

OREGON Fish & Wildlife JOURNAL

Saving Old-Growth By Logging and Fire

Furthering The Concept of Multiple Use of Our Lands Over 45 Years!

Contents...

- My Voice, Please Vote...** *By Cristy Rein ... 5*
- Killing 500K Owls To Save Owls ...** *By Dan Shell, American Loggers Council... 7*
- Come Back When You Can Stay Longer...** *By Cam Ghostkeeper ... 13*
- Montana's Horse Gulch Fire Highlights Consequences of Anti-Forestry Lawsuits...** *By Nick Smith, Healthy Forest Healthy Communities... 21*
- Westerman Decries New BLM Rule Guidance...** *By US Rep. Bruce Westerman... 23*
- Cat Man Gets His Cat...** *By Sandy Cathcart ... 25*
- Burnt To A Crisp, When The Federal Government Owns The Land...** *By Marc Morano, Climate Depot... 29*
- Jim's Creek Revisited: A Burning Opportunity...** *By Bob Zybach, PhD... 31*
- Sierra Pacific Plants 300 Millionth Seedling...** *41*
- Endangered Species Act Reform Bill Protects Species and Landowners...** *43*
- 4 Signs of Election Disruptions Ahead...** *By Taxpayers Association of Oregon... 45*
- Surging Russian Plywood Imports, Shuttered U.S. Sawmills, and the Cost of Inaction...** *By Healthy Forest Healthy Communities... 47*
- \$500K Democrat Party/Kotek Scandal Widens...** *By OregonWatchdog.com... 49*
- American Forest Resource Council Comments Raise Concerns Over National Old-Growth Amendment...** *By American Forest Resource Council... 51*

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OUR COVER



Our cover shows Tim Bailey next to a "culturally modified tree" - Photo by Dr. Bob Zybach

PUBLISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cristy Rein

FORESTRY EDITOR
Mickey Bellman

ADVERTISING SALES/ADMINISTRATION
Hannah Carr

CONTENT CONTRIBUTORS

Cristy Rein, Bob Zybach, PhD.,
Cam Ghostkeeper, Taxpayers Association of Oregon, American Forest Resource Council, Oregon Watchdog.com, Healthy Forests Healthy Communities, Marc Morano, Sandy Cathcart, U.S. Rep. Bruce Westerman, Nick Smith, Dan Shell, American Loggers Council

We can be reached at
(503) 657-6962 • P.O. Box 1325

Clackamas, Oregon 97015

email: RZPublish@aol.com

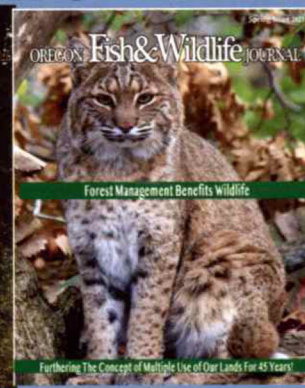
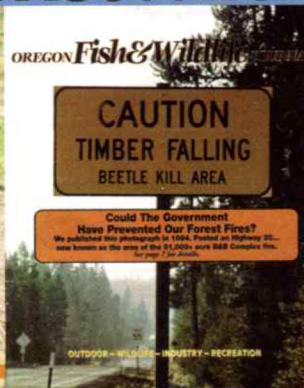
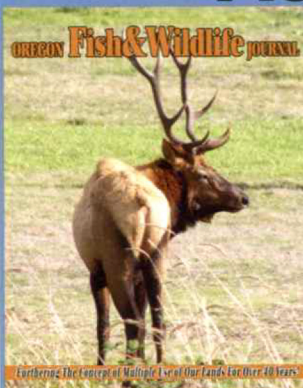
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Jim's Creek Revisited: A Burning Opportunity

By Bob Zybach, PhD.



Fig. 1. Tim Bailey next to a “culturally modified tree” likely peeled last by a Klamath or Molallan Indian before 1855. It is important to remember that this tree was much smaller and younger at that time. There were about 100 modified pine in the Jim’s Creek project, but about 1/2 had been killed by invasive Douglas fir trees, such as these, competing for sunlight, water, and soil. A crown fire or ground fire under these circumstances would be fatal to this tree. Photo by author, April 9, 2010.

