

Winter Issue 2015

# OREGON Fish & Wildlife JOURNAL



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## About Our Cover



Keith Howard with his big Canadian Honker. For more see page 49.

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# Historic Wildfires of Western Oregon, 1765 to 2014

By Dr. Bob Zybach

In 1934 William G. Morris, a forest scientist with the USDA Pacific Northwest Forest Research Station, wrote an article for the Oregon Historical Quarterly titled "Forest Fires in Western Oregon and Western Washington." A few months ago Jim Rombach, retired Weyerhaeuser forester and principal consultant of Rombach & Associates, commissioned me to update Morris' work. This article presents my current findings regarding the Oregon portion of that project.

A lot of major fires have taken place in western Oregon since 1934 (mostly beginning in 1987), and a lot more has been learned about the early fire history of the region since that time through scientific research and computerized mapping and analysis. To illustrate the "too incomplete" lack of historical data claimed by Morris, he even footnoted his article with a plea "to any reader having knowledge of additional facts or sources of information" to contact him directly at his address at the US Courthouse in Portland.

Morris was also the author of a definitive report on the 1933 Tillamook Fire and another on the history of lightning strikes and fires in Oregon. His work was influential in the

writings and careers of such writers and foresters of that time as Stewart Holbrook – who wrote a well-known book in 1945 on catastrophic wildfires of the US (including the Tillamook Fires of 1933 and 1939) – and leading industrial forester Bill Hagenstein. These men, and others, helped form the Keep Washington Green and Keep Oregon Green movements that became instrumental in bringing public awareness to this problem.

As a partial result of these efforts, there were no major forest fires in western Oregon – excepting the Oxbow Fire of 1966 – in the 26-year period from 1951 until 1987. Since then there have been numerous such fires, mostly ignited by lightning and arsonists and mostly taking place on federal lands in on USDA National Forests (created by Congress in 1905), and on USDI BLM O&C Lands (created in 1937), and USDA Wilderness areas (created in 1964).

The following table depicts the major wildfires that have taken place in western Oregon from ca. 1765 until the present. These fires were not limited to forestlands, but that is where the large majority occurred. Criteria were fire size (typically,

**Historic Wildfires of Western Oregon**

Wildfire Name	Year	Mo.	Acres	County 1	Notes & Agencies	Cause
Millicoma	1765	?	200,000	Coos		Unknown
Mt. Hood	1800	?	10,000+	Multnomah	Volcanic eruption	Volcano
Willamette Valley	1826	9	10,000+	Yamhill	Indian burning fires	People
Wilkes Expedition	1841	9	1,000+	Jackson	Indian burning fires	People
Barlow Road	1845	10	1,000+	Clackamas	Wagon road-clearing fire	People
Oregon City	1848	7	1,000+	Clackamas	Provisional Government	Unknown
Yaquina I	1849	8	450,000	Lincoln	Indian and settler fires	People
Nestucca	1853	0	350,000	Tillamook	Indian and settler fires	People
Canyon Creek	1856	?	10,000+	Linn	US Territory	Unknown
Columbia Complex	1857	8	10,000+	All	Indian and settler fires	People
Jacksonville Complex	1864	8	10,000+	Jackson	Indian and settler fires	People
Silverton	1865	8	100,000+	Marion	Ranching and logging lands	People
Seven Mile Hill	1867	9	20,000+	Linn	Wagon road-clearing fires	People
Yaquina II	1868	8	300,000	Lincoln	Indian and settler fires	People
1868 Complexes	1868	8	200,000+	All	Indian and settler fires	People

