

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

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FALL 2017

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

NWW UPDATES!

Lecture Series Our two evening lectures in Alberton were well attended this past April and May. *Matt Metz*, a PhD student from the Wildlife Biology Program at UM shared his expertise on wolf predation dynamics in Yellowstone, in which he's been involved since 2002. He talked about the factors that have influenced wolf population dynamics since the re-introduction of wolves in the 1990s. Prey availability of elk but also bison as alternative prey, disease, and between-pack competition all have played a role. *Carly Lewis*, wildlife biologist for the Lolo National Forest, spoke of her work monitoring and evaluating the effects of land management projects (including timber sales, prescribed fires, recreation, and other activities) on wildlife species and their habitat. She described how prescribed burns in the Ninemile area were planned to benefit wildlife, including burns in the Petty Creek area designed to enhance habitat for bighorn sheep.

Bird Tour We held our sixth annual bird tour this past May. A mix of regulars and new folks enjoyed outstanding weather while finding 47 bird species, two of them not seen on previous trips. Of course besides looking for birds, we also noted other animals, the highlight being the longest line of basking western pond turtles that you may ever see. Cumulatively, we have seen 95 different bird species on these trips over the past six years!



Adopt-A-Highway Our *Adopt-A-Highway* patrol in late June was once again well planned and executed by Dale and Kandy Chik. After tasty treats and coffee, nine of us picked up trash along our two-mile section of Highway 10. One lucky volunteer found some very usable tools that will be put to good use. A surprise/highlight was that there wasn't much to clean up this year compared to past years. This year's cleanup was linked with the Nine Mile Community Center cleaning much of the upper Nine Mile Road and the Ninemile Ranger District employees cleaning up another portion of roadway. Thanks go out to all you drivers, passengers and road warriors that help to keep our environment clean.

Trail-Clearing A new activity this past July involved gathering six civic-minded outdoorsy types to clear the McCormick Peak Trail that goes to the Reservation Divide. Our effort was helped by a neighbor who cleared several large fallen trees from the seasonally closed road. We noted on the drive there that most of the roadside weeds were wilting because of recent weed treatment. A short way up the trail, there were no weeds and we got busy clearing 15 downed trees and cutting back shrubs, branches and small trees that were encroaching into the trail.



You can reach McCormick Peak from the trailhead after climbing about 1500 feet in about two miles. The ten miles from Nine Mile Road is where you gain most of the elevation while sitting comfortably in your vehicle. Once at the peak, you have fantastic panoramic views stretching from the Mission Mountains to the Bitterroots and can see both the Flathead and Clark Fork Rivers.



PETTY CREEK BIG GAME ECOSYSTEM MAINTENANCE BURNING PROJECT

by David Nikonow, Cooperative Biologist, National Wild Turkey Federation



Fire specialists from the Ninemile Ranger District discuss treatment designs with staff from the Wild Sheep Foundation. David Nikonow.

Collaboration. We hear this term with increasing frequency as reduced budgets and fewer staff requires natural resource managers to make less go further. But does collaboration work to accomplish more in the face of these struggles? For the Petty Creek Big Game Ecosystem Maintenance Burning Project on the Ninemile Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest, collaboration has been critical and irreplaceable in the project's first year of implementation.

Located west of Missoula in the Petty Creek drainage, this project will restore historic habitat conditions by reintroducing fire disturbance over 6,000 acres of primarily South facing slopes. Decades of fire suppression have allowed for conifer encroachment to advance. The increasing conifers in this landscape are detrimental to some wildlife species' habitat because historic fires once limited conifer encroachment and allowed for vibrant grass and shrub growth. These grass and shrub lands provided optimal forage for a variety of ungulates, game birds, and migratory songbirds as well as created a resiliency against uncharacteristically intense fires. Habitat restoration therefore should include removal of these encroaching trees through mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. Prescribed fire can also mitigate wildfire smoke with reduced fuels and more timely and controlled burning.

Petty Creek is home to one of Montana's healthiest bighorn sheep populations. Due to its location, this herd doesn't often find itself in conflicts with vehicle collisions and has not yet fallen ill to pneumonia. These sheep do however face a challenge. With conifers marching into open grasslands and rocky terraces, sight distances for predator detection have been dramatically reduced. This shorter sight distance requires sheep to stay closer to escape areas such as cliffs or face higher risk of predation.

Elk and mule deer use the higher slopes in this area in the spring when grasses and forbs green up and provide high nutrition during calving season. Additionally, shrubs provide fall forage as grasses dry and go through senescence in the late summer. Wild turkeys and forest grouse benefit from these openings with grasses and forbs that provide spring forage. The insects in these shrinking meadows are critical for brood rearing. Berry producing shrubs that improve from open canopies also provide great fall and winter food supplies.

Bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer and wild turkey are only a small list of the many species that benefit from this project. These treatments restore ecosystem function which benefits most wildlife species in the area. This is why the Petty Creek Project has received such strong collaborative support from Wild Sheep Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, and the National Wild Turkey Federation. These groups support the management of habitat for more than just the focal species that dawns their organizations names. These groups are committed to preserving habitat for wildlife that benefit hunters and non-hunters alike.

