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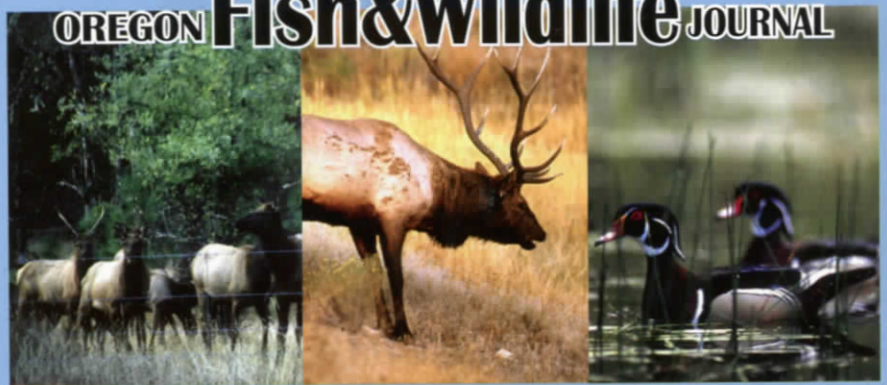

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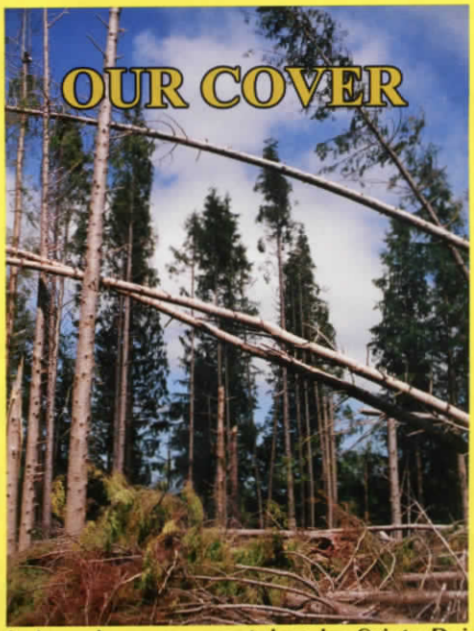

This issue's cover was taken by Cristy Rein in the Mt. Hood National Forest, showing the terrible state of our forests..

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Elliott State Forest's First Recreation Plan

By Dr. Bob Zybach

Southwestern Oregon Community College Forest Recreation Students Develop a Draft Plan to Manage the Forest for Economic, Recreation, and Educational Benefits for All Oregon Students

"Two Old Growth." Jerry Phillips and David Gould discuss fire history of two old-growth trees on Huckleberry Point during May 15, 2018 Loon Lake Field Trip. Photo by Anne Farrell-Matthews, Southwestern Oregon Community College Communications Administrator.

For the past two school years I have had the distinct pleasure and satisfaction of working with Tasha Livingstone, Southwestern Oregon Community College (SWOCC) Forestry and Natural Resources Instructor, and her F251 Forest Recreation students in developing the very first draft recreation plan for the Elliott State Forest. In 1993 I had received my 4-year forest recreation degree from Oregon State University (OSU), and this has been my first opportunity to put it to work – and in a Forest I have been directly involved with and cherished for many years.

Students participated in six 4-hour field trips in 2018 to learn about the Elliott and to consider its potential uses for recreation that could financially benefit the Common School Fund and/or be used for educational purposes by Oregon school students. These trips were reduced to five in 2019, and all tours were accompanied by two or more local experts in forestry, history, fisheries, birding, logging, road construction, and/or commercial recreation.

The lessons learned by these trips, by related lectures and consultations with local experts, and by suggested readings and research made freely available online, were then synthesized into draft Elliott State Forest recreation plans – the very first every written for "Oregon's First State Forest."

My time, the volunteer time and expenses of other field

guides and lecturers, and the costs of printed materials and website construction for this project was provided by Oregon Websites and Watersheds Project, Inc. (ORWW), an educational nonprofit website Wayne Giesy and I co-founded in 1996. Transportation, student instruction, students, and classroom facilities were provided by SWOCC.

