SIGHTLINES

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Newsletter of the Selkirk Conservation Alliance

FEATURES

SCA IN ACTION

SEE LIST ON PAGE 7

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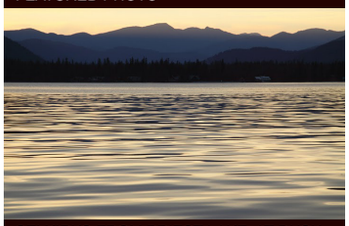

SELKIRKS FROM PRIEST LAKE AT DUSK
(PHOTO CREDIT: LARRY MACDONALD)

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Sightlines is the newsletter of the **Selkirk Conservation Alliance (SCA)**, a non-profit corporation providing environmental oversight and public information for the Inland Northwest.

Caribou Controversy in our Corner of the Country

BY TIM LAYSER, SCA WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

In late November 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued its draft proposal regarding the determination of critical habitat for woodland caribou within the Selkirk mountains. This proposal comes ten years after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was petitioned to identify critical habitat by several conservation organizations, one of which was the Selkirk Conservation Alliance.

The November proposal has generated much controversy in local communities and surrounding counties about the proposal's potential impact on local economies and recreation. Much of the reaction is based on misleading and/or inaccurate information.

The following points provide background for a better understanding of the current issues regarding caribou in the northwest:

- The caribou recovery area represents less than 1% of historic range once occupied by caribou in lower 48 states.
- The caribou population in the Selkirk mountains was estimated to be 200 to 400 animals historically.
- Selkirk Mountain caribou are a mountain ecotype of the woodland caribou.
- Caribou in the Selkirk mountains were federally listed as threatened in 1984 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the mountain caribou ecotype was listed as threatened in 2002 by the federal government in Canada under their Species at Risk Act (SARA).

Caribou clashes in winter.
Photo credit: Jim Brandenburg.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

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A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Many of our members have no doubt followed the controversy over SCA's and other groups' successful suit against the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service seeking Critical Habitat designation for mountain caribou. Mountain caribou, classified as "endangered" under provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), are considered the most imperiled large mammal in the US. As most SCA members know, the only place these magnificent animals are found in the United States is in the Selkirk Mountains of north Idaho and eastern Washington. (See front page article in this edition of SightLines.)

The designation of Critical Habitat, perceived by some as a threat to the local economy and a hindrance to unfettered motorized recreation, has unfortunately been inflamed by grandstanding politicians, tinfoil-hat conspiracy hounds, and a handful of local businessmen who, despite a national economy in recession, high fuel prices, and problematic weather find caribou a convenient scapegoat for a local economy that isn't performing to expectations. That businesses and resorts around the country (where there are no caribou) are experiencing a similar downturn in revenues doesn't stop some from blaming the caribou recovery effort for their financial woes.

Mountain caribou:

The only place these magnificent animals are found in the United States is in the Selkirk Mountains of north Idaho and eastern Washington.

While the wisdom of basing a local economy on motorized recreation in an era of ever-rising fuel prices is debatable, what's difficult to debate is an apparent dearth of reasonable people willing to discuss the critical habitat issue in an informed and respectful manner. In letters-to-the-editor and posts to local websites, conservationists have recently been called everything from "*eco-terrorists*" to "*human-hating cowards.*"

A disturbingly large tinfoil-hat contingent has even stated that the driving force behind the caribou Critical Habitat designation is a United Nations conspiracy to *"eliminate all private property in the United States (and) turn all of northern Idaho, western Montana, and eastern Washington into a wilderness area where animals are free to roam, but people may not."*

Okaaaay... I realize that reasonable discussions may not always be possible.

I still believe however that there must be a majority of fair-minded people out there willing to carefully listen to those who disagree with them and, at the least, come to politely respect each other's sincerity even if they cannot agree with their position.

What we can all agree on is the magnificence and uniqueness of Priest Lake and the surrounding Selkirk Mountains. Pure lakes and streams, unique plant species, exceedingly rare animals such as grizzly bears, caribou, wolverine, fisher, and lynx, two-thousand-year-old cedar trees, scientifically invaluable wetland habitats dating back to the last glaciation, and yes, stunning scenery all make this area unlike any other in the conterminous United States. One would expect local residents to be in the forefront of those demanding protection of this incredible place instead of clamoring for its exploitation.

