

Turf wars

in Idaho's wilderness



Research on **wild wolves** and cougars could prove to be a bellwether for Oregon

By **RICHARD COCKLE**
THE OREGONIAN

McCALL, Idaho —

Wolf researcher Jim Akenson is riding a mule on an icy mountain trail in central Idaho when he comes upon a dead cougar. Suddenly, a pack of wolves materializes and begins howling. For one terrifying moment, the 48-year-old biologist thinks his startled mules are going to stampede and carry him off a 200-foot cliff into Big Creek.

"We could not turn around," says Akenson, describing that tense winter episode four years ago in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. "It is the most precarious condition you can imagine, with wolves howling around you."

The crisis ends quickly. Akenson's saddle mule, Daisy, gives the carcass an indifferent sniff, steps over it and proceeds down the trail. Cricket and Rocky, his pack mules, follow, paying the wolves no heed.

Akenson shrugs it off as part of life in the Idaho wilderness.

"There are circumstances when you could be in trouble with wolves," he muses. "But I think they are very rare."

Akenson and his biologist wife, Holly, 48, are in the ninth year of a University of Idaho-sponsored research project on wolf and cougar interaction. They live and work at the Taylor Ranch Field Station, deep inside the largest block of contiguous wilderness in the lower 48 states. The ranch is 34 miles from the nearest road and is believed to be the most remote year-round human habitation in the nation, outside Alaska.

It is hoped their research will deepen the understanding of wolf behavior, as the predators flourish in Idaho and move into Oregon, where they are feared mainly for the damage they can do to livestock. And as wolves limit the territory of a burgeoning cougar population, that could have deep impact in Oregon, where cougars have rebounded to 5,000 individuals.

But the work of this couple is carried out as remotely as the animals they



Photos by RICHARD COCKLE/THE OREGONIAN

Biologists Jim Akenson (left) and Holly Akenson pause outside their remote central Idaho log cabin with University of Oregon graduate Jesse Davis of Madras, assistant manager of the Taylor Ranch Field Station.

Life on the ranch

Endangered species: The federal government declared wolves an endangered species in 1976 after ranchers nearly wiped them out trying to protect livestock. Bounty records have entries showing wolves roamed north-eastern Oregon through 1921, at least, before disappearing. In February 1999, a female gray wolf known as B-45 wandered into Oregon after leaving an Idaho pack east of the Taylor Ranch.

students, said Sue McMurray, spokeswoman for the University of Idaho. "They are really dedicated to that operation and mentoring the student interns that come in."

The ranch also is a place to gather long-term data as a baseline for future research on projects ranging from anadromous fish to global climate change, McMurray said.

Wildfire threat: A wildfire nearly destroyed Taylor Ranch in 2000, forcing the Akensons to make a harrowing escape.

observe.

A bush plane delivers mail and groceries once a week. Their three-room log cabin's amenities include running water, wood heat, a flush toilet and a hydropower unit that provides electricity for lights, computers and a satellite TV. They have no telephone, but they keep in touch with the outside



The Akensons chat with bush pilot John Ugland as he prepares to take off from a primitive airstrip beside Big Creek on the Taylor Ranch Field Station in Central Idaho. Owned by the University of Idaho, the station is more than 30 miles from the nearest road and 50 miles from the nearest town.

world via Internet e-mail and an FM-band "backcountry radio."

Their closest neighbors are bighorn sheep, moose, elk, deer and three roving packs of Canadian gray wolves.

"They wake us up at night," Holly Akenson says of the serenading wolves.

It's a curiously techno-primitive life that two years ago permitted Jim Akenson to watch the Super Bowl on TV while keeping an eye on seven wolves on a mountain ridge above the cabin.

"I was thinking, 'I bet there aren't very many viewers who are watching the Super Bowl and a pack of wolves at the same time,'" he says.

"It's the opportunity to work hands-on with these animals that's like an addiction," says Akenson, explaining why they stay here.

"For me, it's the immersion in the natural world," adds Holly Akenson. "That day-to-day personal, being part of the natural world, is something you rarely find."

