

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

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PROMOTING KNOWLEDGE AND STEWARDSHIP OF LOCAL WILDLIFE AND HABITATS WITHIN THE COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE NINEMILE, HUSON, AND ALBERTON REGION.

KEEP AN EYE ON THE HIGHWAY

An estimated 60 to 70 elk have been recently spotted crossing the Clark Fork River near the confluence with Six Mile Creek lately, with Interstate 90 just a few feet away. This is a high-risk area on I-90, as several elk were killed there this year and deer are hit there frequently. Most importantly, it is close to the spot where people died several years ago from a deer-vehicle collision. The NWW monitored this area with a wildlife camera for several years which showed very high wildlife use. NWW has communicated with the Montana Department of Transportation to encourage the placement of a wildlife crossing structure along with fencing, or another similar wildlife mitigation tool to reduce roadkill yet maintain wildlife movement.

Here and elsewhere, black bears are getting hit quite a lot this fall, with some hit near Alberton, near St. Regis, on Evaro Hill, and many hit between Missoula and Turah. Check your speed and be aware!

2015 LOLO NATIONAL FOREST FIRE MANAGEMENT *by Jeffrey Hayes*

Wildfire can impact wildlife both positively and negatively, and it's always interesting to know how its being managed locally. When you want updates on local fire activity, check out <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/state/27/> Meanwhile, here's an update from Lolo National Forest, Ninemile Ranger District's Jeffrey Hayes, Assistant Fire Management Officer:

In 2015, the Ninemile Ranger District fire and fuels management program accomplished several prescribed burns. In the spring approximately 925 acres were understory burned in the Isaac and Roman Creek Drainages. In the Mike Creek Drainage 103 acres were prescribed burned and 78 acres were understory burned in the Johns Creek Drainage, both of which are in Petty Creek. Several ecosystem maintenance burns were completed as part of the South Fork Fish Stewardship Project. One hundred and forty acres were ignited in the Oriole Creek Drainage and 38 acres were underburned just south of Lupine Creek.

This year was a very long fire season for the fire crew. The District had a total of 32 wildfires this summer. Twelve of them were human-caused starts, the rest ignited by lightning. Most of the fires were kept to less than one acre in size except for the West Fork Fish Creek Fire which grew to 12,000+ acres and has created a variety of habitats for wildlife - we'll do an article in the spring about this! In addition to local fire responses on the District and Forest, we also dispatched crews, overhead personnel, and engines to California, Minnesota, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, and Alaska.

In 2016, there are prescribed burn units planned in Moncure Creek as part of the Barrette Creek Fuels Reduction Project. In the Frenchtown Face Project, prescribed burn units are planned in Roman, Stoney, Sixmile, and the Butler Creek Drainages. The South Fork Fish Project has prescribed burn units located in Owl, Oriole, and Lupine Creeks. Some of the objectives of these projects are to maintain and improve wildlife security and habitat, maintain water quality and fish habitat, maintain and improve forest health and reduce the risk of high severity fires and damage from insects while maintaining a natural appearing landscape. Mule deer and elk winter shrub forage production will be increased from the combined thinning treatments followed by prescribed burning. The prescribed burning will stimulate herbaceous growth in the understory to improve winter range and return forests to more natural conditions. For the second year in a row, the District has received funding through partnerships with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Federation to assist with implementation on the Frenchtown Face Project to improve elk and wild turkey habitat. All burning will be dependent on weather and fuel conditions. If ignition takes place, there is potential the burning could limit public access in these areas. For public safety, recreationists are asked to be aware of fire personnel and vehicles in this area. Prescribed fire road signs will be posted along roads in the prescribed burn area. The prescribed burn will be ignited only if operational safety, fuel moistures, weather conditions and air quality parameters are met.

FLAMMULATED OWLS IN THE NINEMILE

by Carly Lewis, Lolo NTF wildlife biologist

Several Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup (NWW) members assisted the Forest Service with flammulated owl surveys back in June. These little-known owls are of interest because of their close ties with mature drier ponderosa pine/Douglas fir forests, which the Forest Service is looking at in the Ninemile and elsewhere for fuels and restoration treatments.

Unlike their larger relatives like great-horned and great gray owls, flammulated owls are small—small enough to fit into holes excavated by pileated woodpeckers. Flammulated owls nest in these holes, migrating here each year in the spring to breed and raise their young before heading to warmer climes for the winter. The majority of flammulated owl nests that have been found in Montana have occurred in larger diameter (15” or larger) ponderosa pine snags (dead trees).



Female flammulated owl in her nesting hole. Mat Seidensticker.

Flammulated owls are most often found in Montana in forested areas that are comprised of large ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir trees and relatively open, grassy understories. These forest types historically received frequent wildfires, many of which burned at lower intensities and helped keep the understories open and grassy while allowing the larger trees to grow. Occasionally fires or insects would kill larger trees, creating snags for the owls to eventually nest in.

Restoring fire to such forests is a focus for several areas across the Lolo National Forest (LNF), including some of the south-facing slopes in the Ninemile valley. This past summer, the LNF began assessing the current condition and potential needs of a future project area, located roughly from Butler Creek to Soldier Creek. Foresters and fire specialists were busy identifying opportunities for fuels treatments to reduce wildfire risk in areas where the LNF abuts private property, while wildlife biologists began to take a closer look at what species and habitats currently exist in the area. The LNF anticipates hosting a public meeting later this fall to engage the community in the formulation of the project, and will involve the public throughout the environmental planning process.