Too often however, during local public information events, a mob-like atmosphere prevails with a highly vocal few shouting down anyone who has the temerity to disagree with their position. Instead of a reasoned discussion of the facts, public meetings thus devolve into pep rallies whipped up by county commissioners who are better at cheerleading than leading.

Surely we can do better than this.

Mark Sprengel
Executive Director, SCA
sprengel@scawild.org

CARIBOU

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

- Approximately 25 caribou existed in the Selkirks at time of listing in 1984.
- The caribou recovery area was designated in 1984 when caribou were listed as threatened. The recovery area includes portions of British Columbia. In fact, the habitat recovery area for caribou is generally equally distributed between the United States and British Columbia.
- In the late 1970s, as a result of urging by the Inland Northwest Big Game Council, caribou in the Selkirk mountains became a management concern to state and federal agencies. The International Mountain Caribou Technical Committee was subsequently formed.
- Management for caribou recovery has been a part of the Forest Plans since 1987 for the Idaho Panhandle and Colville National Forests.
- Designation of caribou critical habitat includes habitats already being managed by National Forests for caribou recovery.
- Scientific reports studying the impacts of winter recreation on caribou show that caribou are displaced by winter recreation activities and that they will avoid inhabiting these areas in following years.
- Wildfire and timber harvest has had impact on amount of habitat available to caribou—but sufficient habitat remains to recover the caribou population.
- Predation by mountain lions had a significant impact on the caribou population in the 1990s, but the population of mountain lions has since then been managed by the U.S. and British Columbia to reduce those impacts.
- The presence of wolves within and adjacent to the recovery area has not as of yet been shown as a problem for caribou, but impacts are being monitored by the States of Washington and Idaho as well as British Columbia.

Tim Layser worked for the U.S. Forest Service for more than 30 years and was the Priest Lake Ranger District wildlife biologist for the past 20 years. layser@scawild.org

Join the SCA

Support the Selkirk Conservation Alliance with Your Membership!

Our newsletter, funded entirely by member contributions, keeps you informed of natural resources issues within the Inland Northwest, and offers regular updates on the efforts of the SCA to promote environmental excellence. Now is the time to give to the environment that sustains us all.

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❒ Enroll or Renew Me as a member of the SCA. Enclosed are my dues.

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FISH TALES
Granite Creek: *"1930s"*
[Part II]

BY MARK KABUSH, SCA BOARD CHAIR

Imagine that it is the fall of 1930 and that we are fishing just up from the concrete bridge above what is now the road to the Granite Creek Marina.

If brook trout have not yet been planted in the creek (I'm not sure when they were introduced into almost every tributary of Priest Lake), there are only three species of edible game fish we might catch. West slope cutthroat, bull trout and mountain whitefish. But there are plenty of them.

There were enough whitefish in the 1940s and early 50s to sustain a commercial fishery. They were caught in considerable numbers and sent to Sandpoint to be smoked and sold commercially. Since the bull trout spawn in the fall, being char, we might try for them since they could be as large as the one Scotty Winslow caught back in the day. That fish was "harvested" in the 1950s when he was bear hunting. It had a hole in its head made by a high caliber rifle and was taken from Granite Creek above Nordman.

The cutthroat we catch are not large, probably from 10 to 12 inches, and they have drifted down from the upper reaches of the creek for two years or so and are quick enough to escape the waiting predatory bull trout when they enter the environs of Priest Lake. In the thirties, the cutthroat and whitefish were prey to mergansers, osprey, mink, otters, and probably bears.

When I arrived in the 1940s the local inhabitants were shooting osprey and mergansers on sight since they were "taking our fish," neglecting to realize that all the species were in balance before we arrived. But such clever logic probably had little to do with the near disappearance of the osprey later due to DDT. And there is a healthy population of mergansers now. Mink and otters, as well as beaver are, of course, still being trapped although there is a waning market for their fur, and they are seldom seen.

The value of native fish is clear to any fisherman who has hooked a large bull trout. They are aptly named. ...They fight long and strong and, when it was legal to keep them, were a delight for dinner.