## Historic Wildfires of Western Oregon 1765-2014

Wildfire Name	Year	Mo.	Acres	County 1	Notes & Agencies	Cause
Coos	1868	9	125,000	Coos	Indian and settler fires	People
Silver Creek Falls	1886	8	1,000+	Marion	Ranching and logging lands USDI	People
Barlow Road Complex	1901	8	85,700	Clackamas	Cascade Reserve	People
1902 Complexes	1902	9	200,000+	All	27 deaths; 5+ towns	People
1910 Complexes	1910	8	100,000+	All	1 death; USDA NFs	People
Cedar Butte	1918	9	40,000	Tillamook	Ranching and logging lands	People
Astoria	1922	12	N/A	Clatsop	2 deaths; 30 blocks	People
Tillamook I	1933	8	311,000	Tillamook	1 death; ODF; CCC	People
Bandon 1936	1936	9	N/A	Coos	11 deaths; 500 buildings	People
1936 Complexes	1936	9	50,000+	All	Ranching and logging lands	People
Tillamook II	1939	8	209,700	Tillamook	ODF; CCC; industrial lands	People
Tillamook III	1945	7	182,000	Tillamook	3 deaths; ODF	People
Hubbard Creek	1951	8	15,600	Curry	Industrial forestlands	People
Tillamook IV	1951	4	32,700	Tillamook	Fern burners; ODF	People
Roseburg Blast	1959	8	N/A	Douglas	14 deaths; 300 buildings	People
Oxbow	1966	8	42,900	Lane	1 death; USDI BLM	People
Silver Complex	1987	8	96,000	Josephine	Kalmiopsis Wilderness	Lightning
Bland Mountain	1987	7	10,300	Douglas	2 deaths; 8 homes; private	Arson
Warner Creek	1991	10	9,000	Lane	USDA Willamette NF	Arson
East Evans	1992	8	10,100	Jackson	USDI BLM O&C Lands	People
Hull Mountain	1994	8	8,000	Jackson	1 death; 44 buildings	Arson
Charlton Fire	1996	8	10,400	Lane	Waldo Lake Wilderness	Lightning
Apple	2002	8	17,600	Douglas	USDA Umpqua NF	Arson
Biscuit	2002	7	500,000	Josephine	Kalmiopsis Wilderness	Lightning
Tiller Complex	2002	7	69,800	Douglas	USDA Umpqua NF	Lightning

## Historic Wildfires of Western Oregon 1765-2014

Timbered Rock	2002	7	27,400	Jackson	USDI BLM O&C Lands	Lightning
B&B Complex	2003	8	90,800	Linn	Jefferson Wilderness	Arson?
Deer Creek	2005	8	1,548	Josephine	8 homes; USDI BLM	People
Blossom	2005	7	14,800	Curry	Wild Rogue Wilderness	Lightning
Middle Fork	2008	8	21,100	Jackson	Sky Lakes Wilderness	Lightning
Rattle	2008	8	19,800	Douglas	USDA Umpqua NF	Lightning
Boze	2009	9	10,600	Douglas	USDA Umpqua NF	Lightning
Rainbow	2009	9	6,100	Douglas	USDA Umpqua NF	Lightning
Tumblebug	2009	9	14,600	Lane	USDA Willamette NF	Lightning
Oak Flat	2010	8	7,500	Josephine	USDA Rogue River NF	People
Dollar Lake	2011	8	6,300	Clackamas	Mount Hood Wilderness	Lightning
Douglas Complex	2013	7	48,700	Douglas	USDI BLM O&C Lands	Lightning