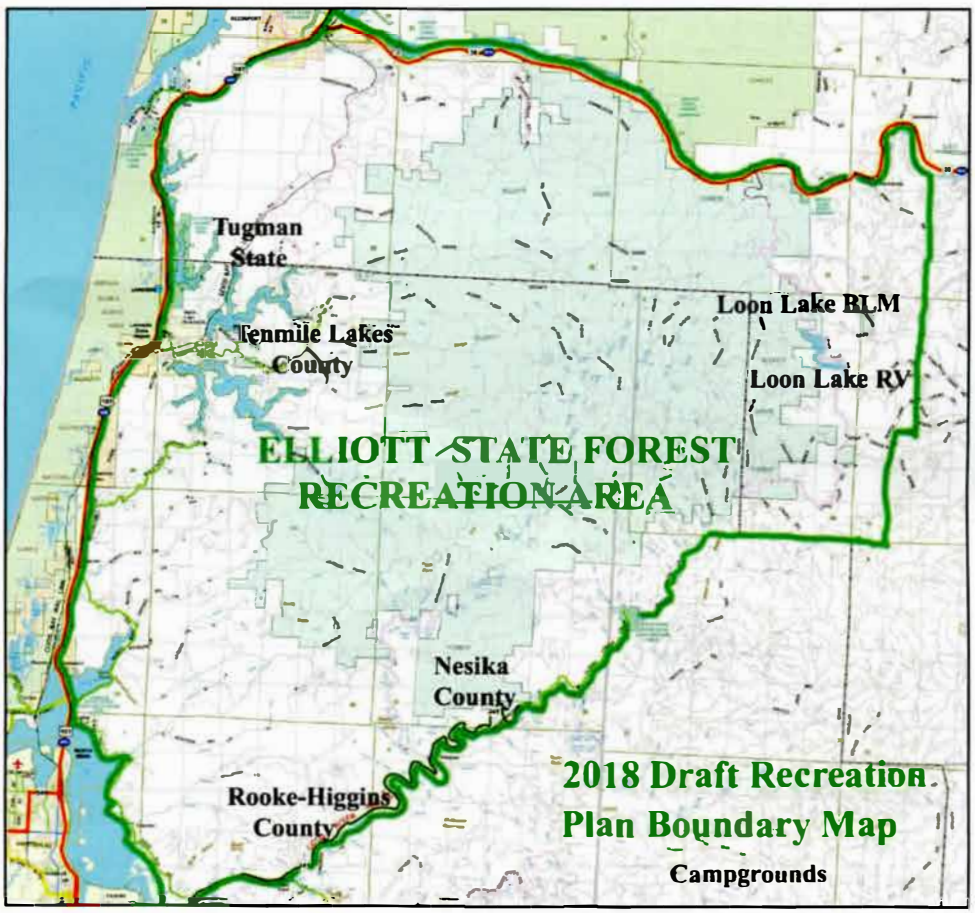
Funding for ORWW was entirely by private donations and primarily provided by a few local businesses – Coos Bay Timber Operators, Inc., Southport Lumber Co., D.B. Western, Inc., Hull-Oakes Lumber Co., NW Maps Co. – and by David Gould, Giesy, and myself. And all based on the work of Jerry Phillips; as legendary Elliott State Forest manager, as its historian, and as a volunteer field trip guide, project consultant, and guest lecturer for the SWOCC students.

Elliott Field Trips

During the Fall of 2017 the Department of State Lands (DSL) and ORWW collaborated on a series of three oral history interviews with Jerry Phillips while touring different portions of the Elliott. The interviews were conducted by me – my OSU Master's degree was in forestry-related oral histories – with DSL providing a vehicle, a driver, and GIS mapping to document our route and interview locations. Other local experts were also interviewed during this process, but Phillips' thoughts and writing about the Elliott were the focus.

With this background the 4-hour educational field trips, beginning and ending at SWOCC, visited all portions of the Elliott and its perimeter, with a focus on forest recreation, history, mapping, planning, and photography. Students were provided with 10-20 page handouts for each trip, including an itinerary of all stops, a detailed map, and a series of historical photographs, texts, and website screen shots that provided additional details on the stops and thematic focus of each trip.

In this manner the students systematically visited the Elkhorn Ranch, Cougar Pass Lookout Tower, Jerry Phillips Reserve, Tenmile Lakes, Trail Butte, Loon Lake, BLM Elk Viewing Area, Dean Mountain, Millicoma Fish Hatchery, all of the local campgrounds, and Golden and Silver Falls State Park. They also observed and considered the Forest's road, trail, fire, and management histories and conditions as we traveled. And at each stop local experts were available to explain what they were seeing and to answer questions.



Elliott State Forest Recreation Area. Students determined that the "Elliott Forest Recreation Area" should include recreational amenities immediately adjacent to the perimeter of the Forest, but remain within Phillips' north-south Umpqua and Coos River boundaries. The western boundary was set at Highway 101 to separate the area from Oregon Dunes, with Golden and Silver Falls State Park at its southeast corner and Loon Lake and Scottsburg in the northeast (2018 Draft Plan: pg. 9).

