

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.



A collared sheep along Petty Creek road this summer. The GPS collar will stay on for 2 years, then a mechanism will cause it to break off in 2018 and biologists will retrieve data from it.



Biologists from Montana State University and MTFWP take biological samples for disease testing, and place collars on an adult female bighorn sheep in Petty Creek.

lambs, and 56 rams were observed during the annual population survey in April. More information about the statewide bighorn sheep study can be found at: <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/diseasesAndResearch/research/bighornSheep/population/default.html>

In addition to the research that is being conducted on the Petty Creek sheep, here on the Ninemile Ranger District we have been developing a project that is intended to improve both the quantity and quality of habitat for bighorns in the area. The Petty Creek Big Game project will involve a combination of prescribed burning and hand-thinning on roughly 6,000 acres of big game habitat over the next decade or so. In particular, planned burns will occur on about 2,500 acres of bighorn sheep habitat, including the rocky cliffs that provide escape terrain from predators, and the adjacent grassy areas that provide foraging opportunities.

Lack of wildfire or other disturbances in much of the lower Petty Creek area in the past century has resulted in the growth of conifer trees and tall shrubs in areas adjacent to the rocky cliffs, which has reduced sight distances and created less secure or desirable habitat for bighorn sheep. Burning and thinning will reduce the heavy tree and brush growth and create open conditions preferred by sheep, as well as adding nutrients back into the soil that will enhance the growth of native grasses, and more palatable young shrubs. For more information about the project, please feel free to contact the Ninemile Ranger Station at (406)626-5201.

PETTY CREEK BIGHORN SHEEP

by Carly Lewis, Ninemile RS wildlife biologist, with input from Carson Butler, MSU grad student

If you've taken a drive or hike up Petty Creek recently, you may have noticed that some of the bighorn sheep are now wearing some new "jewelry." In early February, 2016, I got the chance to help biologists from MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Montana State University to capture and collar 17 adult female bighorn sheep (15 were collared). The Petty Creek herd is one of seven herds statewide that are part of a study aimed at better understanding the role of disease pathogens, habitat, and annual variations in climate on bighorn sheep recruitment, adult survival and population dynamics.

Bighorn sheep were captured at Petty Creek using helicopter netgunning and transported to a processing area where biologists collected samples and attached collars. Each animal was screened for pregnancy status and disease exposure, and received a full physical checkup. Fifteen of the ewes were fit with a GPS and VHF collar to monitor annual survival, and habitat use, and to aid in estimates of the size of the herd. GPS location data from these ewes, as well as those in other populations in Montana, will be used to construct bighorn sheep habitat models that can be used to help inform future translocation and restoration management actions.

Disease testing detected Pasteurella family pathogens that have been associated with pneumonia, but found no evidence for exposure to a bacteria that can predispose sheep to secondary pneumonia. These diseases are often transmitted through contact with domestic sheep and goats. Collectively, findings thus far suggest the Petty Creek bighorn sheep population is a relatively small, but healthy herd. A total of 69 ewes, 26



A helicopter delivers two bighorn sheep ewes to biologists along Petty Creek road, after the sheep were captured via netgunning on the higher slopes. The sheep were restrained with hobbles and had a mask over their eyes to keep them calm for the ride and the handling, and they were released unharmed within about 10 minutes of capture.

A SMOKY CLASSROOM IN THE WOODS

by David Nikonov, Western Montana Cooperative Biologist for the National Wild Turkey Federation

Many of the residents in the Ninemile area are familiar with the Frenchtown Face Ecosystem Restoration Project, which resides in their backyard. For those new to this project, it was designed to address noxious weeds, reduce the potential of high severity fire, reduce the risk of damage from insects or disease, and many other needs. Earlier this April, three students and their teacher from the Missoula-based Conscious Pursuits School joined me to learn about the Frenchtown Face project. The goal of the field trip was to experience first-hand the importance of fire on the landscape and how forest managers use timber harvest and prescribed burning as a tool to restore ecosystem function and improve wildlife habitat.

A few days prior to this field trip, the Ninemile Ranger District had treated several of the projects units with prescribed fire. These treatments were designed to reduce hazardous fuels in the Wildland Urban Interface and restore the forest to its historic fire regime. The treatments had additional benefits to habitat for elk, mule deer, wild turkey and many other wildlife species. This is why organizations like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Federation have contributed funds to assist in the implementation of these as well as past Frenchtown Face prescribed burns.



Flames from this burn consume fuels and reintroduce nutrients into the soil for future plant growth.



A student from Missoula-based Conscious Pursuits School investigates the perimeter of the smoldering prescribed burn.

of the unit still had smoke lifting into the afternoon air. Immediately next to these burned areas was a forest with a mat of dense green grasses, speckled glacier lilies and shooting stars. Upon closer investigation, we could see the ash and charring on the tree trunks from past burns through the dense plant growth. This spot had been prescribe burned just the previous year. This showed the students how this fire-adapted landscape is rejuvenated with the reapplication of flame.

