



ODFW Field Reports

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission
February 20, 2026

East Region

Nick Myatt, Region Manager

Bighorn sheep translocations to Nevada and Idaho

Following extirpation around 1910, California bighorn sheep populations were reestablished in Oregon in 1954 with the transplant of 20 sheep from the Williams Lake area of British Columbia. Through careful management and the generosity of other states and provinces that have provided sheep for the purpose of increasing genetic diversity within Oregon herds, California bighorn sheep are now thriving in parts of Oregon to the extent that Oregon herds can serve as a source for bighorn sheep restoration efforts in other parts of the West. In the most recent example of this, ODFW staff captured a total of 21 California bighorn sheep (20 ewes, one ram lamb) from the Deschutes River Canyon in January for translocation to the Montana Mountains in northern Nevada. This was the second year of a translocation effort by ODFW to help the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) with a struggling bighorn population that has declined due to mycoplasma ovipneumoniae. All sheep were captured on the west side of the Deschutes canyon – a stronghold for California bighorns in the West.



Bighorn capture team members take blood samples from a bighorn ewe and fit it with a GPS collar, Jan. 7, 2026

ODFW staff also captured a total of 30 bighorns (25 ewes and five rams) from the John Day River for translocation to Idaho where herds are struggling from genetic isolation but have been clear of mycoplasma ovipneumoniae. The John Day herd, similar to Deschutes, is a healthy population and therefore a good source herd for neighboring states experiencing declines.

The target area for the capture focused on the middle of the canyon rather than areas surrounding Cottonwood and Thirty Mile canyons where hunter harvest of ewes has been a successful tool to management population size. Sheep were released at two separate sites within the Jacks Creek (Idaho) bighorn population.



ODFW Assistant District Biologist, Justin Ingram, works with staff from Warm Springs Tribe and Wildsheep Foundation to lift a bighorn ewe into a trailer bound for Idaho, Jan. 6, 2026.

ODFW will continue to coordinate with Idaho Department of Fish and Game and NDOW to monitor post-release outcomes and evaluate overall translocation success. In addition to the Deschutes and John Day captures this year, staff also captured, collared and disease tested sheep in the Potamus/Bridge Creek, Pueblos, Lower Owhyee, Rattlesnake and Ten Mile herds.

Virtual fencing and pygmy rabbits

A pilot project is underway in southeastern Oregon to assess an emerging management strategy to limit livestock access in habitat patches that provide the greatest conservation benefit for pygmy rabbits. ODFW staff in the Natural and Working Lands program have partnered with the Oregon Desert Land Trust (ODLT) to integrate wildlife conservation objectives into an existing virtual fencing initiative. ODLT is currently using virtual fencing for cattle operations on their Trout Creek Ranch south of Steens Mountain and they are planning to use the same system on their grazing allotments near the Pueblo Mountains.

The primary focus during field work last fall and this winter has been to identify occupied and suitable pygmy rabbit habitat within working rangelands and to develop a plan that will use virtual fencing technology to exclude cattle from sensitive areas without installing physical fencing.

The Natural and Working Lands program staff are also developing a habitat restoration project in area that will include planting sagebrush plugs and “cache” seeding sagebrush seed to enhance existing sagebrush communities and create suitable sagebrush forage for pygmy rabbits in the future.



Black angus cow with virtual fence collar and ear tag at Trout Creek Ranch near Fields, Ore., Jan. 2026.

While physical fencing is commonly used to protect sensitive habitats such as riparian areas, it is not appropriate for pygmy rabbit conservation. Fence posts create elevated perching opportunities for avian predators, increasing predation risk for pygmy rabbits and potentially exacerbating population declines. As a result,

traditional fencing may be counterproductive and is not considered a viable management tool for this species.

Virtual fencing involves placing GPS-enabled collars on cattle and establishing digitally defined boundaries that restrict livestock movement. These “invisible fences” allow managers to exclude cattle from specific habitat areas while maintaining grazing access across the broader landscape.

Pygmy rabbits are highly dependent on intact sagebrush communities and friable soils that support their burrow systems. These burrows are essential for predator avoidance, thermoregulation, and overwinter survival. Cattle use within pygmy rabbit habitat can adversely affect these resources through trampling of sagebrush, soil compaction, and collapse of burrow systems. Repeated or heavy grazing further reduces vegetation recovery, resulting in long-term degradation of habitat quality.



