

Wildlife Under the Big Sky

2013

Spring Issue

A Multi-Agency News Update Featuring:

- ◆ Bureau of Land Management (BLM) — Central Montana District - 406/538-1900
- ◆ Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP) - 406/444-5354
- ◆ Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) - 406/538-4658
- ◆ Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) - 406/538-7401 (Lewistown) or 406/429-6646 (Winnett)
- ◆ US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)—Charles M. Russell (CMR) National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) - 406/538-8706

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GREETINGS

Welcome to the first edition of the Central Montana wildlife newsletter, "Wildlife Under the Big Sky." Four public land or wildlife management agencies and a natural resource data repository (listed at left) have collaborated to provide you with updated news and information. It is our hope to produce spring and fall issues annually. Please contact the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Lewistown Field Office (LFO) at 406/538-1900 or email BLM_MT_Lewistown_FO@blm.gov with suggestions to improve this newsletter to be most beneficial to you. This and future electronic editions can be found at http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/lewisstown_field_office.html.

MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS MOUNTAIN LION STUDY

The Chippewa Cree Tribal Wildlife Program and World Wildlife Fund began a study of mountain lions in the Bears Paw and Little Rocky Mountains in 2006 to examine cougar population dynamics, habitat use and large carnivore conservation within a multi-jurisdictional setting. In 2010, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in cooperation with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), expanded this study to include portions of the Missouri River Breaks (MRB) and the Charles M. Russell (CMR) National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Objectives are to improve understanding of lion movements and ecology in a portion of Montana not previously studied, estimate survival rates, collect information needed by CMR to consider development of a hunt package and provide data for ongoing statewide population modeling work.

Ten lions have been collared to date on CMR: two were legally harvested off the Refuge, one died, likely a non-target trap-related mortality, and one's fate is unknown. Four are still being monitored and two are presumed alive, but have dropped-off collars. A 2.5-year-old litter consisting of two males and one female were collared during the winter of 2012-13. From last December through mid-February, they all travelled together. During late February, the

males separated with one of them dispersing east of UL Bend. The crew still hopes to deploy three more collars this year.

Thus far, data from collared lions indicates they regularly use timbered habitats, but also make regular excursions into open areas and frequently cross the Missouri River. Individual lions spent 50-100 percent of their time on the CMR. One lion moved approximately 230 miles east of its capture location before being harvested in North Dakota. Previous studies have documented



landscapes and extensive migrations for pronghorn and

sage grouse; this study has found the same for mountain lions. Understanding the importance of inter-connected and large-scale habitats for a variety of wildlife will improve wildlife management in the working landscapes of eastern Montana.

SAGE-GROUSE LEK MONITORING RESULTS

Sage-grouse numbers have been tracked in Central Montana since the early 1950's, with much greater effort beginning in 1999. This increased effort included MFWP, BLM or volunteer visits three times annually between mid-March and early May to each of the 17 Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) leks to monitor trends and help set harvest limits and seasons. Much of the habitat has remained intact with limited recent sodbusting for agricultural conversion, limited oil and gas production and no large fires. Male lek counts fluctuated in large part from weather conditions until 2003 when West Nile virus (WNV) first appeared in Montana. Sage-grouse have a high mortality rate once infected with WNV and the Central Montana sage-grouse population has been lower, in general, since WNV first appeared in the state. Sage-grouse lek counts reached lows in 2011 mainly attributed to a cold, wet spring and

long winter in 2010. Despite another wet spring in 2011, 2012 counts were up 20 percent from the previous year. Even with the improvement in 2012, numbers are down nearly 60 percent compared with the high AHM lek counts in 2000. Spring 2013 counts will be completed again from March through May by BLM, MFWP and volunteers.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR CATTLE IS GENERALLY GOOD FOR GROUSE



Sage-grouse and livestock grazing; are there mutual interests? Media reports and conversations at coffee shops often accentuate differences on issues such as sage-grouse and livestock grazing. Human nature seems to find differences more emotionally riveting while topics of mutual interest go unsaid or are lost to attention grabbing headlines. Sage-grouse and livestock grazing is one of those attention grabbing issues. Below are some points of mutual interest that you may not have heard in the headlines:

Things that Benefit Sage-grouse and Livestock:

- ◆ Healthy, sustainable range
- ◆ Rangeland plant diversity
- ◆ A well-designed grazing plan
- ◆ A healthy forb component
- ◆ Weed and invasive species management
- ◆ Appropriate range management of encroaching conifers (juniper, ponderosa pine)
- ◆ Healthy, productive springs and seeps
- ◆ Unfragmented working rangelands
- ◆ Productive sagebrush grasslands with a healthy native perennial grass understory
- ◆ Healthy wildlife populations



Things that are Negatives for Sage-grouse and Livestock:

- ◆ Overgrazing by livestock or wildlife
- ◆ Urbanization
- ◆ Infrastructure developments and other disturbances such as roads that fragment the range and spread weeds
- ◆ Sagebrush habitat dominated by club moss or blue grama
- ◆ Stock water tanks that drown wildlife and foul stock water