Oakridge is walking distance south to a former 25,000-acre oak and pine savanna. The community is largely defined by western Cascade Mountain ridgelines at a little more than 1200-foot elevation. This puts it above the Willamette Valley fogs to the west, and lower than the heavy snows at higher elevations to the east, resulting in more than 300 days of sun a year.

The reason oak and pine were able to persist over such a large area was entirely due to hundreds or thousands of years of regular burning by local Indian families, who may have also established the original oak and camas populations throughout the area, and possibly even the pine and hazel. Otherwise, the hills and ridges would be almost entirely covered with even-aged Douglas fir trees, as with most of forested western Oregon.

Oakridge was the site of a Molalla Indian village with a large camas swale that barely existed into the 1850s, when most of the remaining people were taken to the Klamath, Warm Springs, or Grand Ronde reservations. A few stayed behind.

Charlie Tufti, a well-liked and renowned Molalla hunter, and historic founder of Waldo Lake, had a 160-acre Homestead on a hill to the east of the old village. His first wife was Klamath, and she and her baby died, as did his second

wife, a Molallan, and their boy and young girl. At least seven people are thought to be buried on the land, and typhoid was the most likely cause of most or all of their deaths. His third wife was a Warm Springs woman named Lucy. In 1889, Tufti sold his ranch and they moved to Warm Springs and became prominent members of the Reservation, where they successfully raised their two children, Josephine and Jasper. Their descendants still have strong ties to the Oakridge Homestead to this time, more than 135 years later.

The Oakridge/Westfir village(s) was/were along a major east-west route from the Willamette Valley to eastern Oregon used by people for thousands of years; and along the historic north-south Klamath Trail trade network that connected the Klamath Lakes to Celilo Falls on the Columbia, to Willamette Falls, and to the Willamette and Umpqua valleys.

The main village site was not only an ideal seasonal trade location; it was also a short distance to more than 25,000 acres of what foresters call a “mixed conifer forest.” That is, 25,000 acres of grassy white oak, yellow pine, sugar pine, Douglas fir, and incense cedar savanna, teeming with deer, elk, bear, and fish, with fields of the world’s finest huckleberries and beautiful camas meadows. All created and maintained for thousands of years by people who were lifelong experts with fire, beginning from early childhood.

After the remnant Molallan and Klamath families died



Fig. 2. One of the few remaining large oaks in Jim's Creek. Most of the others, along with many old-growth Ponderosa and sugar pine, have been shaded out by invasive Douglas fir since the late 1800s. Photo by author, August 19, 2011.

or were moved to reservations in the 1850s and became replaced with white settlers, crops, and livestock, the burning stopped, and Douglas fir rapidly began filling the savanna grasslands with waves of even-aged seedlings.

The variously-aged early historical savanna trees, which often bordered open fields, existed as solitary landmarks in meadows, or formed scattered groves in grassy prairies, rarely numbered more than 10 or 20 an acre, and often less. In the absence of regular burning, even-aged seedlings of Douglas fir soon began populating the area at an eventual rate of 150 mature trees per acre, according to foresters.

Douglas fir competes with other vegetation by growing taller and faster and creating a solid canopy that shades out most other plants, including younger fir trees, other tree species, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers. Mushrooms and mosses benefit. By the year 2000, Douglas fir had killed most all of the oak and about one-half of the savanna's old-growth pine and was reaching a commercial size of 15 to 20 inches diameter. It had also shaded out most of the grasses favored by deer and elk, and the flowers favored by butterflies, hummingbirds, and people.