Elliott has about 550 miles of historic rocked roads completed in three basic phases: 1928-1940 (early highway and CCC construction); 1940-1962 (early old-growth logging); and 1962-1970 (Columbus Day Storm salvage). Of these surfaces, according to Phillips, only about 150 miles are needed for management and recreational access and 400 miles can be converted to trail networks for dedicated hiking, biking, horseback riding, or driving ATVs; and can always be opened up again for temporary emergency or management needs.

One of the first things people notice on entering the Elliott, including the SWOCC students and instructors: all of the roads are rocked, mostly in poorly maintained condition, lined with weeds, and with occasional garbage dumps and homeless camps. And there are no directional signs. The only exceptions are short stretches of State Highway 38 where it becomes the northern border of the Elliott, and the seven-mile stretch of paved county road leading from Highway 38 to

Loon Lake. Everything else is rock, and mostly abandoned.

Draft Recreation Plans

Based on what they saw, heard, and otherwise learned during the course of the field trips, students worked in three-person teams to develop basic recreation plans for each facet of the Elliott's recreational opportunities. Combined, these incremental plans constituted a draft plan for the entire Forest.

There were two basic constraints to these exercises: 1) a recreation plan had never been written for the Elliott before, and 2) it is the only State Forest in Oregon that is 90% owned by the Common School Fund.

A forest recreation plan has to consider, first and foremost, who the landowner is. Whether it is private land, an industrial tree farm, Forest Service, BLM, State, County, or Indian; all of the rules and regulations, landowner objectives, and budgetary constraints are different. For Common School Fund lands they are entirely different.

"Jerry's Point of View." SWOCC student van leaves Jerry Phillips Reserve on April 17, 2018 Elkhorn Ranch field trip. Jerry Phillips has long maintained that this is his favorite viewpoint on the Elliott. Photo by Anne Farrell-Matthews.

The banner quote for both the 2018 and 2019 student draft plans is from Phillips' opening statement in his 1998 414-page history of the Elliott:

"I'd been vaguely aware of the Forest's existence since attending Oregon State College, where it was described in college literature as an undeveloped State-owned forest of young timber lying between Coos and Umpqua Rivers, dedicated to educational purposes."

From 1930 until the early 1990s this was interpreted to mean that the Elliott would be strictly managed for maximum financial gain, and that money would be directly transferred to the Common School Fund. Beginning with the spotted owl and then the marbled murrelet, Elliott timberland was diverted from maximizing profit for Oregon schools to providing "critical habitat" for federally-designated birds. This transition has culminated in the Forest losing money during many of the past 10 years, in large part due to lawyers and environmental organizations using federal rulings to shut down State forestland logging and other management operations.

These changes in use and income of the Elliott have led the State Land Board to first sell the land to a private company, then reverse the sale after public resistance, and now try to "de-couple" themselves from legal obligations to the Common School Fund; possibly by transferring ownership over to OSU. In the interim, however, the school lands remain the management responsibility of the Land Board, as they have been since 1859.

Students were aware of political discussions taking place regarding the Elliott's ownership and management, but told to focus on current and historical ownership responsibilities to the Common School Fund. Due to changed economic conditions, though, they were also told to consider Phillips' statement as saying the Forest could be managed for educational purposes for Oregon schoolchildren, not just for profit. Therefore, their draft recreation plans should consider two primary objectives: 1) make a profit for the School Fund, and 2) create recreational opportunities with educational intent.

A systematic consideration of the Elliott for its educational and recreational potential had not been undertaken before, although the 1857 Oregon State Constitution clearly states that income from the federally-designated school lands:

