

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

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FALL 2018

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

APPLES AND BEARS - AN UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE. AND A REASON FOR A FUN EVENT!

by Steve Parker, NWW board member

The venerable apple has a long and storied history in Montana. It is generally accepted that the apple began its Montana presence in Ravalli County of the Bitterroot valley beginning in the mid-1800s. The favorable growing season and climate was quickly recognized as conducive to growing apples and the first orchards were set in the 1860s. The advent of refrigerated transportation allowed for the shipment of apples over great distances and the race was on; by 1894 the commercial apple trade in western Montana was well underway. By the early 1900s an estimated one million apple trees were in production across western Montana and a MacIntosh cultivar, the Bitter Root, was being sold throughout the United States.

In the fervor of development and growing profits the proverbial Law of Unintended Consequences was not likely on anyone's mind...but those unintended consequences nonetheless became reality. With urbanization across western Montana and a growing number of backyard apple growers, the clash with bears looking for sweet calories to bulk up before a long winters sleep was inevitable. Today bears are common, sometimes unwanted visitors to apple orchards and backyard apple trees throughout the region. Locally, the areas encompassing the Ninemile, Sixmile, Rattlesnake, Frenchtown, Huson, Alberton, and Bitterroot communities are flush with accounts of "problem" bears eating ripe apples both on the ground and still in the tree. The question is oft-asked - is the "problem" really the bear or the abundance of unharvested apples? Whether one's answer is the apple or the bear, a simple and effective solution is the removal of those juicy orbs of bear candy.



Black bear. K. Paul

Enter the Nine Mile Community Center and its **apple cider pressing and chili cook off event** to be held on **October 13th** at the Nine Mile Community Center. Help save our bears by removing apples from your trees and thus reducing the risk of them spending time in your yard. In doing so, give yourself a treat by bringing the apples to the event to make some yummy apple cider! If you're unfamiliar - there's a machine at the event where you dump in your apples on one side, cranks turn that squish up your apples that separate the pulp from the juice, and you end up with delicious fresh cider! If assistance is desired in collecting those apples in the Huson or Alberton area, please contact Lisa at lschweigert4@gmail.com, (406) 626-4274.



There will also be a chili cook-off (\$5 gets you chili samples for lunch!)! Additionally, several agencies and organizations will have information tables for your review and edification. Come together in the beautiful Nine Mile valley and enjoy a great day of apple pressing, chili, and fellowship with neighbors and friends. Don't forget, bring your apples to make yourself some cider!

**FUN COMMUNITY EVENT:
 Cider Pressing and Chili Cook Off!
 Saturday Oct 13th from 11am to 3pm.
 The community center is located at 25620 Nine Mile Road in Huson.**

Cooper's hawk enjoys a red-winged blackbird. P. Sweeney



Checking nest boxes.

“We need bluebirds; the Good Lord intended them to be here for a reason.” That’s the answer I got when I asked Michael Houlihan, known to some in our area as “The Bluebird Man,” why he dedicates his time and energy to maintaining and monitoring over 100 nest boxes every summer. A retired law enforcement officer from California, Houlihan and his wife Kim moved to Huson in 2006, and he started building bluebird nest boxes to install around their property. It was a relaxing change from his high-intensity career and was a way to help in conservation of a beloved species. Over the past decade, Houlihan has installed nest boxes along 5 routes in the Ninemile and Huson areas. Houlihan is a member of Mountain Bluebird Trails, a non-profit organization dedicated to monitoring and conserving mountain bluebirds (one of three bluebird species in North America). The group organizes and coordinates volunteers across Montana who want to maintain bluebird trails. Michael and Kim visit their boxes every 10 days throughout the spring and summer to record data on which species are using the boxes, when they nest, and how many bluebird chicks are fledged and are thus added into the population.

As obligate cavity nesters that feed on insects in open grassland areas, western bluebirds have lost lots of habitat over the past several decades. Many old or dead trees with cavities/holes get cut down as land gets cleared for housing, commercial developments, agriculture, and roadways. Habitat loss is compounded by the introduction into North America of two imported species—the European Starling and the House Sparrow (not to be confused with sparrows that are native to North America, such as the Song Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, etc.). Both are cavity nesters that compete aggressively with bluebirds for nesting habitat.

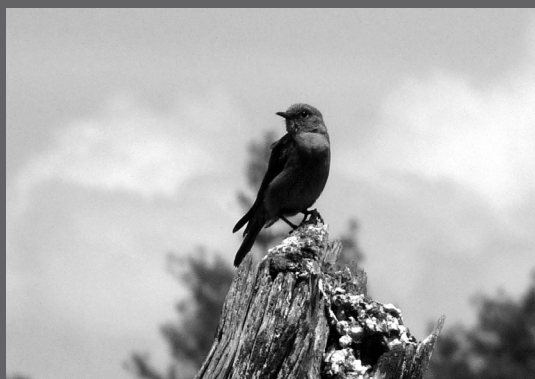
Placing artificial nest boxes is a simple solution to combatting habitat loss. Before installing a box, Houlihan asks property owners for permission and answers questions they may have about bluebirds. He shares that where nest boxes have been put up in suitable habitat across North America, bluebird populations are increasing. It’s easy for property owners to be a part of the recovery of the species and to experience the joy of seeing those beautiful flashes of blue that return to the valley each year as the snow begins to melt.