An estimated 750 Canadian gray wolves now roam Idaho in 59 packs, their numbers up from 35 wolves in 1996, say the Akensons. Oregon officially has no gray wolves, but the biologists are certain the predators have crossed the state boundary.

"I saw wolf scat on the Minam River when I was bowhunting in there a year ago," says Jim Akenson, referring to a stream in northeastern Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness. "There was no question that's what it was."

Oregonians have little to worry about, the Akensons say. In thousands of days in the field, they've never been threatened by wolves they were researching. But there are precautions:

They can't allow Mica, their 11-year-old golden retriever, to roam unaccompanied. Wolves generally hunt in packs of eight to 12 and almost certainly would make short work of the dog, says Holly Akenson.

Biologists captured and returned it to Idaho. Around the same time, an Idaho wolf made its way into Oregon and was hit by a car, and another Idaho wolf was shot.

Taylor Ranch Field Station: The University of Idaho purchased the 65-acre Taylor Ranch in 1970, but it already had a rich history. A frontier outlaw known variously as "Kid Garden" and "The Yellowstone Kid" hid out nearby in the 1880s between stagecoach holdups. A self-styled mountain man called "Cougar Dave" Lewis homesteaded the site. During the 1920s and '30s, Lewis guided hunts for some of the Northwest's most influential men and was termed "one of Idaho's most colorful characters" by the Idaho Statesman newspaper. The ranch has six buildings, and 17 students and researchers spent part of last summer there. Holly and Jim Akenson "are almost like surrogate parents" to the

cape with one horse and four mules. Pursued by flames for much of the way, they rode 22 miles to another ranch. "It was on three sides of us when we were going downstream with our mules," said Holly Akenson. At one point, a sow bear with cubs refused to let them pass. U.S. Forest Service smoke jumpers managed to save the Taylor Ranch from flames.

Akensons' background: Holly Akenson earned a master's in wildlife biology at the University of Idaho, and Jim Akenson has a master's in resource geography from Oregon State University. They worked from 1982 to 1990 at the Taylor Ranch and returned in 1998. In the interim they lived in La Grande, where she was employed as a wildlife consultant and he worked for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife as a cougar and bear research biologist.

— Richard Cockle

And they don't let their horses graze in large pastures. Horses instinctively flee wolves.

"The chase is what gets them excited," Holly Akenson says of wolves. "If the stock are confined, we think they are less likely to attack."

Mules are better adapted to social interaction with wolves, the Akensons say. "Mules look at a wolf and say to themselves, 'Do I need to stomp it?'" says Jim Akenson. "Our mules love to chase bears, too."

Wolves probably will reduce the number of Oregon's cougars, now estimated at around 5,000, they say.

"When there is a pack around, cougars are not comfortable around their kills or raising kittens," says Jim Akenson. "A lot of times a big cougar will kill a wolf, but the pack phenomenon changes the table."

A male cougar's territory averages about 150 square miles, compared with about 45 square miles for a female cougar, say the Akensons. But a typical wolf pack roams across 500 square miles.

The presence of wolves hasn't caused Idaho's elk numbers to drop significantly, they say. But when wolves are around, elk become more wary. They avoid meadows where wolves might see them. That frustrates human hunters, who sometimes mistakenly believe the elk herds are vanishing, he says.

