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# Methow Valley News

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Photo by Marcy Stamper

Blue Lake is one of the popular destination areas included in a study of recreation use coordinated by the U.S. Forest Service and University of Washington researchers.

## What's happening on the trails? USFS, UW team up to get better information

New research methods track outdoor usage

BY MARCY STAMPER

An innovative approach to research is using texting, analysis of social-media postings, and a chatbot named Vic to collect data about recreation in the national forest.

Researchers from the University of Washington have been partnering with the U.S.

Forest Service, supplementing the agency's traditional visitor surveys with crowd-sourced data to provide more finely tuned information about how people use trails and other areas in the forest.

The traditional methods for learning about how many people recreate in the forest and what they do there — asking hikers to register at trailheads, counting parking and wilderness permits, and occasionally sending out a ranger to talk with people — are expensive and logistically challenging, said Emmi

Lia, a research scientist in the Outdoor Recreation and Data Lab at the University of Washington's College of the Environment.

Lia's team has launched Visitors Count!, which draws on community science to gather information about outdoor recreation on public lands. The data lab's approach "meld[s] methods from environmental science, social science, and computer science — combining visitor surveys and other

See TRAILS, A3

## COVID claims 11 lives at Tonasket care center

County cases spiked in last two weeks

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County has suffered a catastrophic loss from COVID-19, which took the lives of 11 residents at North Valley Extended Care in Tonasket. Okanogan County Public Health (OCPH) announced the deaths in a press release on Monday (Nov. 30).

"OCPH sends their heartfelt condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones. Out of respect for the families, OCPH is not releasing further information about the deceased residents at this time. The 11 confirmed deaths brings Okanogan County's total COVID-19 associated deaths to 26," the press release said.

The outbreak at the long-term care facility was first reported in mid-

November. In all, 32 residents contracted the virus, Public Health said. There were 38 people living at the facility, North Valley Hospital CEO John McReynolds said last week.

Numerous employees at Extended Care and at North Valley Hospital, which operates the facility, were also infected, and others have had to quarantine because of exposure to COVID. Two employees were hospitalized with COVID as of Nov. 30 and both are reportedly doing well, Public Health said.

"We have been inundated with offers and help and support. At this time the most important thing you can do is take the virus and precautions seriously," North Valley Hospital said on its Facebook page. "As we hope to see the nursing home recover we are increasingly concerned about hospital capacity in the region. Our behavior today impacts the reality in the weeks to come."

North Valley Extended Care

underwent a routine infection-prevention survey following the outbreak. Officials confirmed that the team is managing the situation safely and professionally, Public Health said.

"Long-term care facilities serve our most vulnerable populations, whose age and health conditions put them at a higher risk for severe complications from COVID-19 and death. When community COVID-19 rates are high, such as those currently experienced by Okanogan County, long-term care facilities face increasing challenges to keep COVID-19 out of the facility," Public Health said.

### Cases on the rise

Infections are indeed spreading more widely throughout the county. The two-week incidence rate per 100,000 population has increased almost five-fold, from 53.8 on

See COVID, A2

## Cascadia Music offers virtual presentation of annual holiday concerts

Recorded works will be aired on KTRT

BY ANN MCCREARY

In a longstanding Methow Valley tradition, hundreds of valley residents gather together in the Community Center in Twisp each December to share music of the holidays performed by members of the local orchestra and chorale.

In this season of COVID-19, however, packing the gym for a community concert is out of the question. The good news is that the show will go on — but like so many holiday traditions this year, it will be a very different event.

Cascadia Music, the organization that presents the annual holiday concerts, has devised a creative way to give local musi-

cians the opportunity to bring seasonal music to the community. Cascadia invited musicians and singers to record and videotape performances, while taking appropriate protective measures.

The recorded performances are being arranged into a virtual concert, which will be broadcast on the valley's local radio station, KTRT (97.5) on Saturday, Dec. 12 at 7 p.m. and on Sunday, Dec. 13 at 2 p.m. A video of the performances will also be available on the Cascadia website, www.cascadiamusic.org.

The broadcasts on Dec. 12 and 13 will hopefully help fill the void of the traditional jam-packed community performances, said Rebecca Gallivan, Cascadia's executive director. "We are going to present

See CASCADIA, A2

## LIGHT AT THE END



Photo by Ashley Lodato

The Nordic ski trail tunnel under Highway 20 near Mazama was getting plenty of use over the Thanksgiving weekend.



Photo courtesy of Barry Stromberger

A female cougar emerged from a woodshed next to a Bugar Street home after surprising the homeowner on Sunday.

## Cougar comes calling in Twisp neighborhood

Cat retreats after Bugar Street encounter

BY ANN MCCREARY

Barry Stromberger was rummaging around in a woodshed next to his Bugar Street home Sunday afternoon (Nov. 29), when he heard a sudden loud commotion coming from the back of the shed. He whirled around and found himself arm's length from a large cougar.