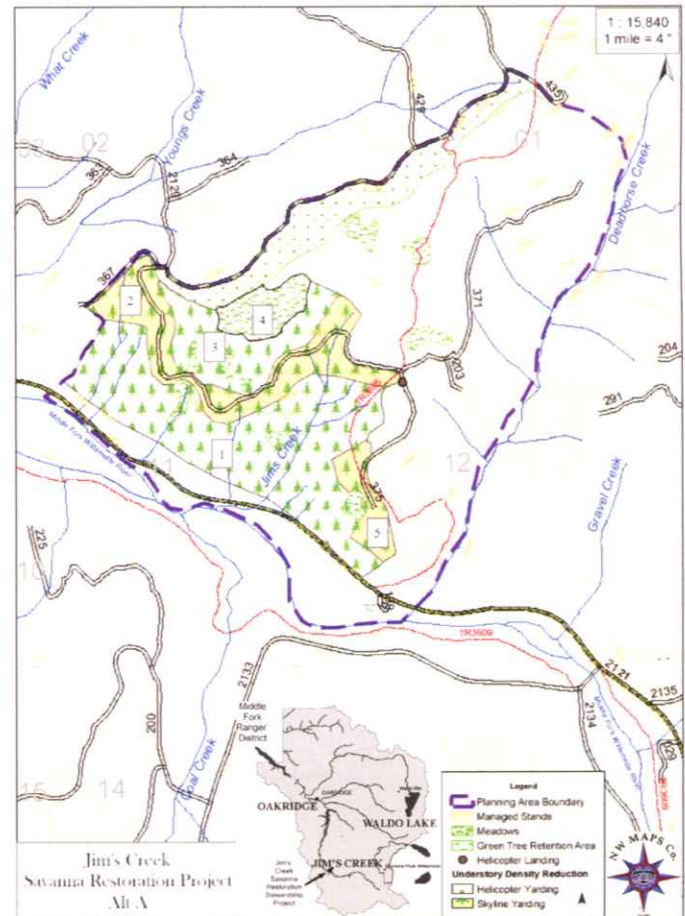
Following World War II, the adjacent communities of Westfir and Oakridge had both developed significant lumber manufacturing facilities, and the Oakridge Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest soon focused on the lucrative sale of hundreds of millions of board feet of public old-growth and mature second-growth Douglas fir that surrounded the former savanna. The home building and heavy construction boom that followed the war provided great jobs for the communities' loggers, sawmill workers, Forest Service employees, teachers, and businesses.

In 1953, Oakridge and Westfir held the first of 71 -- and counting -- annual "Tree Planting Festivals" to celebrate

the successful reforestations of the ever-growing private and public clearcuts. New roads were being built into the forest, campgrounds constructed, and hunters, hikers, fishermen, and bird watchers benefited. Reforestation was being successfully achieved with industrial grid-like plantations of Douglas fir seedlings. The intent was to leave another lucrative crop of trees for future generations by growing as much valuable Douglas fir fiber per acre as quickly as possible.

Most of the lumber manufacturing operations moved away when federal timber sales began sharply declining -- largely due to environmental lawsuits -- and private lands had been mostly clearcut in the 1980s; in 1996 anti-logging protesters burned down the Oakridge Ranger District office; and in 2002 career USFS forester, Tim Bailey, and fire ecologist, Jane Kertis, formally proposed the "Jim's Creek Savanna Restoration Project."

Bailey had recognized that returning to the original open forest conditions would be a prime example of ecosystem restoration, which had recently become a Forest Service priority, and was also cognizant



Map of Jim's Creek Savanna Restoration Project, 2005 USDA Forest Service Environmental Assessment, Alternative A.

of the fact that the tens of thousands of Douglas fir that had invaded the savanna were now approaching commercial size and could be marketed at a profit. More importantly, both were concerned about the ever-increasing loss of cultural landscape, and the directly related losses of oak, pine, native grasses, and the great diversity of songbirds, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, and large game animals that depended on these environments to survive.

Further, they were also concerned about the flammability of the contiguous Douglas fir canopy. A deadly crown fire had been all but impossible when the land was a savanna, but entirely typical of “stand replacement”



Fig. 5. Snags and dead, woody debris were not typical components of a savanna because of the regular burning and firewood gathering by people. Felling of dead pine trees and logging of invasive fir provided excellent opportunities to document the former savanna’s previous fire history and abrupt ending of human burning and occupation. Photo by author, April 9, 2010.



Fig. 4. Tim Bailey and a portion of Jim’s Creek that had been helicopter logged and then broadcast burned in 2009. Note the herd of elk near the crest of the reclaimed savanna and the deer to their lower left. A zoom lens counts 17 elk in the herd and three more and four deer along the timberline. Photos by author, April 9, 2010.