Pygmy rabbit survey in sagebrush habitat near the Pueblo Mountains in southeast Oregon, Jan. 2026.

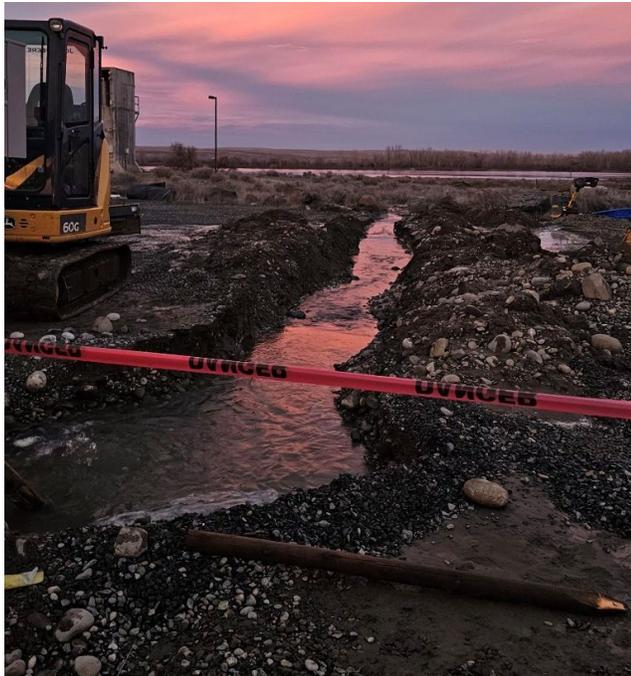
Pygmy rabbit habitat often occurs in narrow, discontinuous patches across the landscape, where appropriate soils and sagebrush structure coincide. These areas may be embedded within larger grazing allotments that otherwise remain suitable for livestock use. In such cases, broad-scale exclusion of grazing is neither necessary nor compatible with land use objectives, but targeted protection of these habitat areas is critical.

If successful, this approach could provide a scalable and wildlife-compatible tool for balancing livestock grazing with pygmy rabbit conservation. Virtual fencing offers the potential to reduce habitat degradation, maintain

functional burrow systems, and improve long-term habitat conditions while still supporting continued grazing use on surrounding lands. This project may serve as a model for integrating emerging technology into conservation strategies for other sensitive species occupying working landscapes.

Irrigon hatchery responds to water outage

On January 12, 2026, the water supply to Irrigon Hatchery was severely compromised during work to upgrade the Umatilla Hatchery's chilling system. During construction activities a pipeline feeding 5,000 gallons per minute to Irrigon Hatchery was punctured. ODFW estimated that 2,000 GPM was lost due to the significant leakage. The well could not be shut off, or the other wells would backfill through the damaged section causing further water loss to the production. The only alternative was to evacuate the fish on-station so the wells could be turned off for repairs.



Water line break at Irrigon Hatchery, Jan. 2026.

Within three hours of the incident, Irrigon Hatchery staff were loading fish trucks and taking steelhead smolts to their acclimation sites up to two months earlier than planned.

Additional trucks were mobilized to be available the next day to continue to move fish.

By Thursday of that week, the entire cohort of steelhead smolts were moved totaling about 800,000 fish. There were also 2.1 million fall Chinook fry in incubation. More than 400 incubation trays were loaded into tanks and driven to Umatilla Hatchery to finish their incubation.

The Wallowa stock steelhead raised at Irrigon and released at Big Canyon acclimation had to be placed in the settling pond at Wallowa Hatchery since Big Canyon acclimation doesn't have adequate water until there is some snow melt. Big Canyon acclimation is downstream on the Wallowa River so the same number of fish will be released into the Wallowa River just not in the same locations as previously planned.



Staff at Irrigon Hatchery work to save trays of incubating salmon and steelhead eggs, Jan. 2026.

The Imnaha stock steelhead went to Little Sheep acclimation a month earlier, this facility has historically been difficult to maintain operations during severe weather which is why staff normally move fish there in February.

The Umatilla stock steelhead went to Pendleton acclimation a month earlier than planned.