"I saw this head, and looked her right in the face. I could have reached out and touched her," Stromberger said. He made a fast exit from the woodshed, grabbing his small dachshund, and called to report

the cougar to the proper authorities.

The cougar was in a back corner of the shed when Stromberger had entered, and he didn't notice it. He had picked up a cardboard box and banged on it to knock dirt off, when he heard noises behind him as the cougar leaped out and knocked over a plastic basket. "When I banged the box, I might have woken her up," he said.

The cougar remained in the shed after Stromberger left, and was curled up in a corner when Jason Day, an enforcement officer with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), arrived about half an hour later, around 3 p.m.

Day peered into the shed at the cat, but it was hunkered down in the corner behind stacks of wood and difficult to see. He called his supervisor to discuss a plan to deal with the cougar. The situa-

tion was complicated because the cat was in one of Twisp's most populated residential neighborhoods. In the meantime, officers arrived from the Twisp police department and Okanogan County sheriff's department to assist if needed.

After talking with his supervisor, Day said, "we decided to check the health of this thing and figure out why it's in the woodshed. It was hard to see if she was emaciated, injured, or had a couple of cubs behind her. I flicked a wood chip in there to get her to stand up."

It worked. The cat jumped to her feet, growling. "She got really upset," Day said. The cat walked cautiously out of the shed and then trotted away into the neighborhood at about 3:30 p.m.

See COUGAR, A3

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Dec 3	Dec 4	Dec 5	Dec 6	Dec 7	Dec 8
37°	36°	36°	35°	34°	35°
23°	25°	23°	24°	26°	25°
Mostly sunny	Partly sunny	Ditto	Chance of snow	A wintry mix	Cloudy

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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## TRAILS

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on-site data with big volunteered data from citizen scientists, social media, and mobile applications," the lab says about its methodology.

Signs urging people to participate in Visitors Count! went up at five trailheads in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest this August and September. The signs ask people to count the number of cars in the parking lot (and spillover parking along the road) and to text it to a number posted at the trailhead kiosk.

The text engages Vic the chatbot, which employs artificial intelligence to follow up with more detailed questions, such as what sites can be accessed from the trailhead, road conditions and trailhead amenities, and how much time the person spent at the site.

All the information the lab gathers is publicly available and anonymized. The researchers look at metadata such as date, time and location from social media postings, and they don't record anyone's phone number, Lia said.

Although the data lab started working with the Okanogan-

Wenatchee forest just last year, the researchers have been gathering data on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest for five years, Lia said.

National forests select sites for the research. Some want a sample of popular and less busy areas, but the Okanogan-Wenatchee asked Lia's team to focus on trailheads that attract a lot of visitors. The team is currently studying the Heather/Maple Pass Loop and the Pacific Crest Trail at Rainy Pass, Blue Lake, and a climbers' route on Silver Star, all on the North Cascades Highway. They're also looking at use of the Chickadee trailhead near Sun Mountain Lodge. Other trailheads in the study are near Wenatchee and Leavenworth. The researchers expect to add more sites next year, Lia said.

### Hikers, climbers help

Hiker and climber groups are also partners in the research, knowing it could provide valuable information for planning and for protection and restoration of vegetation and wildlife.

Jason Keith, senior policy adviser for the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) and the Access Fund, has been working with Lia and with recreation specialists in

the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Keith is now based in Utah, but he grew up in Washington and has been a regular visitor to the Methow since his childhood.

Getting solid information about visitor use would be valuable for climbing guides and other outfitters, who get special-use permits from the Forest Service and need comprehensive numbers to plan their business, Keith said. More accurate data would also help AMGA determine if there are opportunities for guided climbing trips on routes that aren't as busy as Silver Star, for example, he said.

AMGA has encouraged mountain guides to help gather data, giving them printed versions of the chatbot questions to use in the backcountry where there's no cell service, Keith said.

"You can say, 'I go by Rainy Pass in larch season and it's insane,' but you don't really know the uptick in use. You need as much information as possible — how many people go where, and when?" Keith said.

Since this is still a pilot project, it's too soon to say how it's working. The researchers may also learn better ways to use volunteers to collect information, Keith said.

"We just want the best data pos-

sible to make the best decisions we can. If it doesn't result in more permits [for guides], we accept that," Keith said.

### Supplementing USFS

The data lab's research will supplement the Forest Service's own National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) survey, which collects general information about recreation in the forest every five years (the 2020 survey has just been completed).

The NVUM provides data and analysis of visitor-use patterns, economic impacts of recreational use, and visitor satisfaction at the forest scale, so it's much less specific, said Suzanne Cable, recreation, trails and wilderness program manager for the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

The Visitors Count! info will help the Forest Service understand visitor-use patterns at a finer level than the NVUM surveys, said Rosemary Seifried, recreation program manager for the Methow Valley Ranger District.

For mountain guides, the NVUM is too general and not collected often enough to be really helpful, Keith said. It doesn't measure all the uses in the forest — for example, climbing is in a category

called "other," he said.