Forest Service in the ancient savanna. The property is 20 miles south of Oakridge on the east bank of the Middle Fork Willamette River and surrounded by roads and perennial streams, for good access and firebreaks, but contains a significant number of archaeological sites and scattered cultural resources that had to be considered.

Two major archaeological sites, Horse Pasture Cave and Vine Rockshelter, are just across the river from Jim’s Creek. These locations date back thousands of years and contained hundreds of

wildfires in the region’s even-aged conifer forestlands. This concern was borne out in 2009 when the Tumblebug Fire burned through 1,200 acres of the now-defined “mixed conifer forest” and killed many of the few remaining savanna oak, cedar, and pine in the area that had not already been shaded out. These trees had survived and prospered with dozens of purposeful fires intentionally set by people before 1855, only to die by wildfire 150 years later.

The proposed Jim’s Creek restoration project was a little over 630 acres in size and fully intended to be a practical demonstration project for a much greater restoration effort with other public lands managed by the



Fig. 3. John Thomas and Tim Bailey in a grove of surviving old-growth on Jim’s Creek. Photo by author, August 19, 2011.



Regulations vs. Restoration. Aerial photo of Jim's Creek project, July 13, 2012, following completion of logging operations. Note the strips of green that stretch into the open ground. These are 100-foot-wide "buffers" following ephemeral streams that are dry in the summer, have no fish, and never existed before in the history of this land. USFS regulations called for 300-foot buffers but allowed the lesser size following negotiation. These are atypical vegetation patterns in a savanna that increased logging costs, decreased income, and should have never been created in an area maintained for centuries by broadcast burning.

previously undisturbed artifacts when they were excavated in the early 1980s. Researchers discovered more than 400 obsidian arrowheads, basketry fragments, and numerous stone tools, including knives, drills, hammerstones, pestles, and anvils, along with significant amounts of bone from deer, elk, birds, and small mammals that were hunted. Horse Pasture Cave is near an open grassland, named Grassy Glade, that is still used for deer and elk hunting to this time.

These locations are just a short walk to the Jim's Creek campsite, on a flat near its mouth, and about five miles by ridgeline trails to the ancient huckleberry fields on Groundhog Meadows and Logger Butte, which are still being harvested by local families. The project area itself supports many species of edible plants, including camas, yampa, biscuit roots, oak, and hazel. Of particular note is the historic use of the inner bark of ponderosa pine trees, evidenced by the large rectangular scars where bark had been peeled more than 150 years ago. It is believed that the sap and cambium layer were used as food and other purposes. The practice was well known to the Klamaths, who regularly traded -- and often lived -- with the Molala. There is even speculation that the ponderosa and sugar pine groves had originally been created via seasonal Klamath visitors, and perhaps the oak and hazel by trade with Kalapuyans from the Willamette Valley.

About 100 such "medicine trees" are in the Jim's Creek



Fig. 6. Tim Bailey standing in a portion of Jim's Creek that should have been broadcast burned several years ago. Seedlings, shrubs, and large woody debris need to be reduced or eliminated to allow native bunch grasses, forbs, and shrubs to again define the meadows and understory. Photo by author, April 5, 2024.

project area, and about half have been shaded out by the younger, invasive Douglas fir. Pine rots fairly quickly, and most of these dead trees have already fallen over. Peeling scars are typically two to three feet wide and four to seven feet long. All have been tagged and inventoried and indicate Molala and Klamath people must have been present in the early spring, when the trees could be peeled, as well as late summer and fall hunting, burning, and gathering of huckleberries, acorns, filberts, and pinenuts.