Pendleton acclimation has had trouble in the past with icing, high water and debris. There is significant risk to those fish being moved to acclimation earlier if severe winter weather or sub-zero temperatures occur. Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and ODFW staff are working diligently to keep those sites operational to avoid an early forced release into sub-optimal conditions.

Due to the decisive actions of hatchery staff, there were not any significant fish losses during the emergency transport. However, issues could still arise with maintaining adequate water flow at the acclimation sites. At this point, the smolt release goals are still on track to be met but there are some concerns about how the earlier moves to acclimation sites could impact survival and overall impacts to adult returns.

West Region

Mike Gauvin, Region Manager

Cutthroat trout reintroduced to reach of McKenzie River

The Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB) constructed the Carmen–Smith Hydroelectric Project in 1963. The project diverts water from the McKenzie River at Carmen Reservoir into Smith Reservoir for power generation. As a result, a section of the McKenzie River downstream of Carmen Dam was largely dewatered for several decades.

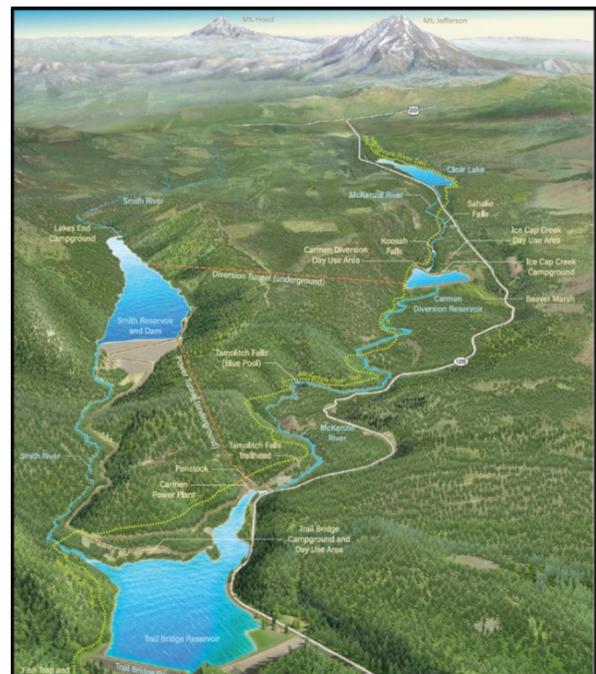
During hydroelectric re-licensing negotiations in 2008, EWEB agreed to maintain a minimum instream flow of 30 cubic feet per second (cfs) below Carmen Dam. This flow requirement created the opportunity for fish populations to re-establish in this previously dewatered reach.

In 2021, EWEB contracted with the ODFW to evaluate the current composition, abundance and distribution of fishes in the historic McKenzie River channel below Carmen Dam and to reestablish a self-sustaining population of local coastal cutthroat trout. Preliminary sampling in 2021 found that coastal cutthroat trout were absent from this reach, while non-native brook trout were the dominant species present.

ODFW reintroduced coastal cutthroat trout using local Hackleman stock reared at Oak Springs Hatchery. Adult and juvenile fish were released in the winter of 2021 and spring of 2022, totaling 1,083 individuals. Follow-up sampling in summer 2023 confirmed successful natural reproduction from the coastal cutthroat reintroduction.

ODFW has continued sampling each summer from 2022 to 2025 to monitor fish abundance and species composition of cutthroat and brook trout. The surveys show that the number of coastal cutthroat trout has increased annually. In 2025, sampling crews captured 170 coastal cutthroat trout representing several age classes (young of the year, juveniles, and adults) as part of a mark-recapture population estimate effort.

ODFW estimates that 748 adult cutthroat trout now occupy the reintroduction reach. One ongoing challenge is the continued entrainment of brook trout through Carmen Dam into this section of the river. Since 2021, ODFW has removed 2,224 brook trout from the project area. Despite this challenge, the combination of consistent water flow and brook trout removal has resulted in a successful reintroduction of coastal cutthroat trout in this small portion of the McKenzie River over a relatively short period of time.



Map of the McKenzie River and Carmen–Smith Hydroelectric Project reservoirs.



