



Autumn in the Harney Basin

Leaves fall, birds fly south and ranchers prepare for the changing season

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by Lauren Brown

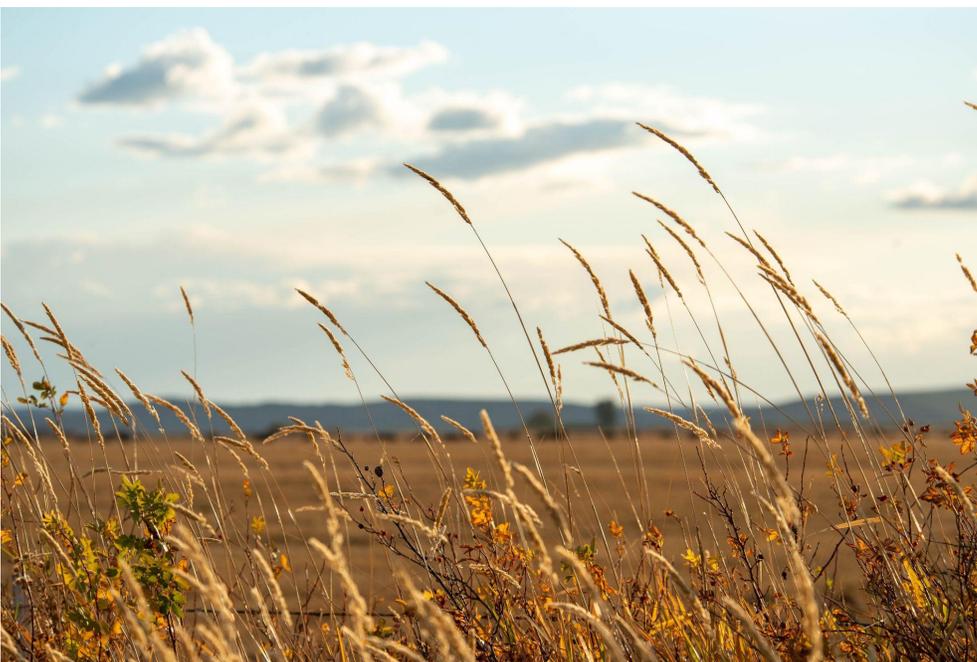
Colorful leaves piling on the ground and the crisp, cool mornings mean fall has arrived in the Harney Basin.

For Harney County rancher Mitch Baker, fall is the time to work on maintenance at the ranch. "There's lots of projects to do," he says. Much of the work revolves around the cattle, which he brings back closer to home. The calves are weaned and fed until November when they are shipped. "It's interesting when we have weaned our calves and we just watch their personalities and how they grow and fill out as you're feeding them before it's time to ship. That's a gratifying thing to watch," he said.

Other fall projects around the ranch include fixing corral fences, cutting juniper, ditch work, removing river fences and culvert maintenance. "Fall is awfully short," Baker said.



Pictured above and below: Harney Basin meadows starting to shut down and prepare for their dormancy of winter. Photos by Jessica Hedges, Branded In Ink.



Baker enjoys the fall because of the cooler temperatures and getting to see his grandkids take part in their Harney County Fair projects as well as fall sports and other activities. "We're just busy every day," he said.

Plants go dormant

Esther Lev, the former executive director of The Wetlands Conservancy and a wetlands consultant for the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, said fall in the basin is a time when things are starting to shut down and prepare for the dormancy of winter. "There's a lot

of brown in the landscape but if you look around the homesteads – the trees around the homesteads and around riparian areas where you have cottonwoods and ash, there's bright colored leaves," she said.

While the deciduous trees are shedding their leaves, the plants in the wet meadows have gone dormant. In fact, they went dormant much earlier than normal this year because of the drought Harney County experienced this summer, said Tony Svejcar, a consultant for the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative and a retired rangeland scientist and research leader with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "They fell asleep during the summer and never had a chance to wake up," he noted.



Svejcar said that in a normal year during the fall, the basin might get one last shot of rain in September, which provides a little green up going into winter. "Plants will set a few leaves, and they'll get optimistic for a brief period. Then the reality of winter hits with the short days and colder weather," he said.

Pictured: Fall colors at the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center in Harney County.

During the fall, the flows of water in the basin are typically low, but this year they may be lower than average because of the drought,

according to Svejcar. "The rains that we get, they are enough to occasionally provide green up, but usually you don't get enough to increase flows," he said. "It's recharging soil moisture but not enough rain that it's going to run off."

Svejcar said he enjoys fall's cooler nights and mornings and pleasant days with highs in the 60s to 70. One casualty of the temperatures dipping below freezing at night was his garden. "My garden got blasted," he said. "I should feel bad about that, but it actually means I can quit gardening for a while," he said with a laugh.

Malheur Lake shrinks in size



Dominic Bachman, Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative Aquatic Health Coordinator, said the size of Malheur Lake changes dramatically during the fall, especially during a drought year. "The lake itself is down to less than 2,000 acres and most of those acres are less than 1/4 inch deep," Bachman said. "Any carp that stayed out in the deepest portion of the lake became stranded and died or were picked off by coyotes and birds. Many carp and other fish were forced to take refuge into the Blitzen River."

Pictured: This fall, Malheur Lake shrunk to about 2,000 acres, down from 48,000 acres at one point last year.

In addition, the red band trout that call the lake home were forced to move up the system, most traveling above Page Springs on Steens Mountain. Bachman said the carp and trout populations are being monitored with radio telemetry units and that there are likely very high carp densities in the lower section of the Blitzen River.

Bachman said one positive aspect of the drought might be that periodic wetting and drying of wind blowing the remaining water across the lakebed has created ideal conditions for emergent vegetation and seasonal wetland plants to germinate and grow. "It may be a good year for some vegetation to re-establish in the lakebed," he said.

However, for the birds passing through during fall migration, the drought has taken a toll on the wetlands, Bachman notes. "Those wetlands are much less productive and not nearly as good of a 'grocery store' for birds to use as they pass through. Many birds will simply not stop and keep flying when they can't find food and water," he said.

Birds on the move



Teresa Wicks, the Eastern Oregon Coordinator for the Portland Audubon Society, said that while we may think of fall as the months of September, October and November, as far as birds are concerned, there is only a month between when spring migration ends and fall migration begins. For example, the shorebirds that migrate through the Harney Basin start showing up in mid-July and increase in numbers through late September. "We tend to see our peak of fall shorebirds in September," Wicks said.

Pictured: Long-billed Dowitcher.

Species of shorebirds that often turn up are long-billed dowitcher and red-necked phalaropes. Smaller shorebirds such as western sandpipers and least sandpipers also fly through the basin in the fall.

Wicks enjoys the migrant bird species that sometimes make an appearance during the autumn migration. "We tend to get some vagrant warbler species," she said. In fact, recently a Canada Warbler turned up at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters. "They are typically only found east of the Rockies," she said.

Wayward birds and the cooler temperatures are a reminder that fall is here with the anticipation of the holidays ahead. We gear up for the season with pumpkin lattes, Halloween costumes and Thanksgiving meals. As we prep our homes and wardrobes for the changing season, the animals and plants that live in the Harney Basin are preparing themselves as well. While there is beauty in the colorful falling leaves and the sunny days, the nip of nighttime cold is a reminder that winter is just around the corner.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

