December 2023

High Desert Voices

A newsletter published by and for volunteers

HIGH DESERT MUSEUM

An Evening With Ronan Donovan

by Siobhan Sullivan, Newsletter Editor

On October 26, the High Desert Museum hosted 217 visitors, eager to see a lecture by National Geographic Explorer and Photographer, Ronan Donovan. An exhibition displaying his photos of wolves fills the *Spirit of the West Gallery* at the Museum. The National Geographic Society curated the exhibit in collaboration with the National Museum of Wildlife Art.

Ronan began the presentation with a dramatic video of wolves of the Polygon Pack of Ellesmere Island in Canada. White wolves blended into the snowy landscape as they interacted with a herd of musk ox. Close-ups of the wolves gave glimpses of their individual personalities. The video ended with a young fox kit practicing its howling skills, eliciting chuckles from the audience.

As Ronan recounted, he spent his early childhood years in Norwich, Vermont, raised by parents who were both teachers. His parents encouraged him to keep a journal of the natural world from an early age. Though he enjoyed spending time in the great outdoors, his classroom experiences were less pleasant. His Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) made sitting still in class difficult. Ronan noted he was "not a bad kid, just not challenged." By the age of 13, he had committed two felonies and two misdemeanors. They gave him a choice of going to a juvenile detention center or taking part in an outdoor program for troubled youth. Ronan ended up at an outdoor school camp, located east of Bend, for a two-month session. Fortunately, this experience changed his life.

The child who could never stop moving returned to classes, first at high school, then at a boarding school, and eventually at the University of New Hampshire. However, his real education began when he took part in a field study of spotted owls in Yosemite National Park. Ronan worked as a wildlife biologist and later became interested in photography. He gained this interest while working in Uganda with chimpanzees and in Rwanda with mountain gorillas. Ronan came to realize that when he was engaged in photographing nature, his ADHD "was a superpower."

In 2014–2015, he photographed the wolves of Yellowstone National Park for National Geographic. Ronan learned of the challenges associated with large landscape conservation. While working in the field with wildlife biologists, his appreciation of wolves and other mammals in the park grew.

Ronan mentioned how Yellowstone's original boundaries were set up to protect geothermal features. The natural ranges of animals were not considered. Most of the large mammals leave the park in the winter months. He showed a map of the historic range of wolves in North America. A horizontal dotted line, halfway up Canada, showed how far north the wolves were hunted and trapped. Pictures of wolf and coyote skins and an enormous mound of bison skulls illustrated how settlers eradicated native species at an alarming rate.

In the more recent past, the importance of keystone species, including wolves, has become more apparent. Ronan showed an illustration of habitat near a stream, before and after they reintroduced wolves to Yellowstone. In the first picture, elk are common, and they have browsed the plant life near the water to bare stubs. In the second picture, wolves and other predators control the number of deer and elk, and thick vegetation borders the stream. Conserving keystone species increases biodiversity.

Ronan spoke more about his experiences with wolves in the Arctic. In the isolated locations where he worked, the wolves showed no fear of people. He showed a short video of himself on his back on a sleeping pad. A curious wolf tries to steal the pad he's resting on.

Ronan shared a picture of another wolf, who he nicknamed Bright Eyes. She was an older female who lived near the pack, long past the age most wolves tend to. She cared for the pack's pups with the wisdom gained through a long life.

He read a couple of excerpts from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. In Indigenous culture, humans are the "younger brothers of creation" and not something that dominates wildlife. They believe we must look to the other species for guidance. He read another excerpt about "species loneliness," where people don't know the names of plants and animals around them. Sadly, Ronan noted, many today lack a relationship with the natural world.

After his talk, several audience members asked questions. When asked what predators went after wolves, Ronan answered mostly other wolves. In Yellowstone, cougar and bear occasionally prey on wolves, and in the Arctic, polar bears prey on them. He noted how musk ox form lines or circle "rosettes" to protect the herd from wolves and other predators.

Ronan said wolves are only successful at hunting 10%–15% of the time. Besides this low success rate, 15% of wolf deaths are caused by their prey. In Yellowstone, elk are their main prey species.