Examples of adult (top left, bottom left), age-0+ cutthroat (top right), and yearling cutthroat trout (bottom right) captured below Carmen Dam in the Upper Carmen Bypass Reach during the 2025 season.

Bird counts

Mid-winter surveys for black brant, a SWAP (State Wildlife Action Plan) species, in Netarts, Tillamook and Yaquina estuaries were completed by Tillamook and Newport wildlife staff. Wintering brant numbers in Oregon have been very low, making this year's count of 120 the highest winter count recorded in recent years.

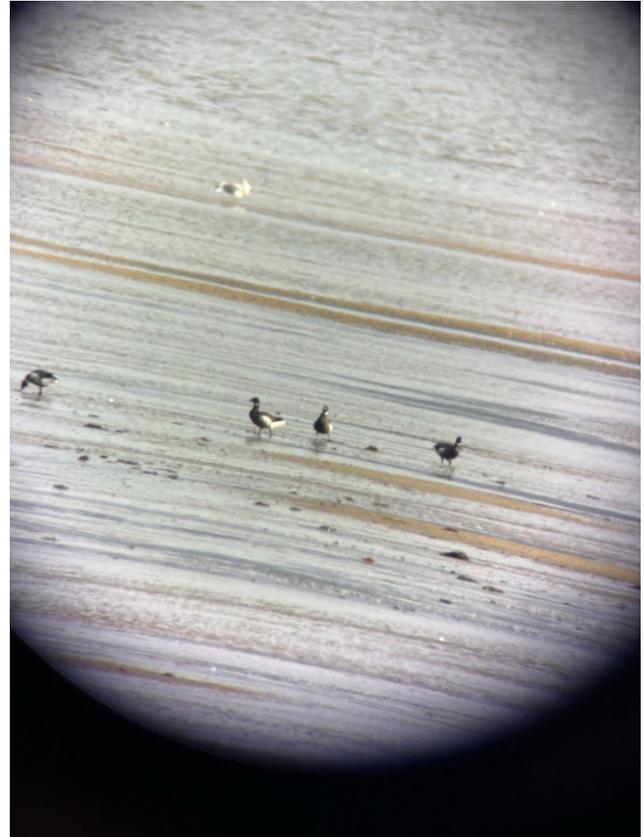
Dynamic change is occurring with brant in the Pacific Flyway with shifting winter range and declines on some breeding areas but increases in others. There is some evidence that the Pacific Flyway population is now in decline again, which along with shifting populations could be accounting for the very low numbers wintering in Oregon.

Brant in the Pacific Flyway were historically indexed based on a mid-winter count from Mexico to Alaska. This gave us a non-statistical estimate of minimum population size, as well as apparent winter distribution. However, the USFWS has transitioned to a statistically rigorous estimate of the size of the population staging in the fall at Izembek Lagoon, Alaska, though California, Oregon and Washington have continued to conduct the winter survey to document distribution and change in local winter numbers.

Tillamook staff also did a mid-winter survey for bald eagles from Cape Kiwanda to Neahkahnie Mountain including all the estuaries of Tillamook County. Staff counted 27 eagles, and while not a record, 27 is on the high end of

recent counts and well above the long-term average of 12 eagles.

The District has been surveying bald eagles since 1971 as part of a larger regional effort to monitor populations during and after their declines in the mid-20th century. In the last 15 years, eagle counts have gone from a stable eight to 12 eagles counted in the early 2000's to counts in the high 20's to mid-30's as populations along the Tillamook County coastline have dramatically increased.



Biologists counted 120 black brant during mid-winter surveys in Netarts, Tillamook and Yaquina estuaries.

Two fish passage projects in the Smith River Basin benefit salmon

With funding from ODFW and partners (Coos Bay Bureau of Land Management and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board), the Smith River Watershed Council (SMWC) was able to complete two important projects that significantly improved fish passage for juvenile and adult salmon in the Smith River Basin. Concrete sills on both Coon Creek – a main tributary to the West Fork Smith River – and Sweden Creek were removed and replaced with modern, fish-friendly culverts.

At Coon Creek, bypassing a large volume of water from the West Fork Smith River and excavating into hard bedrock for culvert footings were challenging. Getting materials and equipment into such a remote area was also a challenge but project partners stayed united and coordinated efficiently to keep delays minimal.