APPLIED FIRE ECOLOGY

Why do public land managers burn areas intentionally? There are many reasons, some of which depend on who manages the land and the location being burned. The BLM has conducted a prescribed burning program on the lands they manage in the Missouri Breaks region for over a decade with the goals to:

- ◆ Reduce conifer encroachment
- ◆ Improve distribution and the ecosystem health for wildlife species
- ◆ Rejuvenate desired hardwoods
- ◆ Decrease fire fuel loads
- ◆ Increase riparian health



The Missouri Breaks region supports a mosaic of mixed-grassland, upland shrub communities and coniferous forests dominated by ponderosa pine. The habitats of the Missouri Breaks are adapted to fire, historically suggested to have occurred every 5-25 years, to maintain grasslands, open pine stands, and encourage wooded vegetation regeneration. However, since the early part of the 20th Century, fire suppression has disrupted the natural fire cycle of the Missouri Breaks. The result has been more trees, denser stands and expanding areas with trees. Foliage insectivore bird species like chickadees and yellow-rumped warblers can benefit short-term from these unburned areas. However, the increased number and area of trees also reduces the amount and types of shrub, grass and forb growth. Burning improves the forage quality and amount for many wildlife species including elk, deer and sharp-tailed grouse. Prescribed burning also reduces fuel loads and the chance of severe wildfires. Since 2009, the BLM has treated approximately 7,500 acres with prescribed fire. These accomplishments are only possible with the help of many partners including Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (MDNRC), USFWS, US Forest Service (USFS), Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation and private landowners.



This spring, the BLM is planning three prescribed burns to improve wildlife habitat and reduce fuel loads. The prescribed fire objectives are to:

- ◆ Under burn a minimum of 75 percent of the ponderosa pine stands
- ◆ Top kill 30-60 percent of conifers less than 3 inches diameter at breast height (DBH)
- ◆ Limit mortality in trees 8 inches DBH and larger to 30 percent



Approximately 4,400 acres would be treated in Tin Can Hill Units E and G. An additional 1,200 acres are planned for Gallatin Rapids Unit D.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE PLANNING

The ongoing BLM LFO Resource Management Plan (RMP) Greater Sage-Grouse Amendment process initiated at the beginning of 2012 continues to move forward. The amendment was started by the BLM to establish regulatory mechanisms for sage-grouse and their habitat after USFWS decided that the listing of Greater Sage-Grouse as a threatened species is warranted, but precluded, due to higher priorities. The USFWS identified that BLM manages over half of the remaining sage-grouse habitat across the West and having regulatory mechanisms in place will help USFWS make a final listing determination in 2015. The LFO Sage-Grouse Amendment Draft EIS is scheduled to be completed by September 2013. Additional information is available from the National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy website at <http://www.blm.gov/sagegrouse>.



WINGS ACROSS THE BIG SKY FESTIVAL COMES TO LEWISTOWN IN 2013

Lewistown will be the host site of the 14th Annual Montana Audubon Wings Across the Big Sky Festival June 7-9, 2013. Federal and state agencies have taken the lead in developing the list of over 30 different birding field trips in the Lewistown area for festival participants to enjoy. The USFWS, BLM, Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and MFWP are all official sponsors of this year's festival. The City of Lewistown is also a sponsor through its partnership with the CMR NWR Urban Bird Treaty Grant funding. Due to the simple fact that Lewistown is centrally located in Montana, Audubon feels this year's festival may attract a record number of participants.

Area field trips will visit federal, state and private lands in the Lewistown area. Highlights include trips to several area national wildlife refuges and BLM lands in and out of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. State lands along Big Spring Creek will also host many of the field trips. This year, Audubon has asked to have a conservation message attached to as many field trips as possible. Some of the field trips will have a federal or state biologist along to discuss the Sage-Grouse Initiative and its impacts on public and private lands. Other conservation issues will include the importance of riparian habitats to migratory birds, the protection of prehistoric and historic resources and reasons for using native plants for landscaping.



This year's keynote speaker is Susan Bonfield, Director of Environment for the Americas which coordinates the largest hemispheric celebration of migratory birds – International Migratory Bird Day. She will be discussing the western hummingbird Partnership, which highlights one of Montana's declining hummingbird species – the rufous hummingbird.

You are encouraged to visit the Montana Audubon website at <http://mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/festival.html> for further information.