There was a question about the color of the wolf's coat. In the Arctic, wolves, weasels, snowy owls, gyrfalcons, and hares have white coats or plumage for at least part of the year. Black wolves in Yellowstone and other areas are the result of wolves interbreeding with domestic dogs many years ago. Ronan said black wolves are less aggressive. They can be healthier overall, like dog mutts. He noted how his own mutt was waiting patiently in the car for him. He reminded people there are 90 million pet dogs in the United States, and they're closely related to wolves.

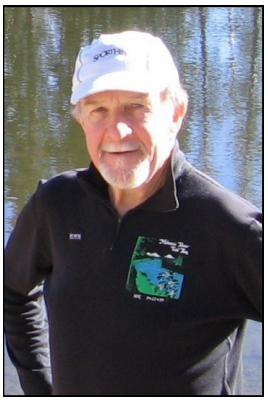
Another audience member asked about Ronan's experiences regarding ranchers and wolves. He said 6–10 sheep and cattle are preyed upon by wolves every year in Oregon. A younger rancher told Ronan you shouldn't manage livestock how it was done in the past. Ranchers could reduce predation risks by using herders and trained dogs. Ronan said grazing livestock in the High Desert and the Rocky Mountains is difficult compared to more lush habitats.

Ronan estimated the number of wolves in Oregon to be in the 170s. He said there were a lot of poaching incidents, including the poisoning of an entire pack. To help support wolves and other wildlife, Ronan reminded people to vote for people who believe in conservation. Ronan received a big round of applause from the packed house, and the crowd filled the gallery to see his remarkable work.

Photos by Todd Cary & Bill Jorgens

Natural History Pub: Experimental Science at the H.J. Andrews

by Tom McGibbon, Newsletter Writer



OSU Press photo

The High Desert Museum Natural History Pub series was pleased to welcome Professor William (Bill) Robbins as its featured October speaker. Robbins, an award-winning and prolific writer of Pacific Northwest natural history, presented to a large, attentive audience at McMenamins St. Francis School in Bend. He was welcomed and lauded by Hayley Brazier, High Desert Museum Curator of Natural History, who originated the popular Natural History Pub talk series.

A career-long historian and Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Oregon State University, Professor Robbins focused his talk on the history of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, which he wrote about in his 2020 book, *A Place for Inquiry, A Place for Wonder: The Andrews Forest.* He also provided a pictorial update on the recent Lookout Fire, which burned sporadically across an estimated 70% of the Andrews Forest.

Professor Robbins' talk began with an overview of the H.J. Andrews Forest. It is a 15,800-acre reserve, near the town of Blue River, in the Lookout Creek drainage on the McKenzie River headwaters, forty miles north-northeast of the High Desert Museum. It was initially designated as the Blue River Experimental Forest (BREF) in 1948. Its name was changed in 1953 to honor H.J. Andrews, a United States Forest Service (USFS) Chief Forester and research advocate directly involved in the experimental forest formation and site selection.

Wikimedia commons photo of Lookout Creek

Since its creation, it has been on the leading edge of forest and watershed ecosystems scientific research. Oregon State University has, with a dozen other schools participating, driven research projects at Andrews Forest through their Schools of Forestry and PhD programs. Recently, Andrews Forest has become host to the humanities as well, with resident artists and writers chronicling its wonders.

Professor Robbins went on to discuss that the early purpose and uses of the Andrews Forest often spawned debate between the USFS and early researchers. For instance, a key Forest Service goal, driven by the post WWII building boom, was to cut Andrews Forest timber in the experimental area and throughout the larger Willamette National Forest. They expected research to focus on issues promoting that monolithic goal. One early researcher, Roy Silen, was mandated to lay out 20 million board feet of cuts per year in the then pristine wilderness, prior to focusing on his research activity. Silen subsequently referred to the BREF as a "chopped up place."