In the 1930s, sometime after our fishing trip, lake trout (or mackinaw as they are commonly known) were introduced into the lake by Federal Fish and Game biologists for what reason I do not know. In the 1940s kokanee (land-locked sockeye salmon) were introduced and they multiplied rapidly much to the joy of all who caught them since they were so good to eat and could also be smoked and canned.

And then the lakers (lake trout) came into their own. In 1957 the United States record laker was taken from Priest Lake. It weighed 57 pounds. At about the same time, those of us who fished for cutthroat noticed a decline in their numbers. Clear-cut logging was in its heyday and the degradation of stream habitat occurred. The Coeur d'Alene Tribe has concluded that the introduction of kokanee into that lake contributed to the demise of cutthroat. So in the section of Lake Coeur D'Alene that the Tribe oversees, they have, to the angry cries of Kokanee fishermen, increased the bag limit on Kokanees which the Idaho Department of Fish and Game is trying to control by limiting harvest.

Although the numbers of spawning bull trout have decreased in Granite Creek, Jill Cobb of the U.S. Forest Service has found bull trout redds (spawning nests) in the upper reaches of Granite Creek. Cobb has plans to implant large logs in that area of the creek to enhance bull trout spawners by providing them with necessary shade and cover. Kudos to her. Since Granite Creek and the Upper Priest River are the main tributaries for spawning bull trout and cutthroat on the West side of Priest Lake, other streams on both sides of the lake have diminished numbers of cutthroat and bull trout for all the reasons cited above.

The value of native fish is clear to any fisherman who has hooked a large bull trout. They are aptly named. Unlike the macks, they fight long and strong and, when it was legal to keep them, were a delight for dinner. Why we tried to improve a fishery like that of Priest Lake is a mystery to me. Nature did her best and we did our best to ruin a system in place that worked so well.

May your backcasts not hook a bush, and your flies land lightly on the beautiful waters we all enjoy.

In the next installment of FishTales, Mark will discuss the state of fishing in both Priest Lake and Upper Priest. Contact Mark Kabush,SCA Board Chair, at kabush@bmi.net or (208) 443-2532.

Book Review: The Big Burn

REVIEW BY ELEANOR JONES, SCA MEMBER/SUPPORTER

THE BIG BURN:

Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America

By Timothy Egan

Illustrated. 324 pp.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. $27

After spending winter months in the city, I look forward to the clean refreshing air of Priest Lake. Invariably, comes a summer morning when a smoky smell fills the air instead.

A haze over the Lake often accompanies the smell, and both can sometimes last a week or so. Someone will usually say they've heard of a fire in Colville, or comment that the winds are blowing the smoke in from Canada. In August 1910, the word would have spread that the smoke was from The Big Burn—a forest fire that raced through the forests of Idaho, Washington, and Montana, a forest fire known as the largest-ever recorded.

Theodore Roosevelt and his forest chief, Gifford Pinchot, on a tour of inland waterways.

In an amazing nonfiction story about this singular fire, Tim Egan delves into the people, places and events of The Big Burn. Egan, winner of the National Book Award for his account, details the largest-ever forest fire and how it saved our national forests even as it destroyed them.

Intertwined and core to the story are Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, both pioneers of conservation. As a team, they championed the notion of our forests as national treasures to be preserved for every citizen.

In 1910, robber barons were doing everything possible to use the forest for their own gain. In their eyes, especially contemptible were the Forest Rangers. The Big Burn richly details the heroism of the nearly ten thousand fire-fighting men assembled by these rangers. As you read along, their stories might bring tears to your eyes or thankfulness to your heart.

The irony is that it took this tragic fire—the death of brave men, homes and cities burned, and over three million forested acres lost in barely two days—to turn public opinion in favor of forest rangers and their mission.

Of particular interest in Egan's book are the references to Priest Lake. Pinchot visited the area in 1897 and saw entire mountainsides 'left scorched and skeletal by earlier burns around Priest Lake.' I'll leave it you to read the antidote of his being shot at and frantically rowing across the lake.

Pinchot notes, 'Of all the foes which attack the woodlands of North America, no other is as terrible as fire.' Upon finishing this The Big Burn, I immediately put it into my family's hands to read. Now t's your turn to burn through this unforgettable story!