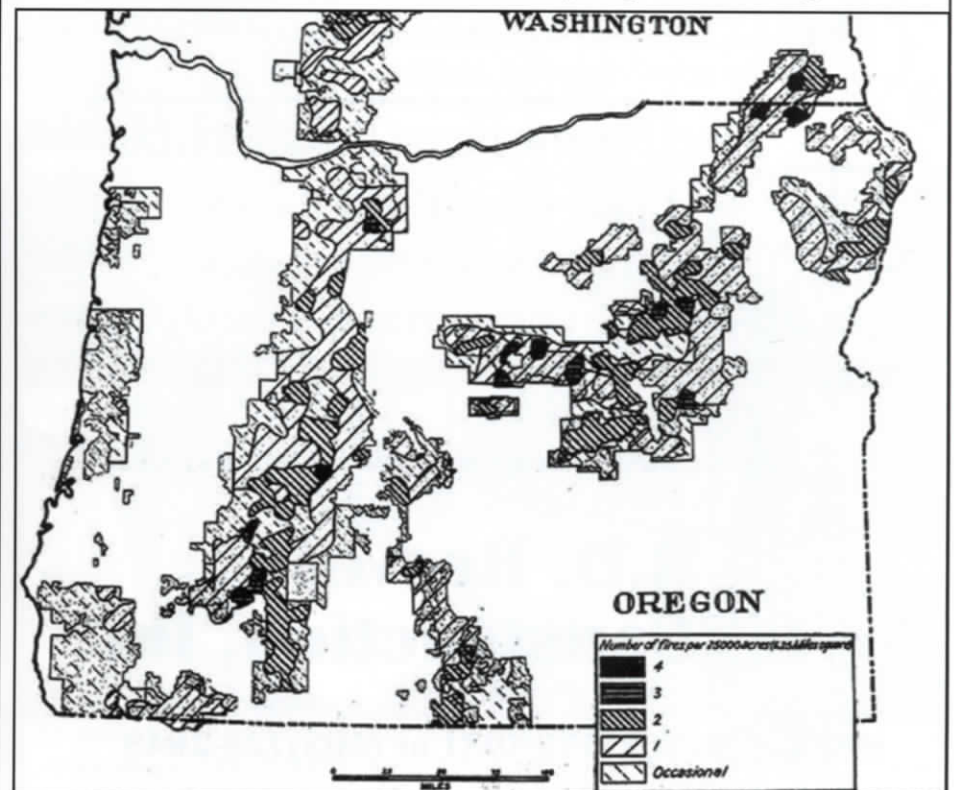
only fires in excess of 10,000 acres have been listed); human mortalities; and physical damage to human structures, such as homes, barns, office buildings, powerlines and the like.

A close examination of this table reveals several interesting patterns that should be of interest to western Oregon resource managers and US taxpayers - and to their elected representatives:

1) The western Oregon wildfire season has been about the same for the past 175 years — about 45-60 days long, generally beginning in late July or August and peaking in August or September, and ending with fall rains in September or October. Despite recent public claims of President Obama, Washington Governor Inslee, and US Forest Service Chief Tidwell in Oregon and Washington this past summer, fire seasons are not getting longer and “Global Warming” apparently has nothing to do with it.

2) Almost all major fires dating to precontact and early historical times were caused by Indians or American settlers. The first lightning-caused fires, for example, were not reported in the Siuslaw National Forest until 1927 and they did not reach historic proportions. This is despite the regular and predictable timing and locations of lightning strikes

**This map of Oregon lightning-caused fire patterns based on 5300 fires reported from 1925 to 1931 was included in William Morris' June 1934 report, *Lightning Storms and Fires on the National Forests of Oregon and Washington.***

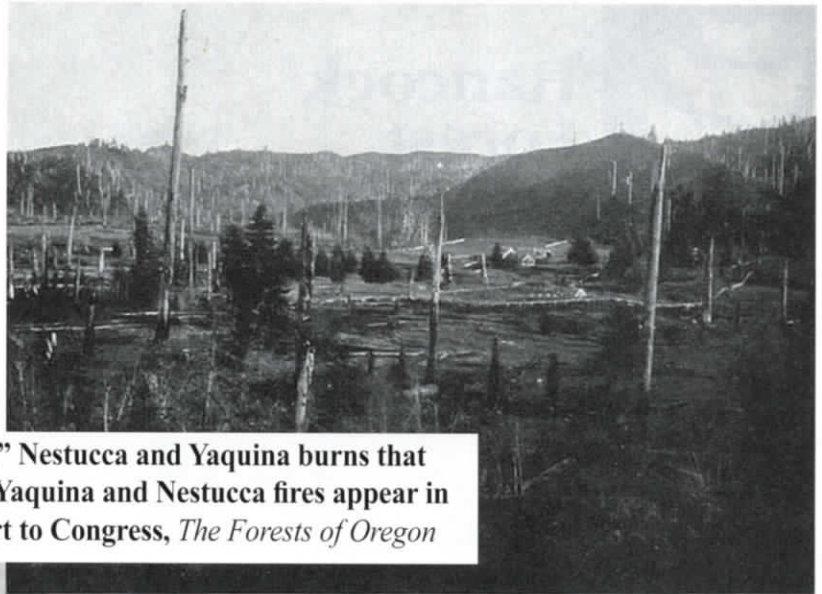


**FIGURE 14.--Zones of average yearly lightning fire distribution on the national forests of Oregon and Washington obtained by plotting the locations of the 5300 lightning fires reported from 1925 to 1931.**

throughout the region during historical time; most of which are confined to southwest Oregon and the western Cascades.