Eventually, however, key field research observations slowly led to changes in USFS timber harvest policies. Professor Robbins noted several, such as erosion and landslides caused by poorly sited roads *and* the practice of clearing streams of logging debris that adversely impacted water temperatures, water clarity, and subsequently, aquatic life.

Wikimedia commons photo of Christmas floods

The rampaging 1964 Christmas Floods yielded invaluable information when three small, monitored watersheds were unevenly ravaged by debris flow, massive erosion, or sedimentation, depending on the style and extent of timber harvesting that had been done within them. Professor Robbins noted that this event, coming on the heels of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring,* helped trigger contemporary environmental awareness and began a societal shift from industrialization of forest resources to conservation within the Andrews Forest and beyond.

Meanwhile, in contrast to this environmental awakening, western politicians, to appease logging interests, overturned protections established in the earliest days of national forest

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service photo

formations to perpetuate the USFS widespread harvest quotas and clear-cutting practices.

The National Science Foundation increased its presence and financial support over the years for Andrews Forest research. In 1980, Andrews Forest was designated a charter member of the Long-Term Ecological Research program to address ecosystem questions that could not be resolved with short-term experiments and observation. Environmental organizations, armed with data from Andrews Forest research, took to the courts. Old-growth forests, formerly dismissed as decadent and diseased, were studied and their importance to species habitat and carbon sequestration became understood. This, along with the 1973 Endangered Species Act and the conservation concerns about the Northern Spotted Owl, armed environmental groups with the knowledge and laws needed to challenge and stem the unabated harvesting practices of the USFS.

Modern Andrews Forest research, regional and international, has focused on biodiversity, interdependence of ecosystems, climate change, disturbance events, and the importance of aesthetics to the human spirit.

A lively Q&A session followed Professor Robbins' talk. When queried about where he thought research and policies were going, the professor drew laughter from the audience when he offered "… one thing that I've learned is that historians should not be predicting the future." He noted the necessity for climate change research, given the increases in frequency and intensity of wildfires, and he cited the greater than 600% increase in the incidence of fires in recent years in the Andrews Forest area alone.

Professor Robbins accentuated the evening presentation with slides, diagrams, maps, quotes, serious and funny anecdotes, personal observations, and recognition of other Andrews Forest notables such as Ted Dyrness and Jerry Franklin. His personal love and appreciation of the Andrews Forest sparkled throughout his talk as he guided an appreciative audience through an evolving history of the formation, research, industrialization, politicization, and environmentalism centered on Oregon's uniquely important and ancient H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest.

U.S. Forest Service photo

High Desert Voices

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HIGH DESERT MUSEUM

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2023 December 2023

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4	**Natural History Pub:** *Can we have our cake and eat it too? Conserving nature in the age of humans.* 7:00–8:00 pm. Doors open at 5:30 pm. Free. McMenamins Old St Francis School, 700 NW Bond St., Bend. RSVP here.
7	**Museum Event:** *Winter Nights: Welcome to Winter.* 4:00 –7:30 pm. Adults $10, ages 3–12 $6, ages 3 and under free. Free admission for members. Get tickets here.
8	**Exclusive Member's Event:** *From Warhol to Whitebark Pine.* 6:00–8:00 pm. Doors open at 5:30 pm, talk at 6:00 pm. Hors d'oeuvres, no-host bar. Members free, Member guests $5. Waiting list registration here.
9	**Exhibition opening:** *Andy Warhol's Endangered Species.*
14	**Museum Event:** *Winter Nights: College Night.* 4:00–7:30 pm. Adults $10, ages 3–12 $6, ages 3 and under free. Free admission for members. Get tickets here.
21	**Museum Event:** *Winter Nights: Exploring Endangered Species.*4:00–7:30 pm. Adults $10, ages 3–12 $6, ages 3 and under free. Free admission for members. Get tickets here.
25	**Museum Closed. Happy Holidays!**
28	**Museum Event:** *Winter Nights: By the Fireside.*4:00–7:30 pm. Adults $10, ages 3–12 $6, ages 3 and under free. Free admission for members. Get tickets here.
	To RSVP or register, click the link next to the event description or call 541-382-4754.