

## WHO/WHERE WE ARE

**Lakewood, CO:** Pam Sponholtz, Project Leader; JoAnn Wise, Budget Admin

**Buckley Air Force Base, Aurora, CO:** Krystal Phillips, Wildlife Biologist, Dustin Casady, Fish and Wildlife Biologist

**Peterson, Schriever, Cheyenne Mtn Air Force Bases, Colorado Springs, CO:** Max Canestorp, Wildlife Biologist

**US Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO:** Brian Mihlbachler, Biological Scientist; Diane Strohm, Biological Scientist; James Donahey, Forester; Melissa Whittingslow, Wildlife Biologist

**Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park, CO:** Chris Kennedy, Fish Biologist

**Warren Air Force Base, Cheyenne, WY:** Alex Schubert, Fish and Wildlife Biologist

**McConnell Air Force Base, Wichita, KS:** Laura Mendenhall, Fish and Wildlife Biologist

**Pueblo Chemical Depot, Pueblo, CO:** Clark Jones, Wildlife Biologist

# Colorado Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office



MARCH 2016

## Habitat Conservation and Management

*Forest Health Reconnaissance at Cheyenne Mountain AFS.* Max Canestorp and Diane Strohm spent a day examining numerous dying trees at CMAFS. Several pines had died of Ips and twig beetles. Max Canestorp felled a heavily infested tree, affording an excellent opportunity to examine beetle infestation across the entire tree. This is the most effective method of learning the signature of infested trees, especially difficult to judge when beetles are present only in the upper portions. Max will wrap the infested trunk sections with plastic to solarize the developing brood, and chip the slash to annihilate Ips and twig beetles in the upper bole and tree canopy. This is important to minimizing spread to nearby trees.

*Stream Habitat Measurement Techniques.* Chris Kennedy took a week-long class entitled Stream Habitat Measurement Techniques at the National Conservation Training Center. This field-intensive course provided skills to carry out commonly used stream physical habitat measurements required for determining regional setting, watershed attributes and stream size, longitudinal and cross-sectional profiles, channel dimension, pattern and profile, substrate characterization, mesohabitat identification, discharge and hydrology, velocity, depth, instream cover, riparian cover, and bank condition. The scale of instream habitat attributes addressed encompasses the macro-, meso-, and micro-habitat levels. Techniques learned will be used this summer in the Big Thompson and West Creek watersheds.

*Riparian Buffers.* Laura Mendenhall used a GPS to mark sign locations for riparian buffers. Mendenhall will oversee a Boy Scout working to get his Eagle Scout rank by installing the marker signs and informational signs in designated locations. The



**Max Canestorp fells an infested pine to provide a living laboratory to examine damage.**

Boy Scout will use land navigation skills to locate the coordinates for each sign location before installing the sign. The signs will help the grounds maintenance crew better visualize where they can stop mowing. The Boy Scout will also research the purpose behind allowing riparian vegetation to grow and compile information to be included on two educational signs.

*Beaver Dams at FE Warren AFB.* Alex Schubert and FE Warren AFB personnel inspected some sites along Crow Creek that were flooded. These sites may have been impacted by beaver dam-building activity as well as spring runoff. They observed areas where the hiking trail was flooded. Beaver lodges were observed, as well as what appeared to be recently cut trees indicating that the riparian area contained busy beavers. On-going coordination with the base's pest management group will seek to find a reasonable means for coping with the beaver activity. This could involve (1) trapping and relocating beavers, (2) removal of beaver dams, (3) painting tree trunks, or (4) other methods. Alex

coordinated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They indicated that no permit is needed to remove beaver dams from the creek, by hand.

*USAFA Creeks.* Brian Mihlbachler conducted a site walk of Black Forest Creek to help potential contractors develop preliminary design concepts and bids for stream stabilization and habitat restoration. The work will be performed in Fall/Winter 2016. Brian has also been working with the Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands (CEMML) at Colorado State University to finalize the site restoration and stabilization plans for completing the Monument Creek channel stabilization project.