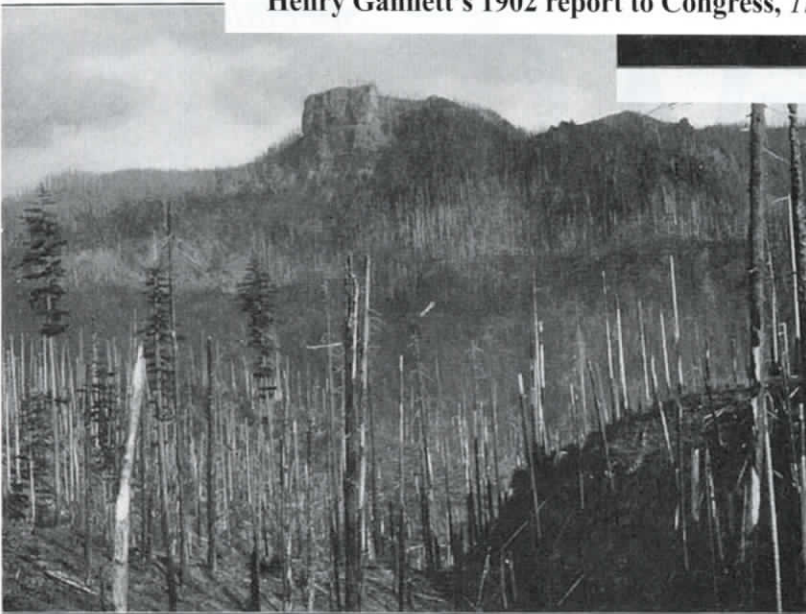
3) Each county has its own history of large-scale wildfires, with significant differences between them: e.g., Tillamook County had numerous such fires from 1853 until 1951, and little or nothing since; while Douglas County had few major fires until 1987, and have seemingly had them on an almost annual basis since.

4) There were hardly any major wildfires in western Oregon between 1951 and 1987; a period in which these forests were the most actively and intensively managed in



**These photos of the “Great” Nestucca and Yaquina burns that resulted from the 1849-1868 Yaquina and Nestucca fires appear in Henry Gannett’s 1902 report to Congress, *The Forests of Oregon***

U. S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



B. THE GREAT YAQUINA BURN.

curbing most such fires on state and private lands in the 70 years since World War II. Conversely, passive forest and fire management actions and policies -- such as those associated with Wilderness areas, spotted owl habitat, and “let it burn” wildfires – that were implemented on federal lands beginning in the late 1960s seem to be primarily responsible for the severity and extent of most forest fires in western Oregon during the past 28 years. As predicted.

*Dr. Zybach has a PhD in Environmental Sciences from Oregon State University. His dissertation research was titled *The Great Fires: Indian Burning and Catastrophic Forest Fire Patterns of the Oregon Coast Range, 1491-1951.**



history, and during which time the “Keep Oregon Green” movement was in full swing.

5) Almost all major wildfires during the 28 years since 1986 have occurred on federal lands and were ignited by lightning or arsonists; further, these fires were predicted by several scientists and other knowledgeable professionals more than 20 years ago due to major changes in federal land and fire management policies and had little or nothing to do with “fire suppression history” or “climate change,” as has been suggested.

In sum, predictable large-scale wildfires are largely preventable, as evidenced by the success of the Keep Oregon Green movement and by the seasonal fire control efforts of the Oregon Department of Forestry in



**The author is shown discussing historical maps at the Round Lake location of the B&B Complex fire on September 15, 2004. Also pictured are (clockwise from foreground) Kermit Cromack, Jim Peterson, Benjamin Stout, Zybach, Wayne Giesy, and Nana Lapham (photo by Brett Morrisette, USDA Pacific Northwest Research Station).**