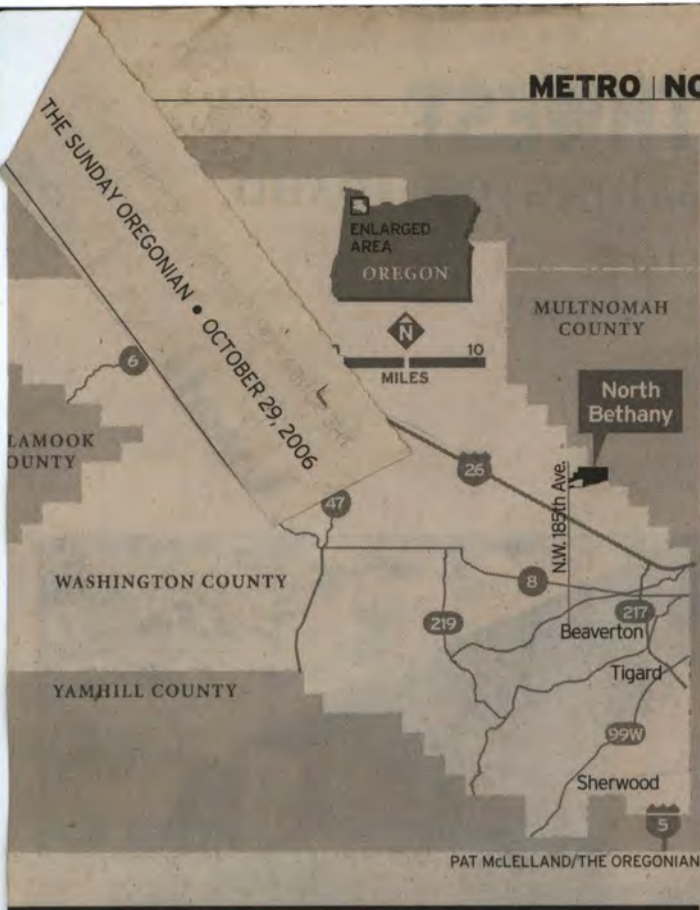
Another change: An elk that gets spooked in wolf country typically plunges into a river or mountain lake, because wolves are at a disadvantage in water, say the Akensons. "That is something you didn't see before wolves."

Wolves occasionally frighten people when they are merely being curious, say the Akensons. Case in point: When Jim Akenson tied up his mules and returned to examine the dead cougar near Big Creek, he was startled to discover that it had died in a fight with another cougar. It hadn't been attacked by the wolf pack, as he first thought.

The wolves merely heard the battle and stopped by to see what was going on, he says. And when he came along, they started howling.

Still, wolves may have been a factor in the cougar's fate, says Jim Akenson. Wolves put the big cats under more stress, and that often causes strife within cougar populations.

"Cougars get jammed into a smaller place with fewer resources" when wolves move in, says Akenson. "So they fight."



Gourmands can indulge in the risotto at Mingo or the Round at Beaverton Central or Vietnamese noodle soups at Pho Van at Beaverton Town Square. Small, locally owned ethnic eateries — from Mexican to Indian to Japanese to Thai — dot street corners and strip malls.

High-end specialty markets such as New Seasons and Trader Joe's arrived early on, and Whole Foods Market is on its way. A full range of Asian delicacies awaits at Uwajimaya in Beaverton, while the aisles of Grande Foods in Cornelius cater to Latino tastes.

The county's population has become more diverse — from enclaves of Indians in Bethany to Vietnamese in Tigard to Latinos in Hillsboro. Eighty-nine languages are spoken in the Beaverton School District. Hillsboro's Tanasbourne library complements children's story times in English and Spanish with readings in Arabic, Chinese, Gujarati, Hindi, Sinhalese, Urdu and Vietnamese.

Shoppers can find plenty of places to max out credit cards.

Washington Square recently expanded, and two new retail "lifestyle" centers — Bridgeport Village in Tualatin and The Streets of Tanasbourne in Hillsboro — have opened in the past couple of years.

The centers offer mostly chain stores, rather than the local boutiques that seem to thrive in Portland, but they are more fashionable, expensive and specialized than ever. For instance, one of Portland's top clothiers, Mario's, just arrived in Bridgeport Village.

Missing a scene

For all its maturity, Washington County is missing that one place. That cool center. For that, people look to Portland's Pearl District or Alberta, Hawthorne or Mississippi.

"Washington County needs a hip area — and it's not going to be a Beaverton," says Davies, the real estate agent. "Not with a name like that."

There are some hangouts. Young Nike employees stop by the Hall Street Bar and Grill after work. La Fogata, a Mexican restaurant in the Canyon Place shopping center, morphs into a Latin dance club in the evenings. Hindi movies with English subtitles play two weekends a month at the Valley Cinema Pub. Dessert Noir Cafe & Bar in Beaverton offers live music late into the night on the weekends.

