Forage quantity and quality are likely a major factor for the observed shift of elk presence from federal to private lands in the Rogue Wildlife Management Unit.

The 261-acre Cascade meadow enhancement project will remove small diameter conifers and prune older shrub species within five separate meadows. These treatments will be followed by prescribed fire. We expect the initial vegetation treatments will increase forage quantity and quality for elk and black-tailed deer as well as improve habitat quality for great gray owls, neotropical birds, small mammals, and special status pollinator species including Mardon skipper and western bumble bee. Work will be conducted by third-party contractors and is projected to begin in late spring with a June 30, 2024 completion.

Currently, the entire area is covered in several feet of snow which makes it difficult to see the project in its entirety. However, to better give contractors an idea of the scope of work, Rogue wildlife staff took various photos and videos of the included meadows with the use of a drone. These photos and videos were shown on January 18 at a pre-bid meeting with contractors.



Willow Prairie meadow is near the crest of the Cascades just north of Hwy 140. It is one of the larger meadows proposed for habitat enhancement and fixes to its livestock exclusionary fencing this summer with help from staff, the Forest Service and OHA volunteers.

Black-tailed deer monitoring at South Slough Reserves

A new black-tailed deer monitoring project is in the works for the Charleston Wildlife District.

The district is partnering with the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve (SSR) and Oregon State University (OSU) to monitor blacktailed deer within the SSR's Wasson Creek habitat restoration project. The project goal is to estimate black-tailed deer abundance and document any changes that may occur due to habitat restoration.

The Wasson Creek restoration project will take the wetland component back to Stage 0 habitat to reconstruct channels and replant native vegetation. While some black-tailed deer inhabit the wetlands, this monitoring project focuses on the upland areas of the SSR where deer are more concentrated. In this area, a variety of woodland treatments are planned including thinning, logging, or no treatment at all.

Black-tailed deer monitoring is conducted through DNA collection, the same process used in monitoring projects in the North Umpqua Basin and other areas of Oregon. The SSR hired contractors that use detection dogs to find deer scat which is sent to OSU for DNA analysis. This process recently began to document the upland area before treatments begin this spring and summer. If the process of using scat DNA to enumerating deer is successful, the survey will be repeated annually for the next few years, documenting deer response to the project.

In addition to wildlife staff's assistance with the black-tailed deer monitoring in the upland area, the district fish staff are actively engaged in the wetlands portion of the Wasson Creek restoration project. Fish staff are providing technical advice on project design, fish passage, salvage during construction, planting, and monitoring.

Oregon State Police

Captain Casey Thomas, Fish & Wildlife Division



Buck poached with an illegal firearm, and no tag.

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper was summoned to a Douglas County Deputy's traffic stop near Rice Hill on Interstate 5. A Patrol Division Lieutenant observed what was likely an illegal deer skull cap with large 4-point antlers attached while backing up the deputy on a traffic stop.

Following further investigation, the subject confessed to illegally killing the buck with No

License or Tag in November 2023 and using an illegal short-barrel rifle. The antlers, 8 packages of deer meat and some rifle components were seized and placed into evidence. The subject was cited criminally for Unlawful Take/Possession Buck Deer No Tag; with additional charges forwarded to the Douglas County District Attorney's Office.



Owl rescued from grill of truck by OSP.

A Fish and Wildlife Lieutenant responded to a residence in Sheridan, where a subject had reported he hit an owl on his way home from work and it was stuck in the grill of his truck. When the Lieutenant arrived, he found a Great Horned Owl very much alive with one leg stuck between the grill and bumper of the truck. With the help of the reporting parties' mother, the Lieutenant was able to extract the owl from the grill and turn it over to an ODFW biologist for assessment.

Marine Resources Program

Justin Ainsworth, Marine Resources Program Manager

Prime fishing areas reopen after more than a two-decade closure

Marine Resources Program (MRP) staff played a key role in a multiyear federal process that reopened historically important non-trawl fishing grounds closed since the early 2000s.

On January 1, 2024, Amendment 32 to the U.S. West Coast Federal Groundfish Fishery Management Plan reopened about 2,400 square miles of the Non-Trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) off the coasts of Oregon and California. This area had been closed to protect overfished rockfish species, all of which are rebuilt after two decades of conservation work except for yelloweye rockfish.

MRP's analysis of fishery data (past and present), fish life history and stock status, and habitat associations was pivotal to informing and supporting reopening this area of the RCA. Remotely operated vehicle (ROV) and habitat mapping data collected by the MRP Habitat Project further supported this action.

With the reopening, commercial fishermen can now target healthy offshore stocks such as highly valuable sablefish as well as yellowtail and widow rockfish in more areas. Fishing effort can also be spread out now, taking some pressure off more nearshore rockfish species.

The seaward boundary of the RCA is now moved in from 100 fathoms to 75 fathoms for non-trawl groundfish fisheries. In addition, vessels fishing with specific non-bottom contact non-trawl gear can access grounds within the Non-Trawl RCA.

The reopening of the 2,400 square mile area also benefits commercial Pacific halibut fishermen because they are now allowed to fish in to 75 fathoms during the halibut season. Pacific halibut are thought to be more plentiful in the 75-100 fathom depths than outside of 100 fathoms, which could allow vessels to catch their limit more efficiently.