Eleanor Jones neé Hungate has spent 71 summers at Priest Lake, and a handful of winters. Her family's historic log cabin, handbuilt by Eleanor's grandfather Joseph 'Chief' Hungate and his five sons, sat at the end of Canoe Point for nearly 100 years. It was dismantled in the 1990s due to 'old age.' ejjones3@earthlink.net

Aerial Monitoring in the Selkirks *Our Eye in the Sky*

BY TIM LAYSER,
SCA WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

The Selkirk Conservation Alliance—with support from Defenders of Wildlife, Idaho Conservation League, Advocates for the West, and the Kalispell Tribe—will be again conduct aerial monitoring flights over the Selkirk Mountains. SCA plans between four and seven flights, depending on weather conditions and plane and pilot availability. Our ongoing monitoring program exists to document snowmobile use in designated snowmobile closure areas, and to monitor caribou activity and other wildlife species such as wolverine and mountain goats.

So far this winter, SCA has conducted one monitoring flight, which was very informative. The flight determined that there are, at a minimum, four caribou within the U.S. portion of the caribou recovery area. SCA staff had known of the existence of a few caribou in the U.S. from a previous report by Idaho Department of Fish and Game, but it was good to observe their activity directly ourselves.

The first winter flight also documented two locations where snowmobilers had entered restricted areas in the vicinity of the upper reaches of Trapper Creek. This has been a common illegal point of entry for snowmobilers in years' past. Because SCA's initial flight occurred on a Friday, due to weather and other factors, little other snowmobile use was observed—snowmobile activity is often highest on or after the weekend.

Four mountain caribou documented during this winter's flight.

Stay tuned for more SCA environmental reports from the friendly skies.

Contact Tim Layser at layser@scawild.org

My Favorite [Place in Time]:
Family Time at the Lake

SUBMITTED BY MATTHEW ALLORE, SCA MEMBER/SUPPORTER

Each summer, after many miles driven and rest stops visited, we arrive at the north end of Priest Lake for our annual stay. Our summer journey is one that my wife's family, the Hungates, has made each year for over one hundred years now. My wife Stacey... her mother... her grandmother... and even her great-grandmother, all summered at the lake with their families, their cousins, their sisters and their brothers.

The Hungate clan, circa 1930, in front of their log cabin on Canoe Point, Priest Lake. Left to right: John A, Richard (Dick), Winona, Joseph Sr. (Chief), Frank, Joseph (Joe), and Robert (Bob) Hungate.

Yes, the lake water is pristine and the natural beauty unsurpassed—but perhaps my most favorite memories are those of sitting quietly and visiting with Uncle Dick in his cabin, sharing stories with Aunt Molly about her first visit to the lake, and going for a chilly swim with my mother-in-law on Memorial Day a few years past. I've visited many wild and wonderful places in the world, but none of them hold such a special connection to a family, one that I'm lucky enough to be connected to.

Now I'm sure all Priest Lake lovers would agree that climbing Lookout Mountain is always fun and that canoeing to the Upper Lake never disappoints. There are countless adventures to be had at the lake. But perhaps it is those who join us on such adventures that are remembered more than the adventure itself. To me, the best place at the lake will always be in a chair next to a campfire, chatting with a loved one, catching up and laughing about memories from years past or from that afternoon.

The Hungate clan, now Ashburn/Allore, circa 2011, at Mosquito Bay, Priest Lake. Left to right, back row: Stacey, Matt; front: Audrey, James.

Each summer our little family of four will journey to the lake to revel in its natural splendor just as the Hungates have for generations. My wife and I look forward to the peace, the hikes, and of course the sun. But most importantly, we travel each year to connect again with family. To find new places with them and to make new memories which will live on forever. My hope is that Priest Lake remains a place of natural beauty that continues to draw our family back—again and again.