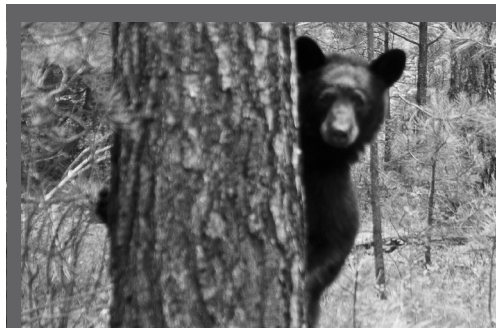
Days later with stumps still smoldering, I heard wild turkeys gobbling from the blackened unit. This burn had successfully reduced fuels, promoted the health of the ponderosa pines and enhanced the wildlife habitat. It was exciting to show students how active management of our forests can mimic natural disturbances which benefit an entire ecosystem's health.

On the drive up to the burn, we saw a diverse array of forest structure and composition. There were open stands of mature ponderosa pine adjacent to denser draws of Douglas fir and western larch. We discussed how the variety of tree heights and densities are important to wildlife to provide both quality forage and sufficient cover. The open ponderosa pine stands, which depend on frequent low intensity fire, grow dense grasses and forbs which are grazed by elk and deer. Additionally, mature ponderosa pine produce high quantities of pine seeds, which can be a critical winter food source for forest grouse, wild turkeys and many other small mammals.

We continued on to the burned unit and arrived to a smoldering forest floor with unburned ponderosas standing high above. Initially, the students looked across the forest and wondered how such a disturbance could benefit wildlife. This outdoor classroom provided an incredible opportunity to show the response this forest has to fire. Part



Oregon grape (*Mahonia repens*) responding very well to the prescribe burn. This image was taken three months following the treatment.



Black bear. Beverly McGown



Deer family. NWW wildlife cameras



Eagle nest. Bob Brugh



Mountain bluebird. Pat Sweeney

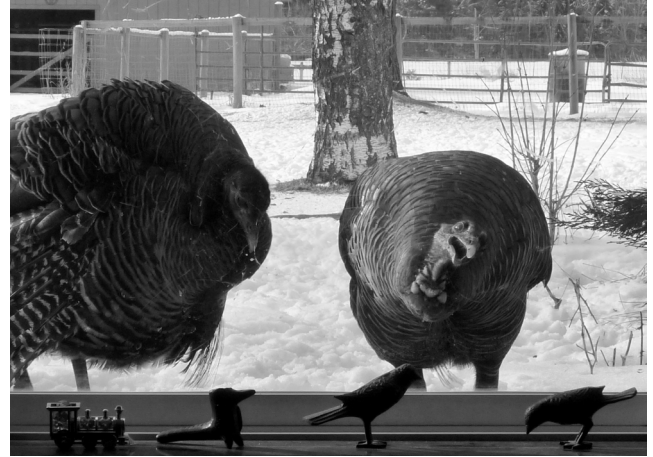
One day a long while back, I was sitting in a truck eating lunch when a bluebird decided to attack the mirror, right next to where I was sitting. Try as he may, he was unsuccessful in chasing off the “intruder” until I moved the truck. This is relatively common behavior with some birds during nesting season when they are establishing and defending territories from competitors. Their image in reflective surfaces such as windows and mirrors is seen as a rival to be driven away.

Small songbirds are one thing, what about larger birds? At our house, we have windows at ground level that on occasion a male wild turkey will repeatedly attack by gobbling, strutting, and pecking at the window. Hearing the disturbance, we usually go to the window and the turkey seemingly has a near heart attack when it sees us and cannot scramble away fast enough.

Further up the valley, neighbors had a similar issue with sandhill cranes. Turkeys are big, as are sandhill cranes, with the added threat of a

long, dagger-like bill. A territorial crane saw his reflection, walked up on the deck and attacked his “rival.” His rival was actually the cranes reflection in a sliding door. Unfortunately, there was a screen in front of the door that did not survive the attack by the long billed crane.

According to the Audubon Society’s website, “despite its violent appearance, this behavior is very rarely fatal. However, birds can sustain injuries, especially to their beaks. A territorial bird can be very persistent. If you cover up a window, the bird may search for the perceived rival until it finds another reflective surface. Some people have reported robins attacking as many as 15 windows on both the first and second stories of homes. The best course of



Wild turkey at window. Pat Sweeney

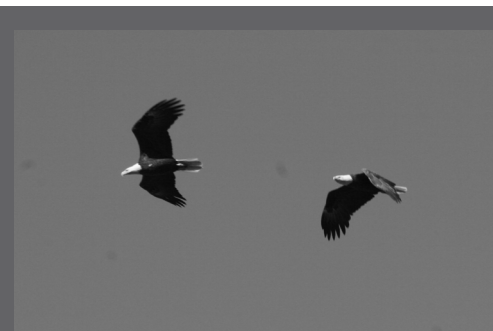
action is to be patient and wait for the breeding season to end.”