Amendment 32 includes some conservation measures as well, creating new closed areas to protect the still rebuilding yelloweye rockfish, improving protections for groundfish essential fish habitat, and other sensitive areas including corals and sponges.



Yellowtail rockfish. Lynn Mattes photo.



Widow rockfish.

Marine habitat and research projects are directly addressing important fishery management questions

In 2019, the Oregon commercial fishing industry generated an estimated \$558 million in household income with the groundfish fishery contributing a significant portion of that total at \$123 million. Commercial groundfish fishing is an essential part of the regional economy and livelihoods of coastal communities.

In 2002, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries introduced substantial restrictions to groundfish bottom trawling along the entire West Coast continental shelf. A rockfish conservation area (RCA), a large-scale spatial closure designed to reduce the catch of overfished groundfishes was created.

Management of the fishery underwent a revolution in the last 15 years. The result is a careful, intensive system that ensures healthy fish stocks through science-based catch limits, individual accountability, and habitat conservation measures. By 2020, with most of those stocks rebuilt, the Pacific Fishery Management Council reopened the RCA to bottom trawling off Oregon and California. The RCA opening created a rare opportunity for ODFW researchers to learn how a spatial fishery closure, as a stock management tool, can affect the seafloor ecology that supports productive trawl fisheries by directly examining the seafloor condition and ecology before and after the reopening.

Acting quickly in 2019 to gather baseline data before the 2020 RCA opening, MRP research staff in the Marine Habitat Project developed a targeted sampling program in the historic bottom trawl grounds near Heceta Bank. The effort was supported by rapid external fund-raising.

The MRP Habitat team conducted intensive Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis of the fishery logbook and electronic vessel monitoring system (VMS) records to document the history of trawl effort across the region and interviewed cooperating trawlers to determine likely fishing locations upon re-opening.

Over the next four years, the team used ODFW's remotely operated vehicle (ROV) and towed benthic sleds to collect quantitative video data on fish, invertebrates, seafloor structures, and fishery-associated disturbances (e.g. "trawl tracks") at depths down to 1,000 feet. In addition to documenting organism densities, the ROV's stereo cameras allowed accurate length and/or height measurements for fish, invertebrates, and seafloor structures.

These data will be some of the first of their kind to directly address a frequently identified fishery management need: quantitative data documenting the interactions between fishing practices, fishery management actions, and the ability of seafloor habitats to support sustainable fisheries.



ROV footage of seafloor biota (fragile pink urchins). The two pairs of scaling laser points provide 10 cm reference widths for the main forward oblique and vertical cameras.



ROV example of very light fishing-associated seafloor marks.

Ocean Recreational Fisheries Surveys

MRP has two sampling projects that collect data from ocean recreational anglers. These are the Ocean Recreational Boat Survey (ORBS) and the Ocean Recreational Fisheries Survey (ORFS).

The ORBS project collects data from sport anglers after they return from a hard day of fishing the ocean. ORBS data is used to estimate total numbers of boats fishing the ocean, total numbers of anglers fishing, total catch and release by species, and biological data from retained fishes.

The samplers also use a metal detector to scan all salmon brought in for a Coded Wire Tag (CWT) implanted into their snout as a smolt at a hatchery. Fish with a CWT have their snouts removed and sent for analysis. The CWTs are critical for salmon fishery management. ORBS data are summarized and reported monthly and are used for in-season fisheries management and for federal fisheries stock assessment analyses.

The ORFS project samplers go out to sea on ocean charter boats to collect data on species caught and released. The data on released species is very important for fisheries management, especially for prohibited species that are not allowed to be retained and therefore not normally seen by the ORBS samplers. The ORFS samplers also collect otoliths from fish at the docks to determine fish age. Some collections are done in cooperation with research done by ODFW researchers and other entities

analyzing fish genetics, maturity, and fecundity (numbers of eggs or young in females).

Most of the at-sea data is used for fisheries stock assessments that are part of the federal fisheries management. However, the data collected for research can be used for a variety of current research projects. ORFS data are summarized and reported annually.

From March through October, the ORBS samplers can be seen at ports all along the

Oregon coast greeting fishermen and collecting information about their trips and catches. During the same months the ORFS samplers are doing ride alongs with the ocean fishing charter boats collecting biological data. During the months of November through February, most of the ORBS positions have ended.

The data collected by ORBS samplers are very important for in-season fisheries management. To help keep the ORBS data collection continuing in the winter, the ORFS samplers step in to do Winter ORBS (WORBS) sampling. They work out of three major ports, Depoe Bay, Newport, and Brookings interviewing anglers coming off the ocean and conducting boat counts. Their data collection is invaluable to the ORBS project for fisheries management and are reported monthly.

The ORBS and ORFS projects play differing but complementary roles in fisheries management. Their data is critical to managing ocean fishing opportunities for current and future generations of anglers fishing along Oregon's coastline.



Yelloweye rockfish are a good example of fish not normally seen by ORBS samplers. They have been prohibited from catch retention since 2004, therefore it has been difficult to collect biological data for them at the docks.



MRP sampler, Trinity Sylvester, meeting a charter boat captain after his trip out of the port of Brookings. She is interviewing him about his trip and what he was fishing for.

End of field reports for February 16, 2024