Matthew Allore lives in Tacoma, WA with his wife and two children. He hopes that reading this little story makes you recall one of your favorite spots in the Selkirks and also the special person you shared it with. Matt and Stacey share in their hearts an everlasting hope of summers filled with huckleberries and absent of mosquitoes. Contact Matt at allore123@hotmail.com

Grizzly Bear Access Amendment

BY LIZ SEDLER, SCA STAFF

Almost six years after the Federal District Court ruled that the Forest Service's 2004 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) for the Forest Plan Amendments for motorized access management in Grizzly Bear Recovery Zones were legally flawed, the court directed the Forest Service to revise its analysis so as to remedy various legal deficiencies. Consequently, the Forest Service issued a Final EIS and ROD in late November of 2011. The ROD adopts new access management standards and was issued jointly by the Kootenai, Lolo, and Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

Subsequently, in mid-January, SCA and three other conservation organizations filed an administrative appeal challenging the ROD and FEIS on the basis that it fails to comply with several environmental statutes and their regulations, including the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Among the points raised in the appeal is the fact that U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) reports indicate that both the Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk grizzly populations are at a high risk of extinction, partly due to the small number of bears in both populations, and also due to the fact that they are isolated from other grizzly populations, including each other. In addition, the Cabinet-Yaak grizzlies are split into two isolated sub-populations because of barriers to wildlife travel between the Cabinet Mountain and Yaak Valley portions of that Recovery Zone. USFWS reports for the Cabinet-Yaak bears indicate that the population has been in decline for more than a decade. The status of the Selkirk grizzly population has not been established, though at best it is estimated to be stable, ie. not increasing or decreasing.

In spite of the obvious dire necessity to take meaningful steps to improve conditions in grizzly bear habitat in these two Recovery Zones, the Forest Service has instead conjured up a set of standards that simply maintain the status quo in terms of provid-

ing secure habitat for grizzlies and avoiding actions that would reduce security. In fact the new Access Amendment would allow permanent reduction in grizzly bear core habitat (secure habitat parcels with no open roads) from current levels. None of the precursors to this set of motorized access standards (this has been going on since 1994) has allowed a permanent reduction of core habitat – the standard has always been "no net loss" of security, whether it be core habitat, or open or total road densities (the other two factors for which standards are developed for grizzly bear habitat).

In other words, in the past, the Forest Service has allowed breaches of security as long as they were "temporary." This large departure from previous policy was determined to be acceptable by the USFWS in its recent Biological Opinion for the Revised Access Amendments, in spite of the fact that the agency has previously stated that "any permanent losses of core habitat… may have serious ramifications on the ultimate recovery of the grizzly bear populations in the [Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk] Recovery Zones." USFWS 2004 Biological Opinion.

Those are fairly strong words, coming from the federal agency that is charged with and oversees the recovery of (terrestrial) species listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA. All proposed federal actions that "may affect" listed species must be reviewed by the USFWS to determine whether they are likely to jeopardize those species.

No explanation is offered by the USFWS for this radical change in policy. One suspects that during the five years it took for the Forest Service and the USFWS to agree on an acceptable revised motorized access plan, that the Forest Service convinced USFWS that they really needed more "flexibility" to carry out their timber extraction program and other desirable actions. Providing "flexibility" for the Forest Service is and has always been the primary excuse for not instituting more stringent access standards, in other words, for just maintaining the status quo in terms of road densities and core habitat. Allowing a permanent reduction in core will fail to even maintain the status quo and will drive these small, struggling populations towards rather than away from extinction.

...Reports indicate that both the Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk grizzly populations are at a high risk of extinction.

Other flaws in the set of motorized access standards the Forest Service selected include the failure to consider the current levels of security in a large part of the Selkirk Recovery Zone; failure to establish a minimum size for blocks of core; failure to include standards that would ensure the availability of critically important seasonal (spring) habitat within core habitat; and to address the essential (to Recovery) need to establish viable linkage zones between the Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk RZs and between the Cabinet-Yaak and the adjacent Northern Continental Divide Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone to the east.