We have never seen a bird injured by this competition with our windows, and luckily for us, the screens are protected by the windows. The windows aren’t as clean after these encounters but that’s a small price to pay to live with wildlife and we somewhat enjoy the occasional visitor tapping on our window.

This is not the same as window collisions, which according to Cornell’s Lab of Ornithology, “kill up to 100 million birds each year. These collisions usually involve small songbirds, such as finches, that may fall unnoticed to the ground. Sometimes the birds are merely stunned and recover in a few moments. Often, though, window hits lead to severe internal injuries and death. It’s thought that birds hit windows because they see the landscape—trees, sky, clouds—reflected on the glass surface but do not realize that a hard, transparent surface lies between them and that apparent open space. Panicking birds, fleeing for cover to escape predators, are even more likely to fly into windows.” Unfortunately we have lost some songbirds at our house and have taken some steps to lessen the toll. You can learn about window collisions, their causes and some ways to help prevent them by visiting the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website at: http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/attracting/challenges/window_collisions/document_view. Happy ‘birding!’



Sandhill crane at window. Krist Hager



Flying bald eagles. Bob Brugh

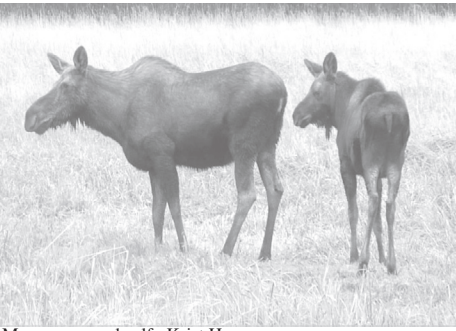


Wild turkey. Pat Sweeney



Sandhill cranes. Krist Hager

FIRE AND FUELS IN THE NINEMILE REGION by Jeffrey Hayes, Lolo NTF



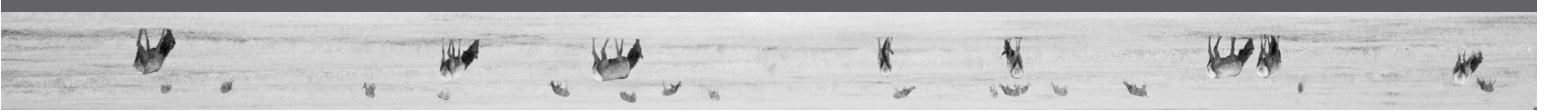
Moose cow and calf. Krist Hager

The Ninemile Ranger District used prescribed fire to restore habitat on 525 acres this spring. Most of the burning was associated with the Frenchtown Face Ecosystem Restoration Project (mentioned in David's article), and was designed to reduce fuels remaining after logging in some areas and enhance the growth of native shrubs and grasses that provide great forage for wildlife species such as deer, elk, and wild turkey. The majority of the burning took place directly behind the Ninemile Ranger Station and up into the Stoney Creek Drainage near the CCC Camp. A smaller burn was completed in Mill Creek and more were under-burned in the Sixmile Drainage.

If you get a chance, take a short trip up to the Grand Menard Picnic Area and go for a walk along the Nature Trail. Fire managers intentionally left the inside loop of the trail unburned, while the outside of the loop was burned, to demonstrate the differences in vegetation, food availability, and fuels between burned and unburned areas. An interpretive sign is currently being created and will be installed soon. A trail camera was set up in one of the burned areas to monitor wildlife use post-fire. We observed deer using the area 2 days after the burn, while some of the logs and stumps were still smoking. Within 6 weeks, we saw elk and wild turkey in the area, as well a few predators, and we could see a major increase in growth of native forbs, grasses, and shrubs that were attracting these animals to the area.

In 2016, thinning work continued on the Frenchtown Face project specifically in the McCormick Creek Drainage. Burning is also planned in the middle reaches of McCormick Creek for big game habitat improvement. Also, thinning of small trees in Kennedy Creek was completed to improve forest health and retain resiliency to insect and disease in the ponderosa pine stands.

This fire season was shorter and less intense than 2015 due in part to receiving rainfall sporadically throughout the summer and cooler temperatures. The Ninemile district had 19 fires, 8 of which were lightning caused and 11 were human starts. This year had an increase in human fire starts across northwestern Montana and this is always a good reminder to be cautious with debris burning, obtain all burning permits, monitor weather forecasts, and ensure your campfires are extinguished before leaving! Thanks!



Please consider supporting our organization so we can continue our mission!
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