



HARNEY COUNTY
Wildfire
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HARNEY COUNTY FOREST
Restoration
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HARNEY BASIN
Wetlands
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YOUTH CHANGING
the Community
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Teamwork Flows Like a Stream

Summer Interns Learn More Than Just Natural Resource Management

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The sun beats down on a group of young adults, nets in hand, as they wade through a cool stream in the Malheur National Forest. To the casual observer, it might appear they're simply enjoying a summer day in nature. But these individuals are part of High Desert Partnership's (HDP) summer crew, and they're hard at work conducting stream habitat surveys in the surrounding forest land.

This summer, HDP assembled its largest crew ever—eight members split between stream and habitat teams that provide monitoring support to the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative and the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative.

While their primary goal was to gain hands-on experience in natural resource management, these high school and college students discovered that the soft skills of teamwork, leadership, and cooperation proved just as valuable—if not more so—than the scientific knowledge they came to acquire.

Kaylee Littlefield, HDP's Monitoring Program Coordinator, oversees the summer crews. And she was exceedingly proud of what her intrepid group was able to accomplish, despite their assorted ages and interests. "The varied backgrounds present this year have been great to experience as they interact with each other and work together to come up with consensus decisions to accomplish daily and weekly tasks," she explained.

The crew's diversity is one of its strengths. From high school students to recent college graduates, each member brought a unique perspective to the team. This mix of experiences and interests created an environment ripe for personal growth and mutual learning.

Take Preston Van Nice, for example. A local resident and recent Crane High School graduate, Preston is headed to George Fox University in the fall with an interest in nature and film. Nature he found in abundance but it was the relationships forged which really stood out to him. "I've never had a job before where it feels as if I'm working with friends," he shared. "Every week is always a great time, no matter how fast or slow the day may go by."



This sentiment was echoed by Tadd Kraft, a recent graduate from the University of California, Santa Cruz. "I have thoroughly enjoyed camping out in the field with the other members of the stream crew this summer," Tadd said. "We have had a lot of fun working together and hanging out back at camp." Tadd's colleagues introduced him to fly fishing and he noted that catching his first fish on a fly was a real highlight.

Pictured: Stream crew is being certified to snorkel for fish and mussels which usually happens during fish counts or stream restoration projects.

While the camaraderie is evident, the work itself is serious business. The stream crew's main objective was to conduct habitat surveys, cataloging characteristics such as water depth, woody debris, and vegetation. This data helped determine the health of the streams and their suitability as habitats for native fish species.

The habitat crew, meanwhile, focused on projects like wildlife monitoring and fence inspection in the Steens Mountain area. Keaira Burns, who's starting at the University of Idaho this fall to study Natural Resources, worked on both crews. She participated in wetland macroinvertebrate studies and helped with monitoring efforts in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Despite the technical nature of their work, it's clear that the most impactful lessons extended beyond scientific data collection. They learned to work with people that perhaps they wouldn't normally associate with Littlefield said. "For some crew members, it got them out of their comfort zones, and they were able to find common ground with each other."

This summer wasn't without its challenges, however. Wildfires in the region tossed carefully laid plans into disarray. The stream crew found themselves unable to access the Malheur National Forest for several weeks due to closures caused by wildfires. Instead of letting this setback derail their summer, the crews adapted.

"The running joke of the summer has been what plan we are on today? Plan A, Plan B, Plan C... I may have used up the entire alphabet this summer!" Littlefield joked. But she noted that the disruption had a silver lining: "The good that came was the crews learned to play a more active role in the planning of daily work and to have their needs and opinions heard and respected."

This unexpected turn of events provided an opportunity for the interns to develop crucial leadership skills. On a number of different occasions they decided what needed to be done each day, with Littlefield there for support. "Those were some of my favorite moments of the season," she said. "They took leadership and made decisions based on their gained knowledge from the summer."



The crews' ability to adapt quickly became apparent during a fencing project in the Steens Mountain area. What could have been a monotonous task of walking fence lines and tallying broken sections turned into a bonding exercise and an adventure. Music played as they worked, conversations flowed, and problem-solving happened organically. When the fence line dipped into a steep canyon, the crew saw it not just as a work challenge but as an opportunity. Their curiosity and drive were rewarded with elk and deer sightings, to say nothing of the fun they had exploring this remote area.

For many crew members, the most memorable experiences came from their hands-on work with wildlife. Braedon

Cornwall, a Natural Resources student at Treasure Valley Community College, relayed fond memories of their fish salvage operations. "We saved hundreds of native fish in preparation for restoration and construction," he said. "This type of work is very valuable to me because I enjoy hunting and fishing, and I want to help restore wildlife populations to ensure healthy populations for the future."

As the summer draws to a close, it's clear that these young adults have gained far more than just entries on their resumes. They've learned to communicate effectively with peers and professionals alike, to adapt to unexpected challenges, and to take initiative when faced with uncertainty. These are skills that will serve them well, regardless of their future career paths.

Littlefield summed it up best: "Paying attention to detail and wanting to learn—that's a huge one. These skills will help them in the future, no matter what field they go into."

As these interns head back to their respective schools or on to new adventures, they carry with them not just knowledge of stream habitats and wildlife management, but also the invaluable experience of true teamwork and personal growth. In the end, they've discovered that sometimes the most important lessons flow not just from the streams they studied or the forests they observed, but from the connections forged and the challenges they overcame together.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildlife Collaborative, Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative, Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative and the Youth Changing the Community Collaborative.