But there's no real scene. No hotel district. No downtown streets to stroll after dinner. No funky music venues or art film theaters. The county has one four-year college — Pacific University in Forest Grove — but it's too small and iso-

lated to grab legions of young people from across the region.

The things that attract many people to Washington County — good K-12 schools, new houses, lower property taxes — don't draw large numbers of young, single people or empty-nesters.

Washington County also doesn't have a large, central public facility such as a convention center. Preliminary plans to build an exposition center at the county fairgrounds in Hillsboro became so mired in politics that the developer backed out. For lack of a bigger venue, the county's first bridal show last year was held at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Tigard.

In arts and culture, Washington County can't touch Portland's museums, galleries and theaters. And it can't — or doesn't — find the money to support the arts. In fiscal 2006-07, the county budgeted \$70,000 for the arts, distributed through the Regional Arts & Culture Council. Multnomah County budgeted \$142,000. Portland budgeted \$2.6 million.

Even if the county offered more, getting there might be a problem. In a recent survey, 65 percent of residents said transportation was the county's most important growth-related challenge. Education was second, at 34 percent.

The county has only one north-south artery with no traffic lights — Oregon 217, which stalls at rush hour. People try to get to work without having to sit through U.S.

26's interminable delays, straining secondary streets. A big headache for county planners is figuring out how to get North Bethany's expected 10,000 people where they need to go.

Still, for simple self-sufficiency, Washington County delivers. Its residents can stay in the county to work, go to school, buy groceries and even go out — if they don't mind a night spot without a certain coolness factor.

When they need to, they can go to Portland.

And sometimes, Portlanders might even gaze west.

Christian Kaylor, a workplace analyst for the state Employment Department, lives in Portland but heads to Beaverton a couple of times a month. He likes to shop at stores on Cedar Hills Boulevard.

It's an easy drive, the stores are better stocked than similar retailers in Portland and the parking is plentiful — and free.

"I actually like Beaverton," he says. "I'll catch hell from my friends for saying that."

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Lee Davies
real estate agent and lifelong Cedar Mill resident

look at Washington County," he says, "and I think, 'Pretty big suburb.'"

Suburbs gain independence

Washington County's gains aren't necessarily Portland's losses. The county isn't siphoning the desirable residents, jobs, restaurants — it's simply adding more.

It could be good for the body, says Ethan Seltzer, director of Portland State University's School of Urban Studies and Planning.

Decades ago, the United States had a nation of central cities and peripheral suburbs. People drove to the central city for work and home in the evening. Much of western Washington County developed as a sea of bedrooms for downtown Portland workers.

That city-suburban model of the 1950s and 1960s was "tremendously unbalanced," Seltzer says, "it assumed transportation would always be cheap."

Today, Beaverton and Hillsboro centers where people can do what they need to do without driving 20 to 30 minutes to the city. Rather than being bad news, that's beneficial to the region, Seltzer says.

Portland can evolve into something unique, and the region can compete better with other metropolitan areas, he says.

It's not as if Washington County residents don't want — or need — to go to Portland. One reason the county's northeast areas — Bethany, Bonny Slope, Cedar Mill — are growing and appreciating rapidly is their proximity to the Rose City. People are close enough for a connection with Portland but far enough away for a relationship on their own terms.

Lee Davies, a real estate agent with The Hasson Co. and a lifelong Cedar Mill resident, says people buy houses in his neighborhoods — from Forest Heights west to Rock Creek — because they are "the closest-in location to downtown where they can escape Multnomah County."

Including U.S. 26, northeast county residents have three routes into Portland, yet are close to Intel or Nike. The Beaverton School District is thriving, although crowded, and property taxes are lower than they are across the county line.

Nurturing self-sufficient communities, Seltzer says, takes pressure off Portland.

"I want good restaurants in Washington County," he says. "Otherwise, they'll be driving to Portland to my neighborhood and I won't be able to find parking."

Ethnic diversity

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