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The view of the wild: New and improved wildlife viewing opportunities offered

By MIKE STAHLBERG

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SEE THE FISH. Look at the birds. Find the frogs. Watch the beavers. Viewing wildlife of all kinds is becoming easier and more educational in Western Oregon, thanks to ongoing efforts to create new viewing facilities and upgrade some existing ones.

Land management agencies - often with the help of non-profit organizations - have been scrambling in recent years to meet increased public demand for "watchable wildlife" opportunities.

Now those efforts are starting to pay dividends.

Recent watchable wildlife projects in the region include:



The final touches on a \$100,000 renovation project at the Winchester Dam fish ladder near Winston are being put on.

Photo: **CHRIS PIETSCH** / The Register-Guard

A major renovation of the public viewing facilities at the Winchester Dam fish ladder near Winston. Final touches are still being put on the \$100,000 project, which involved collaboration between the Roseburg Chamber of Commerce, Umpqua Community College and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW).

The viewing area, located just off Interstate 5 about 5 miles north of Roseburg, provides an opportunity for visitors to see some of the thousands of steelhead (summer and winter runs) and salmon (chinook and coho) that pass in front of the large viewing windows every year as they make their way up the North Umpqua River.

The ODFW uses video cameras to record the piscatorial parade through the "fish ladder" that allows fish to pass over the dam by jumping through a series of pools. Counts this year have been some of the best since the state began keeping track in 1945. For example, more than 13,000 coho salmon passed through the ladder in the final few months of 1999.

Winter steelhead are now in the midst of their upriver migration, although action in front of the windows this week has been slow and the run is temporarily stalled by low flows and cold water. In a couple of months, winter steelhead will be joined by huge spring chinook salmon.

The most dramatic part of the viewing area facelift involved covering unsightly concrete walls with imitation natural rock. Designed by the same man who created the set for Disneyland's "Indiana Jones" ride, the project artwork creates the effect of a viewing room inside a cave carved into a natural rock wall. Workers also replaced the viewing windows, which had been badly scratched by vandals over the years.

A sign listing the running total of the number of fish that have passed through the fish ladder greets visitors outside the cave. Inside the viewing room are educational panels with information about the various types of fish that can be seen, as well as information about their life histories.

- A new viewing platform overlooking a marsh in the upper McKenzie River basin that is home to several beavers. The "Beaver Marsh" viewpoint at Carmen Reservoir will not officially open until May, when six large panels full of interpretive information are scheduled to be installed. The interpretive panels will explain how the marsh was formed and how it will eventually evolve into forest, and talk about the value of wetlands in general.

But a parking area and wheelchair-accessible viewing platform has already been built on the large earthen berm that forms the reservoir.

Elk as well as beaver can often be seen in and around the marsh, which was partially covered by the berm when the reservoir was constructed, according to Willamette National Forest biologist Cheryl Friesen.

"You can stand on the platform and see beaver mounds out there - you can usually catch them moving around at dusk," she said. "It's also a good place to spot elk ... dawn and dusk are best."

Friesen said local forest officials "have been scraping pennies together for about eight years" to develop the first wetlands interpretive site on the Willamette Forest. The Eugene Water and Electric Board and the Oregon State University School of Engineering, whose students designed the facilities, helped with the project.



The boardwalk to Ankeny Wildlife Refuge's new "wildlife blind" shelter is open to the public.

Photo: **BRIAN DAVIES** / The Register-Guard

A new boardwalk and viewing blind at Ankeny Wildlife Refuge north of Albany provides, for the first time, year-round access into the interior of the 2,800-acre refuge.

Youngsters in the Youth Conservation Corps and members of the Salem Audubon Society helped U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staffers construct the half-mile-long boardwalk and a large wooden "viewing blind" shelter that's large enough to hold a bus load of school kids.

The boardwalk passes through an Oregon Ash forest, and the viewing blind is perched on the edge of the woods overlooking a wetland unit.

"This is the first big step we've taken to provide an area here at Ankeny that you can use year-round," said refuge manager Aaron Drew. "There's a lot of people very excited about it."

Birders are anxiously waiting for it to rain enough to fill the wetlands so that waterfowl will be attracted to the area, Drew said. "It's just been so dry this year that a lot of species you'd normally see by now aren't here."