". . . shall be set apart as a separate, and irreducible fund

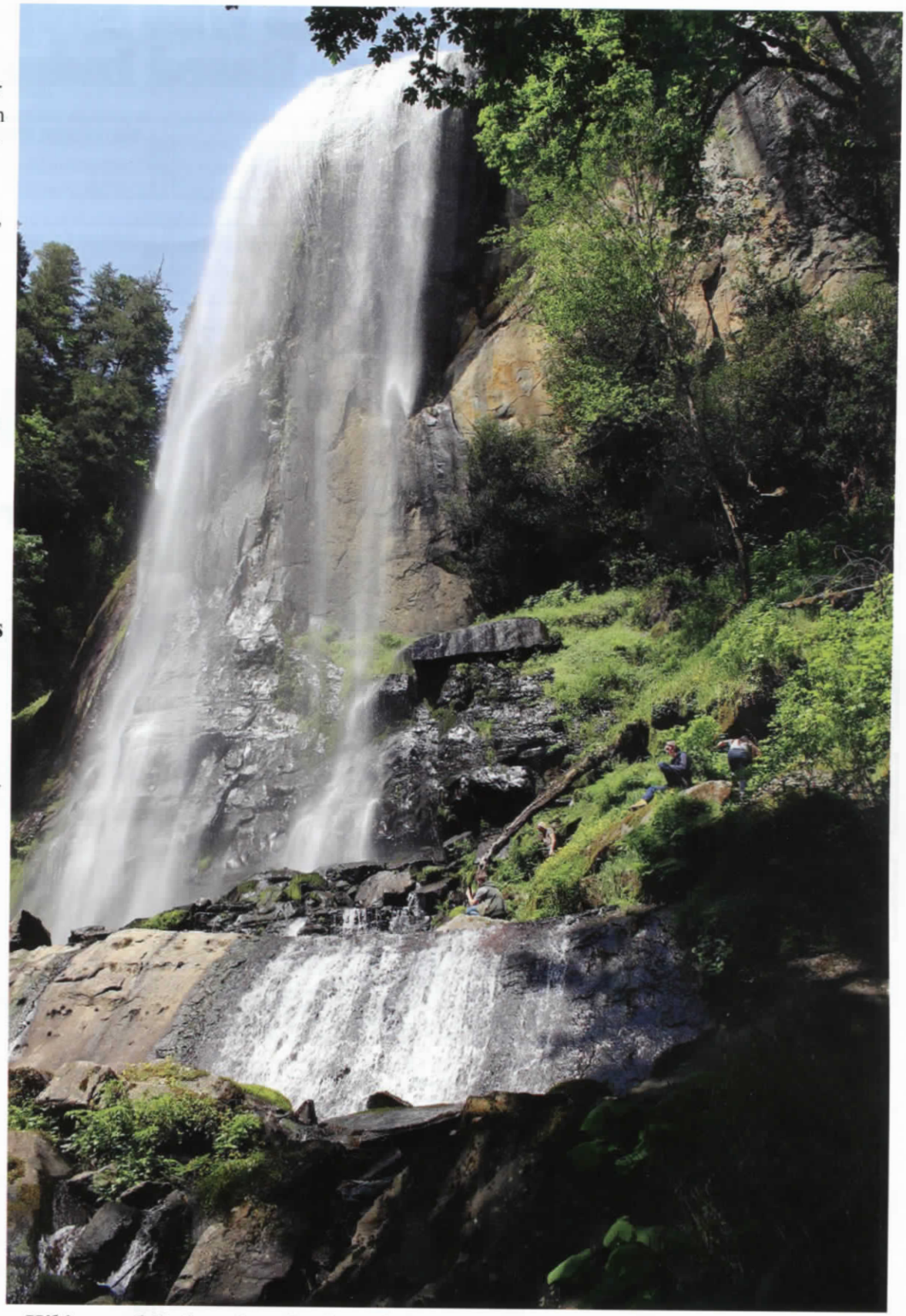
to be called the common school fund, for interest of which together with all other revenues derived from the school lands mentioned in this section shall be exclusively applied to the support, and maintenance of common schools in each school district and the purchase of suitable libraries, and apparatus therefor."

In this day and age, it certainly seems as if Internet content, transportation, and computers can reasonably qualify as "suitable libraries and apparatus."

Student Recommendations

In both 2018 and 2019 students placed maps, directional signs, and road maintenance as their highest priority recommendations. The lack of directional signs, in particular, was seen as a critical need that should be immediately remedied – not only for reasons of recreational and educational uses of the Forest, but most importantly for reasons of public safety.

There are hundreds of miles of road on the Elliott, mostly in poor condition, and no directional signs anywhere. Roads are narrow and winding, poorly surfaced and even blocked in many areas, and the Forest is defined by its steep canyons and sheer rock cliffs. Radio and telephone reception is poor or nonexistent in many locations and the possibilities of getting stuck, getting a flat, or having an accident are fairly good. And, outside of hunting season, there is hardly any



Hiking and Sightseeing. Students follow trail to Silver Falls during May 28, 2019 Golden and Silver Falls State Park field trip. Photo by Anne Farrell-Matthews.

traffic or other human presence for miles.

The recent decision by the State Land Board to reverse its earlier agreement to sell the Elliott was predicated in large part to keep the Forest "open to the public." With this obligation, and given the enormous size of the existing Common School Fund, it should only make sense to follow the SWOCC students' lead and immediately resolve these problems. That could be done, easily, this summer.

The students also noted that directional signs, improved road surfaces, and functional maps would make educational and recreational visits to the Elliott more desirable, as well as safer, and therefore likely lead to greater amounts of traffic – creating its own set of additional problems and opportunities.