In the first year of implementation on the Petty Creek Project, this collaborative of conservation groups raised and contributed over \$50,000 towards habitat restoration. These contributions were leveraged with other federal dollars which makes this non-commercial project possible. Relationships lead to partnerships, which lead to collaboration. Here, collaboration has been responsible for on-the-ground conservation action. Collaboration can work.



Helitorch operations from an early May prescribed fire allowed for ignition on steep and rugged terrain on the Petty Creek project. Ninemile Ranger District.



Hidden fawn. Pat Sweeney.



Western toad. Kylie Paul



Spruce grouse. Kylie Paul

MOUNTAIN GOATS! A COOL CRITTER IN WESTERN MT

by Pat Sweeney

If you spend any time in the high country, you may be fortunate enough to spot mountain goats. This emblem of Glacier National Park (GNP) lives in the highest, ruggedest, and rockiest northern peaks where they can find refuge from predators. Weighing up to 300 pounds, mountain goats' oversized, specialized hooves can support their weight on crusted snow, and pads protruding from their hooves provide better traction on smooth rock surfaces. Mountain goats are normally solitary or found in small groups with notable exceptions being salt licks or concentrated food sources. An example of this can be seen just off Highway 2 in GNP at the Salt Lick Overlook.

Mountain goat behavior has adjusted in recent years where you can find goats in more gentle terrain where non-mountaineering humans can also visit. A study in GNP shows the charismatic ungulates happen to be keen on humans, because of the defensive barrier we create against predators and for the salty 'treats' we tend to leave behind. Besides easily seeing goats at Logan Pass in GNP, you can also encounter them at Heart Lake south of Superior, Leigh Lake south of Libby, and Scotchman Peak, just over our western border in Idaho.

A normally-behaving backcountry goat spends much of its time near escape terrain, especially steep cliff faces, so they have a place they can easily get to when a predator comes by. The front-country goats seem to have outsourced their defenses to the humans who also happen to supply them with much sought-after salt via their urine, clothing and packs. When fire closed the very busy Logan Pass to visitors, GPS data and remote cameras showed that when the people were gone, the predators came in and the goats headed back to the mountains. So the study concluded that mountain goats are near humans for predator avoidance, and that salt is a secondary bonus.

Goats and humans do not always mix well. In 2010, a hiker was killed in Olympic National Park after being gored by an aggressive mountain goat. Other people have reported being bitten. A dog was gored by a goat this summer near Heart Lake where goats have been regularly visiting occupied campsites. This year near Leigh Lake in the Cabinet Mountains, a goat was shot and killed after it acted aggressively toward several hikers.

People are starting to do something about this. Signs explaining how to minimize conflict with goats are being posted in problem areas. GNP recently hired Gracie, as the resident 'bark' ranger. The three-year-old border collie is in her second season of goat patrol at Logan Pass. Her mission is to keep the goats wild by ensuring they stay away from people and parking lots. She also serves as an interpretive tool to teach people about respecting the land and wildlife in the area. Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness is in its second year of a goat ambassador program. Volunteers hike the trails during summer weekends and educate visitors on how to behave around goats. They report that the goats are noticeably more leery of people this year and not approaching them as much.

Here are some safety suggestions on what to do in mountain goat country:

- Goats can become very tolerant of people and allow a close approach. Despite their tolerance, keep a safe distance (50 yards). Goats can be aggressive if they think they need to defend their space.
- Dogs should be kept on leash or under voice control.
- If a goat approaches, slowly move away. If it follows, make noise and wave a coat, backpack or walking stick. Maintaining distance keeps you safe and ensures that goats don't lose their fear of people and develop aggressive behaviors.
- Goats crave salts in human urine or sweat-soaked clothes, leading to conflicts. Urinate at least 50 yards off trail and away from camping areas to keep goats from regularly concentrating in areas that hikers visit.

Most people would consider seeing mountain goats a trip highlight. By adopting just a few common sense human behaviors, we can enjoy seeing these magnificent cliff dwellers for years to come without confrontation.

Photos: Pat Sweeney



Mountain goat nanny and kid



Wild turkey eggs



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Black bear with white chest. Kylie Paul



We plan to continue these events highlighted in this newsletter next year around the same time frames, and hopefully for years to come. It would be nice if you would consider joining us on one or several of these future activities. You'll probably learn a thing or two, meet some interesting people, and have a good time. Check our website, our Facebook page, or future postings for details.

BOARD MEMBERS WANTED!

Do you like wildlife? Are you thinking about contributing to your community's quality of life? Our current board is looking for new interested volunteer board members to lead and strengthen our mission to promote knowledge and stewardship of local wildlife and habitat in our area. If you can contribute some time, ideas, and energy approximately *one evening* a month, and are interested in exploring this opportunity, please contact Pat Sweeney (626-1610) or another board member for details on what we do and how you can be involved. You can also visit our web site for details on our organization. Our annual board election will be held on November 8th.

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Elk herd in the Ninemile. Jan Pierce.