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NOVEMBER 2020

Unified Regions 5/7 Priority Projects

Species Conservation & Management

Pam Sponholtz, Dana Shellhorn, and Cole Brittain lead a sampling effort to determine population parameters of the Rio Grande sucker and chub on the Baca National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. The U.S Fish & Wildlife teamed up with Colorado Parks & Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. National Parks Service in one of the largest sampling efforts to date on the Baca NWR in order to understand how two fish species are interacting with their unique environment. Using trap nets and electrofishing surveys they captured 3,110 Rio Grande suckers and chubs and deployed 1,700 new PIT tags for an ongoing movement study.



(Left) Pam Sponholtz empties a trap net and (right) Cole Brittain holds a Rio Grande sucker during fish surveys at the Baca NWR.



Melissa Whittingslow continues to guide selected elk hunters on the US Air Force Academy (USAFA). Three hunters filled their tags in November. USAFA Natural Resources uses hunting to effectively manage the elk population, protect habitat, and minimize elk-vehicle accidents. Melissa also submitted samples from deer roadkill and elk harvested on USAFA to Colorado Parks and Wildlife for Chronic Wasting Disease testing.

Alex Schubert reviewed trail cameras strategically placed in the northern grassland portions of base to document the presence of swift fox at F.E. Warren AFB, a Wyoming Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Trail cam photos revealed that the species is present on the base.



Swift Fox captured on a game camera at F.E. Warren AFB.

Chris Kennedy assessed fish populations in the Big Thompson River in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) following a fish kill caused by the East Troublesome Wildfire. The RMNP fire crew observed thousands of dead fish in late October. A preliminary visual survey was conducted followed by a detailed electrofishing survey. Very few fish were observed at the most upstream extent of these surveys; but affects of the fire were less severe at downstream sites. Fish samples were collected and shipped to the USFWS Bozeman Fish Health Center for necropsies.

Leadership in Science and Technology

Mike Jungen attended a restoration webinar titled: Be a beaver: Using beaver dam analogs (BDAs) to restore incised meadow systems. He is currently looking into using this method at McConnell AFB.

Partnerships and Accountability

- Katy Fitzgerald is working with Peterson Natural Resource Biologist, David Kelly and CPW April Estep to establish Peterson AFB as a survey location for regional 2021 black rail surveys, a species which only occurs in five counties in Colorado.
- Brian Mihlbachler evaluated the current condition of Monument Creek and several eastern tributaries with staff from the City's Stormwater Enterprise. This is the first step in implementing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Intergovernmental Service Agreement with the city to address mitigating the off-base stormwater impacts to the USAFA riparian areas and Preble's meadow jumping mouse habitat.
- Chris Kennedy joined the virtual Greenback Cutthroat Trout Recovery Team Meeting, where he gave two talks; one on activities related to developing a broodstock of greenback cutthroat trout at the Leadville National Fish Hatchery and another on a greenback cutthroat trout restoration project on Ouzel Creek in RMNP.
- Dustin Casady reviewed the bat (Chiroptera) surveys for Midwest AFCEC Installations including Buckley Air Force Base (BAFB). Nine species of Chiroptera were detected on BAFB during the survey, none of which are listed or proposed to be listed under the ESA. Only two of these species were previously identified on BAFB.



From left to right: Sunset over the Baca NWR (photo by Dana Shellhorn). Pronghorn grazing on F.E. Warren AFB (photo by Alex Schubert). Sixteen foot windblown White Fir tree removed by USAFA foresters (photo by Joe Murphy).

Habitat Conservation & Management

- Joe Murphy met with the Wildland Fire Support Module to review an upcoming mastication unit on the USAFA. The North Section of the Western Boundary Fuels Treatment began operations in November. The focus for this project will be to mitigate a selection of fuels by utilizing hand treatments or mastication with a tracked or wheeled machine. Removing these mid and understory fuels will help preventing a crown driven wildfire from threatening the USAFA Cadet area. The 174 acre unit also includes an 80 acre prescribed fire unit.
- Bryan Wilfong delineated in the field via flagging and mapped via GPS the boundaries of a 90 hectare forest parcel at USAFA for an overstory thinning operation (OTO) to commence in December of 2020. He began marking new trees to cull based on health, and remarking any trees were previously marked.
- Iowa Conservation Corps visited McConnell AFB for the third and final time at the beginning of November. During this visit, the Corps dug up the rhizomes of Johnson Grass in priority areas to expose the rhizomes to frost and kill the invasive plants.

Invasive Johnson Grass at McConnell AFB over the summer.

