

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WILDLIFE IN THE WINTER OF 77

America's wildlife populations are enduring no less severe a winter than its human populations, a current survey of regional biologists of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows.

The winter of 77 poignantly dramatizes the Darwinian theory of natural selection. Starvation, ice, disease, and die-offs abound in bitter cold sections of the Nation; while warmth, drought, and no snow create equally unique and opposite effects in other sections. In sum, it's a cockamamie year. There's no way to label it, either. Biologists all stress that winters like this have a favorable and unfavorable impact. You can't make a subjective judgement. It's nature.

Bears in the Anchorage, Alaska, Zoo refused to hibernate this winter because of the warmth. In the Alaskan wild their uncaged cousins are being stirred out of hibernation months early by thaw conditions. They're on the prowl, hungry, and without an adequate food source. Some biologists fear this may draw them to villages. Wet snow and avalanches have driven moose to lowland areas but there's ample browse for them because of the mild rainy weather. Trophy rainbow trout are migrating further inland than ever before noted. The significance is unknown at present. Inland and coastal wind pattern changes promise different erosion and ice flow--a development that will affect millions of sea and shore bird nesting populations in the late spring. Which way, a present, is unknown. The mild winter insures higher calf and cow survival among elk and caribou herds, thus the wolf pack will likely increase. An 11th hour appearance of winter in Alaska could ambush the disrupted wildlife and biologists there are holding their breaths and crossing their fingers.

Waterfowl across the Nation are being blindsided and bullied about by a fickle nature that has produced drought and warmth in the Pacific Northwest, bitter cold in the Midwest, and starvation-causing ice in the East. The result, mainly, is a crowding into the far Southeast and Southwest by the smart and healthy birds. The sick and tradition-bound are dying. Lead poisoning is killing more than the normally high number along the Atlantic Flyway, particularly in Delaware where ice chokes wetlands and mudflats--driving birds to wind-blown cornfields and likely disaster because corn and lead produce a fatal combination in waterfowl digestive tracts. Well-meaning feeders of birds are encouraged to contact State or Federal officials for recipes. The two winter oil spills--off Cape Cod and in the Delaware River--oddly enough, benefitted waterfowl to the extent that they nudged many birds out of the two areas before the deep freeze stunned the East Coast. On the Pacific Coast the drought has reduced surface water by a third, crowding ducks and geese under enough

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stress to trigger cholera and botulism outbreaks in California and elsewhere. Pothole breeding country in the upper plains, lacking snow cover, doubtless will detract from next summer's breeding.

Game birds are taking it on the chin in the ice and snow areas. The tail feathers of male pheasants freeze to the ground and they starve. Fine blown snow clogs the nasal passages of quail and grouse and suffocates them, and ice too thick to chip coats their food.

Deer herds are being winnowed by belly deep snow, razor-sharp crust ice, and suburban and farm dogs with energy to burn. Frostbite will nip the ears of possums and other small mammals in the relatively mild areas of the lower Ohio Valley.

The drought in the Pacific Northwest is subverting steelhead and salmon spawning. They can't migrate upstream because of low water and are crowding the river mouths. Three years from now the impact will be dramatic when their adult year class is due to return from the ocean phase of their life. Game fish in the Great Lakes and midwest rivers are dying of oxygen starvation from snow covered ice which blocks photosynthesis. Natural aquatic competition will follow, ultimately creating a healthy balance after a fierce see-saw species adjustment of a year or two. In some iced up areas a quick spring thaw or bottom anchor ice may scour trout redds--egg deposits laid down last autumn--and kill or disturb the eggs of insects on which trout feed. Fish in the deep lakes of New England are unaffected.

Deep ground frost is locking up aquifers, encroaching on normally secure and dormant insects, and doubtless will be seen to affect songbird distribution this spring. Which way, again, can't be told at present. It'll be a busy and interesting year for birders. Eagles, hawks, and other raptors have been shouldered south along the cutting edge of the frigid jetstream boring down the midwest from the arctic.

A noted Ohio Valley naturalist once wrote: "Wildlife faces an energy crisis every winter, yet they manage to cope. The strong survive and the species adapts." There's really very little that man could or should do under stress periods like the winter of 77, most biologists assert. Supplemental feeding helps soothe the human conscience, but it also makes creatures a little less wild and free, some scientists claim. The severe winter is in no way of man's making, so scientific concern is toward witnessing the event and recording its impact with involvement limited to cases of extreme need. Supplemental feeding was initiated in New Jersey primarily for Atlantic brant, a species of small sea goose whose numbers are low and whose migration pattern is rigid. The deep freeze on the Atlantic Coast reaches as far south as the Carolinas, and the brant could not reach warmer climes because of the non-availability of food enroute.

Virtually all biologists contacted in the survey expect the winter of 77 to have an impact on next year's hunting, fishing, and birdwatching. None, however, are ready to make predictions or assign a subjective "good-bad" label to the winter's fury.