Even under Bailey's expert leadership, the project still took a dozen years to complete. Following its conception in 2001, Bailey and Kertis' 2002 formal presentation and subsequent reports, an Environmental Assessment in 2006, a comprehensive "Watershed Analysis" in 2008, and signifi-



Fig. 7. Mature second-growth thinned in 2010 to begin savanna restoration efforts. Trees are top-heavy due to growing in close proximity and shading out lower limbs. Predictable windthrow has further thinned the stand and downed trees should ideally be removed before broadcast burning. Previously burned stump, native bunchgrasses, and deerbrush are in the foreground. Photo by author, April 5, 2024.

cant outreach and input by tribes, environmental groups, and the public, a logging contract was awarded to Swanson Superior to log the invasive Douglas fir in about 425 acres of the project area.

Because of the presence of the 100 “culturally modified” pine, eleven registered archaeological sites, and lithic scatters throughout the sale, a decision was made to log 70% of the area by helicopter to create as little surface disturbance as possible. This meant that harvesting costs were more expensive and, coupled with the poor markets at the time and helicopters only being available between wildfires, the contract took nearly four years to complete.

The logging resulted in 9.6 million board feet of commercial timber harvest and generated, “before adjustments,” \$660,000 in stumpage receipts; some \$300,000 of which was earmarked for subsequent restoration activities by using the Stewardship Contracting authority granted by the Forest Service Regional Office after a year of review. The Middle Fork Willamette Watershed Council was also involved in the Jim’s Creek project from “early on,” and was “instrumental in helping to determine the priority of retained receipt expenditures.” Naturally, they were also well represented in budgeting requests.

By July 2011, most logging and a few prescribed burns had been completed, so a successful public field trip was held that was attended by more than 30 people, including environmental group representatives. The tour generated widespread concurrence regarding the positive nature of the project’s progress and results, and a nearly unanimous opinion that the savanna restoration concept should be greatly expanded, and with some urgency.

The management plan called for prescribed burns every five to ten years, but has never been completed. Instead, a year later, in July 2012, the Rigdon Dry Forest Restoration Project was being developed to expand the successful Jim’s Creek pilot demonstration to a “considerable portion of the 28,200-acre Middle Fork Mixed Conifer Forest type.” Further, “this forest type has changed dramatically over the last 100 years, due primarily to fire suppression and, (in the case of the 10,000 acres of plantations in the forest type) secondarily due to harvest activity.”



Fig. 8. An effort to eventually transform a pine plantation to its former savanna condition began with volunteer workers girdling a number of the young trees. As evidenced by this photo, some of the girdled trees are still living, and most of the others have fallen over and created a fire hazard. A broadcast burn "as is" would likely remove a lot more excess trees, but removing the fuel before burning would allow the trees to grow to a commercial thinning size to help pay future maintenance costs. Photo by author, April 5, 2024.

There were some problems with this idea: in addition to the 10,000 acres of Douglas fir plantations, the project included 7,000 acres of private lands, more than 7,000 acres of “spotted owl habitat,” another estimated 7,000 acres “in remote areas that would likely include the “taking” of spotted owls,” and “the remaining 4,000 acres are populated with regulated tree voles.”

•••••

I first wrote about the Jim’s Creek project in 2012, as its completion was being delayed by environmental lawsuits related to the existence of hundreds

or thousands of red tree voles that had multiplied with the Douglas fir encroachment. The self-described “environmental activists” were trying to stop logging by using this particular rodent, which had been recently determined by the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) to be a “species of interest.” This federal recognition qualified the animal for “survey and manage” regulations, which had then become required by law. The voles weren’t even listed as “threatened or endangered,” and I wrote:

“This type of work stoppage, based on relatively new federal regulations and related litigation initiated by environmental organizations, has become the main difficulty in beginning and completing forest restoration projects in Oregon and throughout the West.”

A local “Rigdon Collaborative Committee” was formed in 2016 to “work with the Forest Service on the Rigdon Landscape Restoration Project.” The group of largely volunteers did a good job of organizing local people, business groups, and special interests through field trips and meetings to devise a formal strategy for overcoming these problems. A focus was on expanding the Jim’s Creek model and doing it with local businesses and workers.

An initial 2017 project “restored” a 40-acre wetland, in part by placing logs in a creek, but by 2019 the collaboration had developed the Youngs Rock Rigdon project proposal. This ambitious effort identified 6,600 acres of desired forest management treatments to continue and expand the Jim’s Creek restoration model. The strategy included

a mix of “thinning, early seral creation, fuel reduction, habitat restoration, system road management, and recreation management.”