Flammulated owl in hand. Mat Seidensticker.

Enter the good folks of the NWW, who joined in for a few nights of fun. Since flammulated owls are nocturnal and are most vocal during their breeding season, the optimal time to survey for them is from late May to late June, starting at dusk (which, that time of year, is about 10 pm). Survey methods involve driving or hiking along roads or trails that intersect potential flammulated owl habitat, stopping at survey points every 500 meters (~1/3 mile). Flammulated owls are territorial, and vocalize a single “hoot” to let others know their whereabouts. Surveyors listen for a few minutes, and then if they don’t hear any owls, they broadcast a recording of a flammulated owl using a loudspeaker, in an attempt to elicit a response from any nearby, otherwise silent owls.

Flammulated owls were detected in two areas in between Butler and Soldier Creeks—in the Favorite Gulch area off McCormick Creek, and in the upper reaches of Butler Creek. In addition to these surveys in the Ninemile, LNF biologists also surveyed for flammulated

owls in several other areas across the Ninemile, Missoula, and Seeley Lake Ranger Districts this summer, and detected owls in many different areas. These surveys help the LNF to monitor the presence of flammulated owls on the Forest over time, and help guide the development of projects that are aimed at restoring fire to drier forest types that flammulated owls prefer. And, well, they’re fun! Keep an eye out for a chance to join in next summer for more surveys—the super late bedtime and subsequent short nights of sleep are worth it for a few nights of star-gazing and owl-hooting!



Ninemile elk. Jeffrey Hayes



Pileated woodpecker. Charlie Janson.



Black bear. Beverly McGown

ADOPT-A-HIGHWAY - NWW ROADSIDE SHENANIGANS

Seven of us met on a very hot June 27 to clean up our adopted 2 miles of Highway 10 just a little west of Nine Mile Creek. Luckily we started early enough in the day to avoid the heat. And this year, unlike many previous Junes, there were no mosquitos. Once again, Dale and Kandy Chik coordinated with the highway department to get the equipment, provided us with delicious treats, and most importantly, made sure everyone stayed safe. Sadly, we missed one of our longterm road pickup crew members with the passing of Mick Hines.

The road side was pretty clean (perhaps thanks to our work across the years!), but during our 2 hours of work, we managed to fill 2 large bags with aluminum cans headed for the recycle bin. By far, the most numerous roadside can once held, you guessed it...beer. That and a few bags of miscellaneous trash made up our haul. There were no significant wildlife sightings such as the snake in a can that we found last year.

Special thanks to Dale and Kandy for again supplying treats and running the event. Thanks also to the rest of our road warriors: Jeannie Siegler and her granddaughter Olivia, who came all the way from Australia, Rod Kruckenburg, Sharon and Pat Sweeney. We should also thank the anonymous bicycle rider from Missoula who stopped and snapped the group picture. We'd love to have you join our congenial group next year. We'll let you know when it's going to happen.



FOR THE BIRDS

This was the fourth year for our annual bird watching trip to the Checkpoint Ranch, the Ranger Station and the Siegler's. The weather (for a change) was excellent, overcast but warm and no rain. It was our first trip we did in May and like every year we had a great time and a few surprises. That morning, Lisa, Mike, Judy, Margo, Bob, Rickie, Sharon, Jeannie and Pat saw a total of 49 species with new birds sighted including wild turkeys, a belted kingfisher and common crows. All birds you would expect to find but didn't until this year. Cumulatively, we detected 84 species over the 4 years we've kept records. Call Pat Sweeney if you'd like to get a list of the birds we found. We think early June is probably the best time to see the most species. So if you're interested, come join us next June for our annual birding trip.

INTERESTING BIT O' INFO - ROADKILL SALVAGE PERMIT

No one wants to hit a critter while driving. But if you hit a deer, elk, moose, or antelope or find one dead on the road, if you're so inclined, as of 2014 you can 'salvage' the animal for personal consumption. To do so, you have 24 hours to apply for and get a (free) permit either through law enforcement officers on the scene of collisions or online through this web page. <http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/licenses/salvagePermit.html>

One good aspect of this is it can reduce scavengers from being attracted to the roadside and becoming roadkill themselves. This is especially the case with bald and golden eagles - roadkilled eagles usually are associated with a nearby carcass. With that in mind, anyone who salvages a road-killed deer, elk, moose, or antelope will be required to remove the entire animal from where it is found. Parts or viscera cannot be left at the site. There could be worry that this will make people more inclined to hit a deer or other ungulate, but it's hard to imagine someone interested in taking such a risk to life, limb, and the pocketbook.

Data from the collision and ensuing permit should be carefully filled out with as much detail as possible, because that information is needed to determine where wildlife-vehicle collision hotspots are occurring.



Bobolink. Jeffrey Hayes



Black bear. Jeffrey Hayes



Wilson's snipe. Jeffrey Hayes

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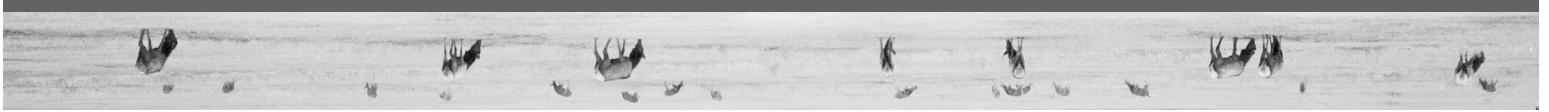
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