

National Elk Refuge News

Second Refuge Curlew Receives a Transmitter – June 9, 2015



Researchers lay a mist net over a nesting curlew in order to capture the bird and fit it with a satellite transmitter. Mist nets are commonly used to capture birds for banding or other research projects.

What's good for the goose is good for the gander – but what if the bird in question is a curlew?

Late last month, a male long-billed curlew received the same hardware as his female partner: a satellite transmitter that will track his movements over the next year and provide researchers with valuable data on migration and breeding patterns of the unique bird species.

Just over a year ago, National Elk Refuge and Wyoming Game & Fish Department biologists assisted Boise, Idaho-based Intermountain Bird Observatory staff in capturing a nesting

female curlew on the National Elk Refuge. The bird, identified as “AJ,” was fitted with a transmitter and then released. With the new technology in place, researchers were able to document that she hatched her eggs shortly thereafter, then migrated south for the remainder of the year. Typical of the species, she left the young with her mate to raise. By early July, she had landed approximately 100 miles south of Mazatlan where she spent the winter, staying within a 10-mile radius through late March before beginning her trek back north.

AJ returned to the National

Elk Refuge this spring, again establishing a nest to raise another brood. Her return route varied from her trip south last spring, with both trips documented through satellite-derived location data.

AJ's story sparked renewed interest in the species, which breeds in grasslands of the Great Plains and Great Basin. Now, AJ is no longer the lone Wyoming long-billed curlew with a satellite transmitter. Seven additional Wyoming curlews were fitted with similar technology last month, including one more from the National Elk Refuge. Whereas AJ's transmitter was paid for



Before fitting the curlew with his transmitter, researchers recorded data about the bird.

by a local nonprofit organization, the Meg and Bert Raynes Fund, her tracking success helped draw in funds from additional sources. The Bureau of Land Management, Wyoming Game & Fish Department, and the Wyoming Governor’s Big Game License Coalition joined the nonprofit in offering up funding for expansion of the study.

This year’s work on the National Elk Refuge was especially exciting for the researchers when they realized they had the potential to capture AJ’s mate. Because AJ was nesting approximately one kilometer southwest of last year’s nest, project lead Jay Carlisle suspected she may have a different male partner than last year. “Males keep very similar territories,” he explained, “often returning to the exact location each year.”

On May 29, the team of biologists spotted a curlew with an antenna leaving a nest, visually confirming the individual bird they were

watching was AJ. Male curlews incubate the eggs at night, so the researchers waited until that evening to trail a mist net over the area in hopes of capturing her mate. A thunderstorm threw a wrench in their plans, and a heavy fog the following morning further delayed their quest.

Finally, two nights later, the team had another chance at netting the bird. “By then, my nerves were frayed,” Carlisle described. “Given the sample size of the curlews, this was a huge opportunity we didn’t want to miss.” The mission

successfully came to fruition later that evening.

With AJ’s male partner now also fitted with a transmitter, biologists will gain insight into whether or not curlew pairs winter together or if they breed with the same mate year after year.

The successful capture was documented on film by Jennifer Tennican of JenTen Productions. Tennican is producing a documentary about local conservation icon Bert Raynes. Raynes has a long history of inspiring the people of the Jackson Hole valley to observe and care about their wild neighbors. After founding the Jackson Hole Bird Club in 1976, he began writing a weekly nature-based column for the *Jackson Hole News & Guide* that has been read by lovers of nature for more than three decades.

In addition to Bert’s personality and love of nature, the film will feature conservation projects such as this one that the Meg and Bert Raynes Fund has helped to fund in the area.



With the bird’s head covered to reduce stress while being handled, Jay Carlisle attaches a satellite transmitter to a male curlew.