Liz Sedler is SCA's Forest Programs Coordinator. sca@scawild.org

Current SCA Projects

Your membership support and donations to SCA help fund this valuable work:

1. **Caribou Recovery Habitat**
2. **Grizzly Bear Access Amendment/Appeal**
3. **Priest Lake/Priest River Watershed Advisory Group**
4. **Priest Lake Water Quality Monitoring Program**
5. **Lakeview/Reeder Timber Sale Monitoring**
6. **Lower Priest SDEIS**
7. **IPNF Forest Plan Revision**
8. **Albani Dam Fish Passage**
9. **Boundary Dam FERC Relicensing**
10. **Aerial Monitoring Program**
11. **IDL Geographic Information Systems Project**
12. **SCA Outreach Project**
13. **Remote Wildlife Camera Program**
14. **Grizzly Bear Food Storage Project**

Making the Past Present: **1860**
Surveyors Arrive at Priest Lake

BY STEVE BOOTH, SCA BOARD MEMBER

The Fall 2011 SightLines issue discussed what led surveyors to Priest Lake in 1860.

This is the rest of the story...

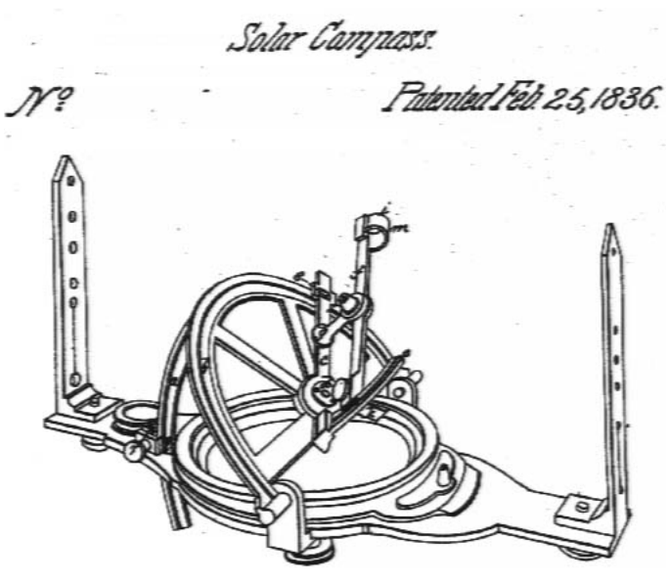
The surveyors left Seneacquoteen in early summer of 1860. They crossed the river and followed Riley Creek and crossed through a valley into the Blue Lake country. This was an Indian trail that the Indians used to access Priest Lake from the south. From Blue Lake, they continued north, roughly paralleling the Priest River, then called the Vermillion River.

Once they reached the south end of the lake (Coolin area), they pastured their mules at a near by prairie (probably Cavanaugh Bay or Lee Lake area). They built a canoe in three days and from this canoe they surveyed the lower lake eventually making their way to the upper lake. They were able to survey the lower lake in just three days.

They tried to navigate the upper river but could not proceed because of log jams in the river. They decided to push forward on foot until they reached the 49th parallel which they had already surveyed. They took with them five days provisions.

It took them three days to reach a high mountain (Big Snowy). Their leader described it as the highest mountain he ever ascended. From this point he could see all of the major river valleys in our area, including the Columbia, Pend Orielle and Kootenai. He also stated that three creeks originated on this mountain's flanks; one flowed to the Kootenai, one into upper Priest Lake, and one to the Pend Orielle, near its mouth at the Columbia River. He was obviously impressed with Big Snowy and stated that it would "make a fine astronomical station."

On their return to the big lake, two members of the party decided to hike up to a pyramid-shaped mountain on the east side of the lake with an elevation of six to seven thousand feet. See if you can ascertain which mountain that might be. They spent the night there in a terrific thunderstorm. They left the mountain in the morning and by noon they were back at base camp at the foot of the lake. These guys were in shape!



Cutting-edge surveying technology for the times: the solar compass, patented in 1836.

Late 1800s American surveyor and Harvard graduate Dr. James Underhill surveyed parts of Idaho.

The Priest Lake valley was described as heavily timbered and "no blade of grass can be found on it." That may have been an exaggeration. Also; "the lake is full of delightful nooks, corners, and bays." Even in 1860, these guys thought Priest Lake was something special. It still is!

The leader of the survey party said in his report of the trip that he would not bore his boss with a long narrative of his trip to the lake, and the country around it. How unfortunate for us!

Steve Booth is a former teacher, coach, historian, and forest service firefighter. He is a longtime resident of Priest Lake and has owned his small construction business for 28 years. Steve has been on SCA's board since 2002.