MFWP NOTES FROM THE FIELD

As of late mid-March, the Lewistown-area FWP biologist has completed post-season deer surveys and is underway with winter elk surveys. In Hunting District (HD) 410, mule deer numbers remain low (43 percent below objective in the Sand Creek/Carroll Coulee Study Area); however, fawn:doe ratios are relatively high at 47 fawns per 100 does. The buck:doe ratio post-2012 hunting season is 30:100, mainly spikes and two- to three-year-old bucks. In HD 419 (Sage Creek/Indian Creek), deer are ~44 percent below objective, and fawn:doe and buck:doe ratios currently sit at 42:100 and 25:100, respectively. Finally, in HD 426 (Coffee Creek/Arrow Creek), deer are roughly at objective, with 41 fawns:100 does and 48 bucks:100 does (almost 30 percent of the bucks seen were mature, 4x4 males). Spring mule deer surveys aimed at determining overwinter fawn survival and recruitment will be underway in April and May with the first signs of green-up. Elk in Central Montana are faring better than mule deer these days, where they are above objective in all area hunting districts. Hunting access is the main issue concerning over-abundant elk populations. White-tailed deer also appear to be bouncing back after 2011's epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) outbreak; there were no recorded cases of EHD or bluetongue in this area last year. Lewistown FWP is currently gearing up for sharp-tailed grouse and sage-grouse surveys this spring.



The deadline to apply for bull elk and buck deer permits, as well as nonresident licenses, was March 15. However, there is still time to submit your applications for moose, sheep and goat licenses (May 1 deadline), and antlerless deer B, elk B, antelope and antelope B licenses (June 1 deadline).

NEED INFORMATION? TRY MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM

The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP) <http://mtnhp.org/> was established by the 1983 Montana State Legislature as part of the Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) at the Montana State Library to be a comprehensive program for acquisition, storage and retrieval of data relating to the flora, fauna and biological community types of Montana (Montana Code Annotated 90-15). The MTNHP's activities are guided by statute and through ongoing interaction with, and feedback from, principal data source agencies such as MFWP, MDNRC, the Montana University System, USFS and BLM.

Resources available from MTNHP include:

- ◆ Montana Field Guide <http://fieldguide.mt.gov/> which contains accounts for Montana's plants, animals and ecological systems
- ◆ Natural Heritage Map Viewer <http://mtnhp.org/mapviewer/> which has interactive maps and reports for land cover, land management, wetland and riparian mapping, generalized distributions of Montana's plant and animal species and geo-referenced photos
- ◆ Natural Heritage Tracker <http://mtnhp.org/Tracker/NHTMap.aspx> which has interactive maps and reports that allow agency resource managers and biologists to view spatial and tabular information for nearly 1.5 million plant and animal observations, animal survey locations and species occurrences which are used in environmental reviews
- ◆ Montana Animal and Plant Species of Concern Reports <http://mtnhp.org/SpeciesOfConcern/?AorP=a>
- ◆ Wetland and Riparian Mapping Information <http://mtnhp.org/wetlands/default.asp>
- ◆ Montana Land Cover is available at <http://gisportal.msl.mt.gov/geoportal/catalog/main/home.page>

Upcoming Events & Deadlines:

<p>April 28-May 5, 2013: Soil and Water Stewardship Week; find out more at http://www.nacdnet.org/stewardship</p>	<p>June 24-26, 2013: Montana Range Days; Havre, MT; find out more at http://cartercd.org/MRD%20page%201.htm</p>
<p>May 1, 2013: Application deadline for moose, sheep and goat hunting licenses</p>	<p>July 8-12, 2013: Montana Youth Range Camp; Ekalaka, MT; find out more at http://dnrc.mt.gov/cardd/camps/rangecamp/default.asp</p>
<p>June 1, 2013: Application deadline for antlerless deer B, elk B, antelope and antelope B hunting licenses</p>	<p>August 4-9, 2013: North American Envirothon; Bozeman, MT; find out more at http://www.envirothon.org/</p>
<p>June 7-9, 2013: Wings Across the Big Sky Festival; Lewistown, MT</p>	

OVERVIEW OF AGENCY ROLES

Even though differences in the lands we manage are often not apparent, with multiple agencies contributing to this publication, we feel it's important to clearly define the mission and guidance that influences our actions.

Federal Agencies:

BLM: The BLM's mission is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

USFS: The mission of the USFS is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

The BLM's and USFS's multiple-use missions mandate that they manage public land resources for a variety of uses, such as energy development, livestock grazing, recreation and timber harvesting, while protecting a wide array of natural, cultural and historical resources.

USFWS: The USFWS's mission is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

NRCS: The mission of the NRCS is to provide national leadership in the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources. The NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit the soil, water, air, plants and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems. Seventy percent of the land in the United States is privately owned, making stewardship by private landowners absolutely critical to the health of our nation's environment.

State Agencies:

MDNRC: The mission of the MDNRC is to help ensure that Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations.

Today, MDNRC promotes stewardship of Montana's water, soil, forest and rangeland resources; regulates forest practices and oil and gas exploration and production; and administers several grant and loan programs.

Trust Land Management Division: Our goal is to manage the State of Montana's trust land resources to produce revenue for the trust beneficiaries while considering environmental factors and protecting the future income-generating capacity of the land.

MFWP: The MFWP, through its employees and citizen commission, provides for the stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks and recreational resources of Montana, while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations.