*Partners Program Strategic Planning:* Pam Sponholtz and Krystal Phillips attended the Region 6 Partners for Fish and Wildlife program strategic planning meeting. Topics discussed included focus areas, species and partnership opportunities.

# Species Conservation and Management

*Burrowing Owls on the move!* Two burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*) fitted with satellite transmitters last June at Pueblo Chemical Depot began their northward migration in March. After spending the winter in Chihuahua State, Mexico, Burrowing Owl #120430 began moving north on March 28, and remained in the Big Bend region of Texas through the end of the month. Burrowing Owl #120431 departed its wintering location near Mexico City several weeks earlier on March 4, and stopped over near Lubbock, TX very close to its previous stopover location during fall migration. This project is part of a partnership with the University of Idaho USGS Cooperative Research Unit to better understand the causes of population declines of burrowing owls.

*Fish Stocking.* Following recommendations outlined in the 2015 pond fisheries survey results, McConnell AFB stocked largemouth bass, channel catfish, and hybrid bluegill in two recreational ponds. Laura Mendenhall will survey the ponds again in 2-4 years to assess fish species composition and abundance, but will track fishing yields in the interim using creel survey forms and Floy tags. Mendenhall is coordinating with another Boy Scout troop to help catch, weigh, measure, tag, and release Largemouth Bass from one of the ponds. Mendenhall will also teach the Scouts how to set and check hoop net traps. The Scouts will help her set nets on base before camping out for one night and helping check nets the following morning.

*USAFA Deer and Elk Hunts.* On March 8<sup>th</sup> Melissa Wittingslow and Brian Mhlbachler met with Colorado Parks and Wildlife's wildlife biologist to discuss the analyzed data from the deer/ Elk survey conducted on the US Air Force Academy. The documents showed that the Academy's elk and deer populations are able to sustain the 2016 deer and elk hunts.

*Pronghorn Antelope Survey.* Alex Shubert and Dustin Casady conducted an antelope survey on F.E. Warren Air Force Base. The antelope numbers are down significantly compared to counts done the prior fall. The cause for the drop in population is unknown and many dead carcasses have been found across base throughout the winter. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services personnel will be looking for fresh carcasses to be tested for disease and will continue to monitor the population.

#### **Stocking ponds for recreational fishing at McConnell AFB.**



*Mountain plovers arrive at Pueblo Chemical Depot.* For the second year in a row, Pueblo Chemical Depot was the first spring arrival

#### **Mountain Plover at Pueblo Chemical Depot.**



location for Mountain Plovers in the state of Colorado. This year's sighting came on March 14, which was a day earlier than the 2015 arrival date. This date was the earliest arrival date for Mountain Plover ever documented in Colorado. Colorado hosts the majority of the breeding, continental population of Mountain Plovers, but their numbers have declined by 3% or more per year since the 1960s.

*Prairie dog surveys.* Max Canestorp surveyed Schriever AFB for prairie dogs in control zones. These areas were subject to prairie dog control last year; no prairie dogs were observed in the area during March surveys.

*Cutthroat Trout.* Chris Kennedy assembled and updated Colorado River Cutthroat Trout range-wide database with data from Rocky Mountain National Park. Each fish biologist in the States of Colorado, Wyoming and Utah inputs data into the database for the populations that they manage and the information is used to generate status assessments on recovery effort for the sub-species.

**Check out the current locations of the Pueblo Chemical Depot Burrowing Owls at**

**[http://hallgis.com/projects/PTT\\_test.html](http://hallgis.com/projects/PTT_test.html).**

# Partnerships and Accountability

*Air Force Environmental Management – Cross Functional Team Aspect Inventory.* The Air Force has established an Environmental Management System (EMS) as the framework for process improvement through clearly defined environmental roles and responsibilities, planning requirements, budgeting, effective implementation and operation, and management review. Krystal teamed with Buckley Air Force Base (BAFB) EMS Program Manager to identify and determine past, present, or potential natural resource aspects and impacts (positive or negative) affected by Buckley's operational processes. Krystal's participation allowed for BAFB to remain up to date and in compliance with the Air Force's monitoring and measurement of environmental performance.