Now, Coon Creek flows freely to the West Fork Smith River, connecting salmon to the habitat they need to thrive. Accessibility to 42.5 miles of habitat is improved for these fish year-round. Sweden Creek’s undersized culvert was removed and replaced with a new bridge. This project had more challenges including a high skewed bridge abutment layout, initial work area isolation and turbidity mitigation. Project partners and work-site contractors took these in stride, resulting in only minor delays. Timely and excellent product support from Pacific Bridge & Construction gave feedback and insight into the entirety of the construction process.

Juvenile and adult salmon can now pass through in all flow conditions. The project, coupled with SRWC instream habitat improvements within the North Sister subbasin will increase native salmon population productivity and resilience.



Before restoration, Coon Creek salmon struggled to bypass the concrete sill and culvert during low flows.



Project partners (ODFW, Coos Bay Bureau of Land Management, and SRWC) conducting fish salvage at Coon Creek.



A large box culvert greatly improved fish passage at Coon Creek.



A new bridge replaced an undersized culvert on Sweden Creek allowing salmon to pass in all flow conditions.

Southwest Oregon STEP volunteers awarded

Central Point and Gold Beach STEP biologists honored dedicated volunteers with awards at annual holiday banquets of the Curry Anadromous Fisherman, Oregon South Coast Fishermen, and Middle Rogue Steelheaders. Volunteers were recognized for their commitment to

habitat restoration, fish monitoring, educational outreach, and many other contributions towards the STEP program over the past year.

John Weber, Gold Beach STEP biologist presented 18 awards to those with time in volunteer service at Winchuck fish trap, Indian Creek Hatchery, adult and juvenile seining, broodstock collection and youth education. Weber also presented the 2025 Standout Volunteer Recognition award to Dave Kuehn for 20 years of service in these south coast projects.

Central Point STEP biologist Monica Magdaleno presented volunteer awards to some members of the Middle Rogue Steelheaders. Magdaleno also had the honor of presenting Jim Ferguson with an award from the Salmon Trout Advisory Committee meeting (STAC) during a local chapter meeting for Trout Unlimited. The STAC award recognizes volunteers across the state who are committed, have gone the extra mile, and volunteered for multiple years. Ferguson has contributed to STEP volunteer work in the upper Rogue River for more than 11 years.



Monica Magdaleno with members of the Middle Rogue Steelheaders.



Jim Ferguson was awarded for volunteer work in the upper Rogue River for more than 11 years.



John Weber presenting an award to Marrienne Farnsworth, a STEP volunteer with Curry Anadromous Fishermen.



Oregon South Coast Fisherman volunteer David Spencer accepting his award from John Weber.

Oregon State Police

Captain Doug Shugart, Fish & Wildlife Division

Commercial Crab Investigation Reveals Undersize Crab

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper was notified by a dealer in Charleston that they had located a few undersize Dungeness crab during an offload. The Trooper responded and found a few more undersized crab in totes coming up from the boat. The Trooper climbed into the fish hold of the vessel and began to sort crab with the crew. Ultimately, 56 pounds of undersize crab were located. Through interviews it was determined one crew member was responsible for most of the sorting and measuring. The crew member was issued a citation for take/possession of undersize Dungeness crab. The crab were seized and released into the bay after being weighed.



Fish and Wildlife Division member investigates commercial crab complaint.

Poaching Investigation Uncovers Multiple Crimes

A Fish and Wildlife Sergeant received a complaint of a subject poaching deer at the Sandy River Delta and was called to a dump site where parts of two deer were located. Along with the deer, a Bottle Drop bag at the location led to a suspect. Fish and Wildlife Troopers executed a search warrant at the suspect's residence assisted by an OSP Drug Detective and members of OSP SWAT. The suspect, a convicted felon, was in possession of 4 deer heads, deer meat, elk meat, bear meat, and duck meat, all without documentation. The suspect admitted to taking deer at the Sandy River Delta in 2025 and claimed several others as roadkill but had not

followed the roadkill salvage rules. Also seized were a stolen Mt Hood National Forest sign, scoped rifle, stolen 9mm handgun, spotlights, ammunition, 4 compound bows, 2 crossbows (one with mounted light), and more than 70 grams of methamphetamine. An accomplice was interviewed and admitted to helping kill two of the poached bucks. An additional deer head and deer meat were seized. The suspects surrendered cell phones, which revealed evidence of bear baiting. The investigation is ongoing.