### Sustaining recreation

Lia is a data scientist who cares deeply about the ecological ramifications of human interactions with the natural world. "I think of recreation as an ecosystem service that's provided to the community by the natural world — clean water, clean air, and also outdoor recreation," Lia said. "I think about how to provide recreation opportunities in a sustainable way."

The number of visitors and where they go are key elements of sustainable recreation. Some areas are really busy — and for good reason — but it's a challenge to ensure that those beloved areas aren't degraded by the sheer number of people using them, Lia said.

Lia said she's often asked about the "Instagram phenomenon" — are dramatic photos luring people to certain lakes or trails? Although some places probably become popular because of social media or being highlighted in a newspaper article, it's hard to know how long that effect will last, Lia said. It's this kind of answer that she hopes their research will tease out.

Lia expects that their approach will also reveal patterns of recre-

ation during the winter, when trails are less accessible to researchers.

The effectiveness of their research is still being vetted. Researchers need to determine if texted vehicle counts and information culled from social media — Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and hiking and trail websites — provide reliable data about actual visitation and use, Lia said.

If the data proves reliable, it would also be useful for recreation managers, providing timely information when they apply for grants for trail maintenance and management, she said.

Researchers have gotten about 45,000 texts from signs posted at 24 sites, in the Okanogan-Wenatchee, the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and on the Olympic Peninsula, Lia said. They plan to start analyzing the data this fall and winter and expect some conclusions next spring, Lia said.

The response has been better than expected. "It's pretty satisfying to see the level of interest," she said.

Ideally, the data will help ranger districts obtain more money to manage areas that get higher use — for resource protection as well as for amenities like toilets or trash cans, Keith said. "We have to make the use sustainable," he said.

## COUGAR

From Page A1

"She went through a neighbor's back yard, and started to head up Twisp River. She ran back to a residence on Burgar Street and hid in a carport. I followed the tracks and they looped back. The cougar ran right out of a carport in front of us," Day said.

Day followed the cougar's tracks as they paralleled Ainsworth Avenue, then crossed Highway 20 and went toward the river, then turned back toward the highway before Day lost them.

### Tracked before

Day called a researcher involved in the University of Washington project that collared the cougar, to learn more about the animal. The researcher told him that data

from the GPS collar showed the cat to be a female that spent the summers in the Pasayten Wilderness and winters in the Methow Valley in a drainage east of the Methow River.

She was captured and collared about three years ago for the UW research project, which is studying the interaction of wolves and cougars. Day said satellite signals downloaded every 16 hours from her collar showed she travelled from the Pasayten Wilderness to the valley in late November, following the Methow River, then the Twisp River, before the data placed her in Twisp around Nov. 27 or 28.

The cougar has contributed to research for a long time, Day said. Before the Washington Predator-Prey Project collared her in 2018, she had been collared in 2008 and again in 2012 for a study of cougar

behavior conducted by WDFW biologist Rich Beausoleil.

That means the cougar is at

**"In a town, on city lots, with a cougar in a woodshed and neighbors staring out the window ... any of the solutions that we could propose have risks and conflicts built into them."**

Jason Day, enforcement officer with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

least 12, which is an advanced age for a cougar in the wild. She appeared to be "a confident older female (who) has seen it all. She's made it many years without getting into trouble," Day said.

The cougar's collar also emits a radio signal, and using telemetry, the researcher attempted

to locate the cougar on Monday morning, Day said. It appeared the cat might still be in the area,

but the signal was not clear enough to provide a location.

If the cougar remains in the residential area, it might be because she has killed a deer nearby, Day said. She probably sought out the woodshed because "it's that time of year that they're looking for warm, dry places

to spend the day," he said.

### Limited options

Hopefully, the cougar will move on to her usual winter territory across the Methow River, because options for dealing with cougars in residential areas are limited, Day said. "Ultimately, we're lethally removing most of these animals now," he said. If the cougar hadn't suddenly left the woodshed, she probably would have been shot, he said.

"A lot of people call [to report cougar sightings], assuming we're going to show up with cages and nets and darts and we're going to haul the cougar off and dump it in a national park," Day said. "But what you really get is me on a weekend. We don't have the personnel and equipment and capacity to show up and dart it and take it away."

Trying to immobilize a cougar with a dart gun is an imprecise

and unpredictable undertaking, he said. Often the animal is panicked after being hit by a dart and runs away before the immobilizing drugs take effect. A freaked-out cougar running through a residential area is not a good option, he said.

"Imagine a half-conscious cat running into someone's yard and the family dog decides to defend its territory," Day said. "In a town, on city lots, with a cougar in a woodshed and neighbors staring out the window ... any of the solutions that we could propose have risks and conflicts built into them."

Wildlife officers responding to calls have to evaluate "what we can do to keep the public safe and wildlife protected and preserved," Day said. "Sometimes lethal removal, when you weigh all these factors, is the safest, simplest, and most straightforward way to resolve the conflict."