*Wildland Fire Center Fuels Module.* James Donahey and Diane Strohm met with Shelly Crook and two members of the

Wildland Fire Module, expected to start at the Academy in April. They received an orientation to the Academy, viewing their crew facilities in Jack Valley. The module will be available to assist with prescribed burning, fuel hazard reduction and wildfire suppression on numerous installations across the Midwest region of the Wildland Fire Center, but will be based out of the Academy this season.

*Kansas GIS.* Laura Mendenhall attended the 2016 Kansas GIS Technical Meeting in Salina, Kansas. The meeting was a great opportunity to connect with Kansas GIS technicians and share data. Mendenhall learned about the WAFWA Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT), LiDAR data for Sedgwick County, a USFWS web map showing impediments to fish passage (<https://ecos.fws.gov/geofin/>), and a new Kansas Forest web map that helps users choose the right tree plantings for

different soil types. After exploration of some of these new data sources, Mendenhall learned that McConnell AFB contains part of a polygon ranked "most critical" for conservation using the WAFWA CHAT. Mendenhall will utilize some of this

new data in the 2016 McConnell AFB INRMP update.

*Drill Seeder.* Dustin Casady worked with William Kutosky from the Rocky Mountain Arse-



Dustin Casady and a drill seeder.

nal National Wildlife Refuge to complete training on the calibration and use of a drill seeder. Dustin calibrated a drill seeder to deliver eight pounds of seed per acre and seeded approximately 80 acres. The low rate of seed was desired to interseed into a previously seeded area.

*Colorado/Wyoming American Fisheries Society Meeting.* Chris Kennedy prepared and gave talk entitled "History of the Fisheries of Rocky Mountain National Park" and Pam Sponholtz presented information in talk titled "Improving Rio Grande Sucker and Chub habitat on Baca National Wildlife Refuge in Laramie, WY."

*Report submitted to Rocky Mountain National Park:* Chris Kennedy, Pam Sponholtz and Katy Fitzgerald from the Partners Program submitted a summary of fish and habitat information in the Big Thompson Watershed examining the effects of fire and flooding on fish populations.

## Black-footed Ferret

Alex Schubert prepared a draft black-footed ferret pre-conditioning facility management plan. F. E. Warren AFB has played an important role in the reintroduction process to reestablish the black-footed ferret in the prairie and sagebrush ecosystems that this species once inhabited. Through trial and error, researchers found that ferrets that were "pre-conditioned," habituated by living around prairie dog towns in captivity, fared three times better when released into the wild than ferrets released without exposure to live prairie dogs. Using money bestowed through the Department of Defense's Legacy Fund, F.E. Warren AFB was able to build a pre-release conditioning facility for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's

(USFWS) National Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program.

This facility has been used as a 'half-way house' for ferrets raised in captivity. Healthy prairie dogs have been released into pens in the facility on F. E. Warren AFB to establish colonies. Once the prairie dogs have been established in the facility, young black-footed ferrets are housed with the prairie dogs to expose them to life with and around prairie dogs. These pens simulate their wild environment while not subjecting the ferrets to the real-life dangers of predators and disease. After the pre-conditioning phase is complete, the young ferrets are then trapped from the pens and taken to one of several wild release sites in various western States.

The pre-conditioning facility at F. E. Warren AFB has not been used in several years. However, at this time with the placement of a USFWS natural resources manager on the base, the USFWS and the F. E. Warren AFB have the opportunity to resume activities at the pre-conditioning facility for captive-bred ferrets. The pre-conditioning facility can house up to six family groups at one time. The USFWS proposes to transport ferrets to the facility where they would remain for up to 90 days. During the pre-conditioning period, ferrets will be housed in the outdoor enclosures where they will learn to hunt and eat prairie dogs. Prairie dogs to be used at the facility will be imported from trapping and breeding programs.