Fish and Wildlife Division members investigate deer poaching complaint.

Wilson River Steelhead Float Patrol

Fish and Wildlife Troopers conducted a float patrol along the Wilson River from Vanderzanden to Sollie Smith focusing on steelhead anglers. Throughout the patrol over 40 steelhead anglers were contacted with a handful of fish being checked. In one instance, the Troopers observed 3 rods actively angling from the bank with only one angler standing near one of the rods. As the Troopers pulled over to the bank, two more anglers came out of the brush towards the rods. Further inspection revealed none of the three anglers had the proper licensing or tags. Each angler was cited accordingly for the offenses.

Additionally, multiple non-motorized boating inspections and guide inspections were conducted throughout the patrol, with multiple warnings given for various boating and ELS related offenses.



Fish and Wildlife Division members check anglers on the Wilson River.

Fish and Wildlife Troopers assist USFWS with Waterfowl Enforcement Operation

Fish and Wildlife Troopers took part in a 3-day operation with USFWS focusing on waterfowl hunting enforcement. During the operation the Troopers located a duck hunter using motorized duck decoys. The hunter admitted he knew it was illegal to hunt with motorized decoys in Oregon. The decoys were seized as evidence and the hunter was cited for Use of Motorized or Battery-Powered Decoys.



Fish and Wildlife Division members assist USFWS with waterfowl operation.

Mule Deer Poaching Complaint Leads to Multiple Criminal Charges



Fish and Wildlife Division members investigate mule deer poaching case.

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper was called out in the late evening hours to the report of a buck deer being shot and the suspects possibly back on scene to retrieve the deer in an area north of Madras. The investigation revealed a juvenile and an adult set of cousins were coyote hunting with spotlights when they located a large mule deer buck with the use of a spotlight and thermal device. The juvenile fired a single shot at the buck, which was on private property, after legal hunting hours, with no valid tag, using the vehicle as a rifle rest from the roadway, while the deer was spotlighted. The cousins trespassed onto the private property where the juvenile was discovered by the property owners and the adult fled on foot with the rifle and thermal device.

A thorough search of the field and surrounding area by Fish and Wildlife Troopers was unsuccessful in locating the buck. The adult suspect was contacted at his residence where he ultimately produced the rifle, which he had stowed away in a friend's truck. The Troopers were led to an area miles away where they located the thermal device that was left in the brush. The rifle, scope, detached thermal scope, spotlight, and ammunition were seized. The adult has a restraining order that lists a firearm and ammunition prohibition. The suspect's will be facing multiple charges related to the investigation.

Fish and Wildlife Trooper Rescues Green Sea Turtle



Fish and Wildlife Division member rescues sea turtle.

A Fish and Wildlife Trooper responded to Horsfall Beach outside of Coos Bay, after receiving a report of a sea turtle on the beach. The Trooper was able to locate the sea turtle and contacted the Newport Aquarium. After consulting with Newport Aquarium personnel, the small Green Sea Turtle was removed from the beach and released to the aquarium for potential rehabilitation.

Ocean Salmon and Columbia River Program

Tucker Jones, Ocean Salmon and Columbia River Program Manager

Southern Resident Orca Outreach & Education

Southern Resident orcas, a small and unique population of orcas, were listed as endangered in Oregon by the Fish and Wildlife Commission in 2024. Since then, ODFW has increased and expanded outreach and education actions to enhance public awareness about the population and the main threats to their survival and recovery.

In addition to developing a dedicated webpage for the [Southern Residents](#) and social media postings, ODFW staff have been interviewed by media and presented information on the orcas for webinars and in-person events such as the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry's popular Pub Science series.

One particularly impactful outreach and education initiative is ODFW's partnership with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) which runs Oregon's Whale Watch program. Program volunteers help state park visitors to spot whales and learn more about them. In March 2025, ODFW's Southern Resident Orca Conservation Coordinator worked with OPRD rangers to train volunteers participating in the Spring Whale Watch Week. As the program usually focuses on gray and humpback whales, this was the first time that orcas had been incorporated into the training. ODFW's presentation (Figure 1) garnered a lot of interest from the 60 plus volunteers in attendance, as indicated by the large number of questions they had.



