U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Hanford Reach National Monument
Saddle Mountain National Wildlife Refuge
. . . protecting the last of the free-flowing Columbia River

April 24, 2006

Windy Weather Greets Visitors on Rattlesnake Mountain

High winds battering the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain presented a challenge to Hanford Reach National Monument staff and visitors during the fourth annual Rattlesnake Mountain field trip. The educational program, a cooperative effort between U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Kennewick Community Education, featured a visit to the Aird Lands Ecology Reserve, which has been closed to the public since 1943. Prior to the field trip, participants enjoyed an evening program featuring the Monument's natural and cultural resources. Wildlife Biologist Heidi Newsome and Planner Dan Haas were joined by local historian Michele Gerber, covering topics ranging from biodiversity and shrub-steppe restoration to Native American traditional uses to WWII and Cold War era plutonium production.

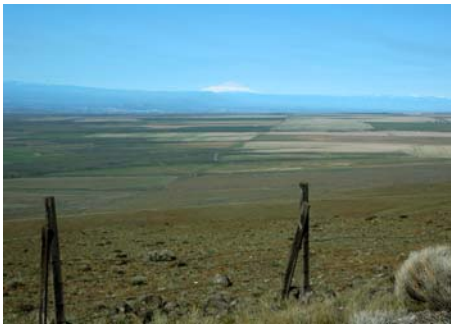

Photo: Ron Crouse/USFWS

Looking west from the 3600' summit

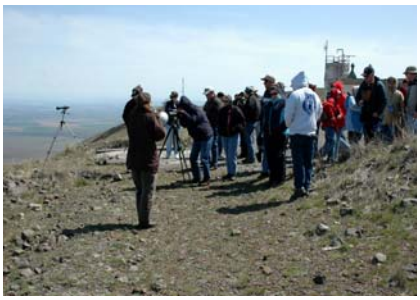

Photo: Ron Crouse/USFWS

Heidi Newsome uses a bullhorn to battle the wind

On field trip day, two groups of 40 each, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, met at Horn Rapids County Park on the Yakima River. Visitors boarded two tour buses and were given specially designed wildflower identification guides to the mountain. Haas and Newsome were joined by Information and Education Specialist, Ron Crouse, and Wildlife Biologist, Kevin Goldie, to serve as guides and instructors for the day. Refuge Operations Specialist, Jack Heisler, was on hand to direct buses, supervise security, and retrieve wandering visitors.

The group was diverse in ages, backgrounds, and goals for taking the class. For some, it was the history or biology. For others, a pilgrimage to the top of a forbidden mountain they had grown up with but never set foot upon. High winds on the summit had pushed the wind chill to 17 degrees at 6 a.m. By the time we reached the summit, the weather was brilliant, but winds were in the 35 to 50 miles per hour range. Group interpretation was difficult, resulting in adaptive techniques. Visitors enjoyed investigating the alpine-like habitat and the former command structures, while staff supplied one-on-one and small group education.

Photo: Ron Crouse/USFWS

Nearly flying in the strong wind

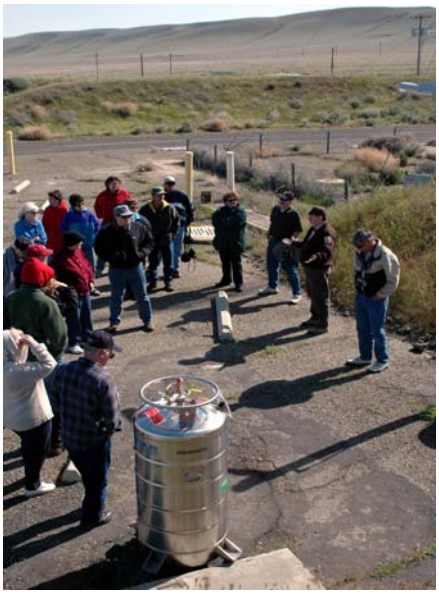

Photo: Ron Crouse/USFWS

Dan Haas makes use of a tank of liquid Helium to interpret the "Big G"

Back down on the mountain's flanks, we explored shrub-steppe restoration sites of bunchgrass and sagebrush seedlings that were planted after the devastating "24-Command" wildfire of 2000. Spring wildflowers were magnificent, carpeting the slopes with pink phlox, blue lupine and yellow balsamroot. Former Nike missile silos provided the perfect backdrop for education sessions on pre-Hanford history and post-Hanford physics. Haas deftly interpreted today's use of one silo as a research laboratory studying the gravitational quotient, affectionately known as the "Big G.."

Visitors were gracious and commented favorably on the program. As a requirement for a graduate education class, Crouse prepared and distributed a short evaluation survey asking each participant, "Please take one minute to tell us the most significant thing you learned from this class." Results indicated that many visitors enjoyed learning about the complexity and difficulty of restoring shrub-steppe habitat. Others commented on never knowing how Rattlesnake Mountain got its name. But the following response was one that we all, as an agency, should feel good about. "I learned that there are professionals who care and who know what they are doing, who are taking care of the land for us."

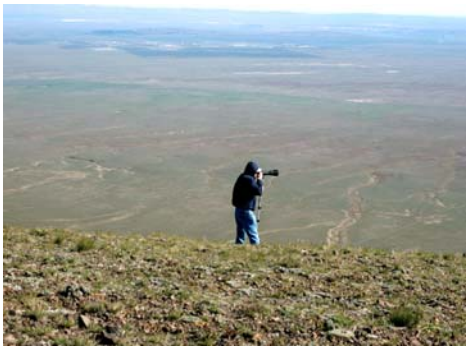

Photo: Ron Crouse/USFWS

The view east across the Hanford basin

Photo: Rich Steele

The cover of the Rattlesnake Mountain Wildflower Guide