A “Notice of Intent” (NOI) was published in the Federal Register in June, 2019; A “Draft Environmental Impact Statement Notice of Availability” (DEIS NOA, really) for allowing public comment was published in July, 2021; the “Final Environmental Impact Statement” (FEIS) NOA was published April, 2023; the “Objection Period” was started on the same day, April 7, and on May 18, Oregon Wild filed



Fig. 9. Ground fuels and three different species of conifer seedlings that need to be treated. Photo by author, April 5, 2024

an objection, because of logging and global warming. Further, they used the Jim’s Creek Project as their rationale, because it had “resulted in a significant blowdown event killing several hundred old-growth pine trees that the project intended to save, as well as significantly spread weeds where native wildflowers were intended to thrive.”

The “Youngs Rock Rigdon Final Record of Decision” (ROD) was signed by the Willamette National Forest Supervisor on December 8, 2023, and work was estimated to begin by May 1, 2024. On June 17, 2024, a coalition of Oregon Wild, from Portland and Eugene, and WildEarth Guardians, from New Mexico, filed a complaint challenging the decision. It was their proven cut-and-paste strategy of claiming the Forest Service had “violated NEPA by failing to consider reasonable alternatives” and by not taking a “hard look” at the project’s “environmental impacts.”

As usual, the complaint argued the same semi-science concerns, claiming the Forest Service hadn’t “adequately analyzed the project’s effects on carbon storage, climate change, mature and old-growth forests, fire risks, road construction, and northern spotted owl habitat.” They also demanded that the Forest Service immediately stop all “road construction and commercial logging until the alleged NEPA violations are addressed.” Only lawyers, the litigants’ well-paid staff, and agency bureaucrats will now be allowed to continue working on this project, if documented history is a guide.

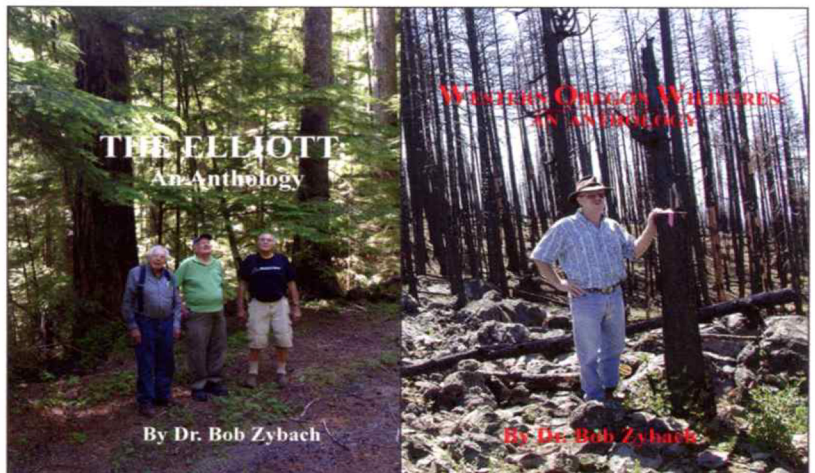
Enough should have been enough 30 years ago. These people are destroying our rural communities and our nation’s forests and wildlife, and the federal government appears to be overly

compliant. While taxpayers keep footing the bill and breathing the smoke on both sides.

Jim’s Creek needs to be completed. All 638 acres should have been burned 10 years ago, as planned and paid for. If people actually care about “critical habitat” and “biological diversity” -- which are legal terms, not science -- they should burn Jim’s Creek now, this fall, when the Molala would have burned it. If the Forest Service can’t do it, how about a local business, as in pre-spotted owl litigation times? Or the volunteer fire department? Prescribed fires are a lot cheaper and safer than wildfires, and this would be a great opportunity to publicly display that difference.

Jim’s creek has good road and stream boundaries, fuel preparation could be done in a few days time, and trained crews are available as wildfires are being extinguished. Late summer and fall burns, as people have done for thousands of years, would greatly reduce risk and severity of wildfires, and is the pattern that native plants and animals have both adapted to and thrived until now.

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