Figure 1. Southern Resident Orca Conservation Coordinator, Howard Takata, presenting information on orcas to Whale Watch volunteers at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport.

Another virtual training session was held last December for about 50 volunteers planning to participate in the Winter Whale Watch Week. Again, ODFW's presentation was well received with many volunteers commenting on how much they appreciated learning about orcas and how excited they were to pass on the information to the thousands of whale watchers that visit the Oregon Coast during winter break. This collaborative effort between ODFW and OPRD is a great example of how the energy and enthusiasm of volunteers can be harnessed to increase public awareness of a species at risk in Oregon. It also shows that the power of numbers can be leveraged to reach a wide audience when staff time is limited.

ODFW staff were also able to do some "hands on" outreach at OPRD's Whale Watching Center in Depoe Bay during the first weekend of Spring Whale Watch Week when approximately 2,000 visitors came through the center. Many visitors were not aware that an endangered population of orcas use the habitat off the Oregon Coast and were eager to learn more.

Whale watchers were also able to take home an informative postcard developed by ODFW's Communications Team (formerly the Information and Education Division) to help spread the word about the Southern Residents (Figure 2). The postcards are available at the

Whale Watching Center year-round and have been distributed to the public by ODFW staff at other outreach events on the Oregon Coast such as Marine Science Day in Newport and the Wild Things Festival in Yachats.

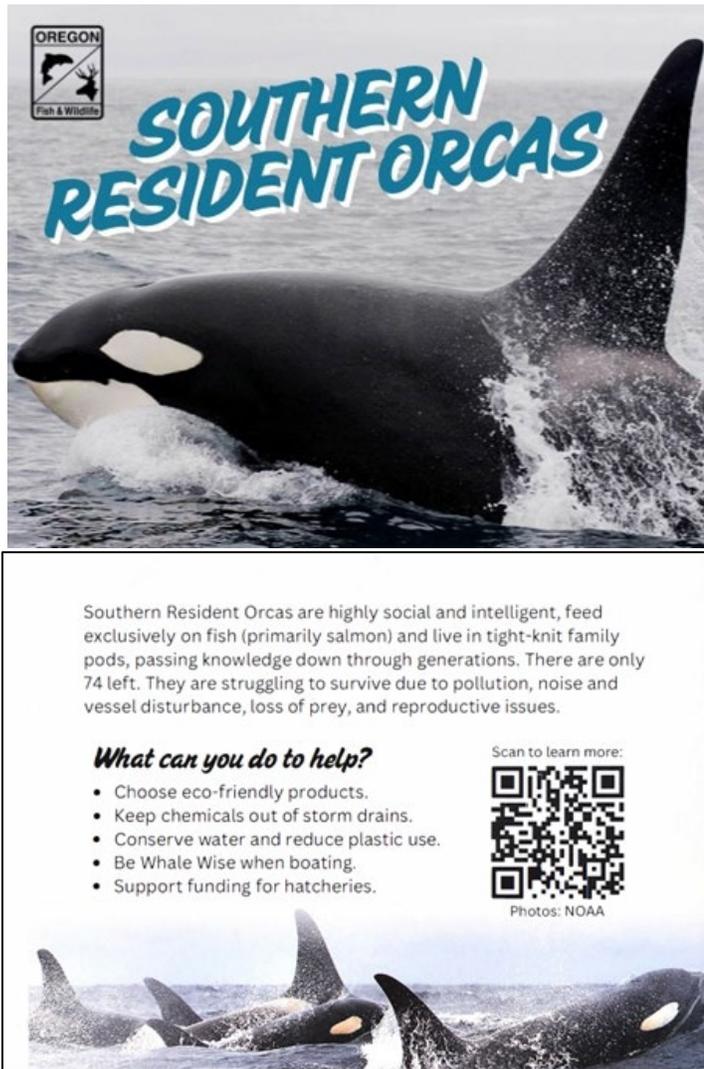


Figure 2. Front and back side of a Southern Resident orca postcard designed by Beth Quillian from the ODFW Communications Team

**End of field reports for
February 20, 2026**