Even without normal ponding in the area, he said, visitors can see a "diversity of songbirds, shorebirds where what little water we have is ponded up - and a lot of raptors hang out at this time of year, including peregrine falcons and golden eagles."

The trailhead for the viewing blind is located at a parking lot alongside Wintel Road, about a mile west of Interstate 5 via the Talbot or Ankeny Hill exits (242 and 243).

- An eagle and osprey viewing area at a small strip of forest service land alongside Highway 22 in the town of Detroit. The Detroit Ranger District and the Audubon Society took advantage of the fact that the so-called "Detroit Flats" area is frequented by osprey, bald eagles and Canada geese to establish a viewing area with interpretive signs.



Northwest Youth Corps workers construct a trail at Stewart Pond Park in west Eugene.

Photo: **CHRIS PIETSCH** / The Register-Guard

New wheelchair accessible trails and boardwalks in the Stewart Woods area of the west Eugene wetlands. The Bureau of Land Management utilized Northwest Youth Corps workers to construct all-weather wheelchair-accessible trails northeast of the Stewart Pond area, just east of Bertlesen Road. More improvements, including interpretive signs, are in store.

"We're working on a recreation access and environmental education plan" for the west Eugene wetlands, said BLM spokesman Doug Huntington. The document will guide efforts "to enhance and improve what's going on in the wetlands for public use," he said.

All of the new projects should provide good viewing in the months ahead as the areas in which they are situated come to life in spring. The wetlands areas, for example, should soon start to see activity by tree frogs, according to wildlife biologist Bill Castillo of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Springfield office.

The state wildlife agency would like to see more designated public viewing areas developed.

"It's an area we recognize as being tremendously important, to provide better education and viewing opportunities for the public," said Martin Nugent of the ODFW's wildlife diversity program. "Unfortunately, we haven't had the resources to see that through."

While designated "watchable wildlife" areas are helpful because they usually provide interpretive information that allows viewers to better understand what they are seeing, wildlife watching can be good virtually anywhere in Oregon. The critters, after all, cannot read those "wildlife watching" signs to know where they're supposed to be.

Castillo points out that he has had some good wildlife viewing recently just by looking out his kitchen window - through which he has spotted a couple of bald eagles in the trees alongside the

Willamette River near Day Island Park in Springfield. Nearby cottonwoods have also been serving as evening roosts for dozens of cormorants, he said.

"The bike path right through the middle of town is a good place to see a lot of different things," Castillo said. "It goes through some nice riparian areas, places where you see a lot of different song birds and raptors ... occasionally you'll see beaver, otter mink - all of that can be seen right in town."

The Willamette Valley is a significant wintering area for bald eagles and a variety of waterfowl, including tundra swans, he said.

And, while not new, Fern Ridge Wildlife Area west of Eugene provides excellent viewing opportunities year-round. The East and West Coyote and Fisher Butte Units are closed to public access from Jan. 22 through March 15 to provide waterfowl with a sanctuary. However, that closure is lifted every Saturday to provide public wildlife viewing opportunities.

WILDLIFE VIEWING TIPS

Fade into the woodwork: Wear natural colors and unscented lotions. Walk softly so as not to snap twigs. Crouch behind boulders or vegetation to hide your figure or break up your outline.

Stick to the sidelines: Observe animals from a safe distance; that's for you and for them - use binoculars or zoom lenses to get close-ups. Give nests a wide berth. Your visit could lead a predator to the nest or cause the parents to leave the nest and expose the eggs or young to danger.

Come to your senses: Use your peripheral vision. Look for out-of-place shapes such as horizontal shapes in a mostly vertical forest. Watch for out-of-place motions - the flight of a bird will stand out against a backdrop of falling leaves.

Watch your ethics: Stay on trails and roads. Never chase, herd, flush or make deliberate noise that stresses wildlife. Leave plants, trees and other natural features as they are found. Leave pets at home or in the car. Wait your turn to view or photograph animals when sharing a viewing area.

Camera tips: Use at least a 400 mm lens; keep the sun at your back. Afternoon light is best. Try to feature wildlife within natural surroundings.