Assuming that the student recommendations are followed, as they reasonably should be for reasons stated, a wide variety of recreational and educational options becomes more likely and desirable: greatly improved camping, fishing, hunting, sightseeing, berry picking, hiking, biking, horseback riding, and ATV trails all become possible. The enhanced educational opportunities for students all over Oregon also become apparent.

Common School Fund Income

In addition to exploring the recreational opportunities of the Elliott, students were tasked with recommending how those activities might be used to generate an income to meet obligations to the Common School Fund. This proved to be much more difficult than suspected.

Oregon was initially granted 3.4 million acres of public lands at statehood in 1859, by Congress, specifically to "support public schools." Through trades and sales -- mostly legal -- most of the remaining forested lands were consolidated into the 71,000 acre "Elliott State Forest" in 1930. Most of this area was covered with young Douglas fir saplings that would not become commercially viable for another 30 years.

During Jerry Phillips' management, trades and purchases increased the size of the Elliott's school properties to about 84,000 acres. It grows an estimated 80 million board feet of timber a year, far exceeding the 50 million annual feet estimated in 1930 when the Forest was much younger and smaller, and also exceeding the 50 million feet per year that Phillips sold, on average, over the last 30 years of his tenure. Now the Forest somehow loses money.

As of June 30, 2014, the Common School Fund was $1.45 billion. In the past 20 years, distribution to Oregon schools has ranged from a low of $13 million in 2004, to a high of "an expected $136.6 million in the 2015-17 biennium" (most recent numbers on the Oregon government website). If the Elliott were again managed according to law, that number would be increased by $20 to $25 million a year for the next 20 years. And produce more than 400 needed local

Hunting on the Elliott. (L) Jenna Goin shows grouse she shot near Elkhorn Ranch, September 22, 2018. (R) Amelia Harvey and the black bear she killed near Johnson Creek, May 24, 2018. Both hunts were on the Elliott State Forest. Photos by Amelia (L) and Alex (R) Harvey.

West Fork Millicoma Fishing Camp. Students gather for group photo on April 23, 2019 Elkhorn Ranch field trip. Jerry Phillips and Instructor Tasha Livingstone are on the far left; field guides Bob Zybach and David Gould are on the far right. Photo by Wade Gould.

jobs in order to do so, while still retaining more than 40,000 acres in "older forest habitat.

A commissioned economic report produced by Utah State University in 2014 titled "Options for the Monetization of the Elliott State Forest," concluded that the Elliott: "has no unique or special attractions that would bring in a significant amount of tourists to produce any substantial profit for the Common School Fund."

And: "Without unique sites or attractions, and given the small population in the area, monetizing the [Elliott] through entrance fees for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and other recreational activities is not a viable, revenue-producing option on its own."

Students generally agreed with this assessment but, noting the Elliott's long history of timber management, wildfires, and windstorms, assumed that a certain amount of logging would continue to take place and help generate funding needed to improve roads and develop recreational opportunities.

For specific recreational purposes, "strategic logging" was seen as a method capable of funding other amenities and possibly even showing a net profit for the Common School Fund. This type of practice was discussed as: necessary salvage to keep roadways and trails open, create and maintain scenic vistas in key locations, remove danger trees, open up campgrounds and overcrowded stands, restore cultural landscapes, and develop areas for big game foraging and songbird habitat.

Another option discussed was to maintain the Elliott as an actively managed forest focused on economic benefit to Oregon schools – as had been its history and legal obligation for more than 80 years – and to use the historic roads, logging sites, tree plantations, and old-growth reserves as the missing "special attraction" identified in the Utah State report. That approach would continue to produce hundreds of local jobs, hundreds of millions of dollars for our schools, and pay for any and all recreational facilities wanted or needed.

2020 Plans

Plans are already being made for the spring term 2020 SWOCC F251 students. They will be using the 2018 and 2019 draft Elliott recreation plans as their study guides, will be participating in the five established educational field trips, and will be expected to make improvements on the current 2019 draft.

A difference, though, will be that the 2020 students will be particularly focused on inventory and planning for the Elliott's 550 miles of roads and trails, and on the identification of, and recommendations for, the Forest's uncounted campsites and gathering areas.

Hopefully there will be directional signs and safe roads for them to travel on. Their classmates have been trying to make that happen.

Dr. Bob Zybach is Program Manager for ORWW. Both student plans are available online as printable PDF files and as interactive HTML files on the ORWW Elliott Forest website: www.ORWW.org/Elliott_Forest/Recreation