Nesting activity varies from year to year, depending on weather, other competitors, and factors we cannot observe here, such as changes in their over-wintering habitat (in southwestern U.S. and Mexico). But overall, bluebirds in the Ninemile and Huson area seem to be doing well, with about 50-60% of the nest boxes occupied each year (the other boxes are used by swallows, sparrows, chickadees, and even the occasional chipmunk or squirrel family). In 2018, Houlihan’s nest boxes produced 185 fledglings, which are now flocking up in groups of 40-50 bluebirds to make their migration for the winter.

Data from the Mountain Bluebird Trails volunteers is submitted to Cornell University’s Project NestWatch program, which compiles range-wide data on the species. The website, www.mountainbluebirdtrails.com, has helpful information and tips, including design specifications for building your own bluebird nest box. Or, if you’re un-handy with a saw like I am, you can contact Houlihan (riverrunmt@gmail.com), who would gladly build one for you. I have thoroughly enjoyed watching the activities that occur around the nest box he installed on the fencepost outside my window at the Ninemile Ranger Station— especially the bluebirds defending against swallows with amazing aerial dives. And I’m already looking forward to seeing them return again next spring!



Bluebird at a box.



Bluebird. Sharon Sweeney.



Bluebird eggs in nest box.



I know many of you think the cutest thing around is your toddler relative. But coming in at a close second is a denizen that lives in the rocky slopes of western North America. Weighing less than one-third of a pound, the pika brings smiles to humans when we're fortunate enough to come upon them. Here's how one pika researcher describes them: "They look like a potato, with Mickey Mouse ears, and no visible tail, and they're just adorable."

But being small and cute doesn't necessarily mean pikas are soft. They live year-round in harsh environments. They do not hibernate. During the summer, they often leave the safety of their home in rock crevices to travel on their short legs to adjacent meadows to forage, sometimes hundreds of times in a day. The 2-4 young raised each year enter the main population after only 4 weeks. They are territorial and will defend their hay piles and home range from other pikas. Pikas are tough.

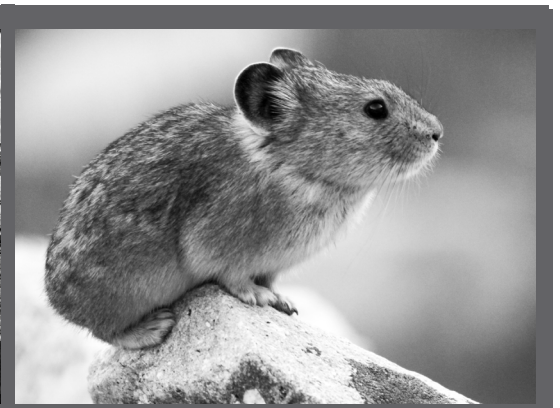
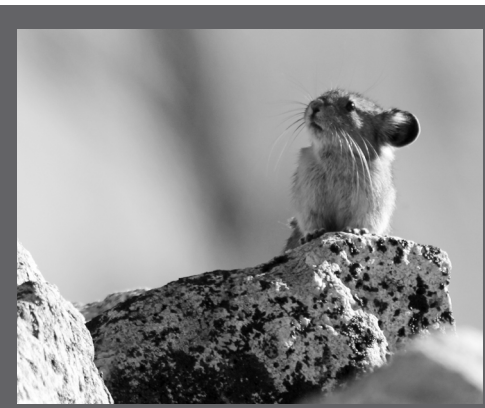
Most of us rarely encounter pikas because they are found only at high elevations where they eke ('EEEEK!') out an existence in an environment inhospitable to most animals and where we don't spend much time. They live in rocky talus slopes that are covered in snow much of the year. The rocks need to be large enough to allow spaces for pikas to move through, build nests, and store the nearly 70 pounds of 'hay' they collect to last through the winter. Their habitat also requires nearby meadows for foraging and haying the grasses, wildflowers and shrubs that make up their diet.

More often heard than seen, their alarm call can best be described as a loud, distinctive, high pitched "EEP!" They have good reason to sound alarms, as they'd either be a tasty morsel or a full meal for almost all predators. When you're hiking in the mountains and hear their alarm call (they consider us a threat), take time to scan the rocks and find one. It isn't easy. You'll have a better chance to see them if they're moving. With patience, binoculars, and a little luck, maybe you'll spot one of them and get a glimpse into their lives.



It may be obvious from where they live that pikas are adapted to cold climates. They are also sensitive to changes in temperature. More active during mornings and evenings, they retreat into crevices between the rocks to keep them cool during warm temperatures. Their round, well-insulated bodies do not dissipate heat well and death can occur after brief exposures to ambient temperatures greater than 80°F. Pikas also depend on snow for insulation in the winter. If that snow layer melts earlier in the spring when temperatures are still cold at night, they may not survive. The pikas' preferred habitat is at risk due to climate change. A team of researchers from the National Park Service and several universities concluded from recent studies that pika populations will decline and possibly go extinct in several national parks by the end of the century. For most populations, habitat isolation and barriers to dispersal and gene flow were key drivers of vulnerability in the event of increasing temperatures and altered rain and snowfall.

Luckily for us in Western Montana, at the relatively safer northerly portion of their range, we can easily enjoy the charismatic pika when in the high country. I've seen and heard them on several nearby trails. Next time you find yourself in likely pika habitat, keep an ear out for their loud distinctive call. If you do hear one, take a break to scan the rocks. If you spot a pika, I'll bet you'll smile.



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about how you're registered. Go to that website to see if you're registered, check your voter registration address, check your polling place, see if you're on the list to have ballots mailed to you, etc. Voting in mid-term elections is super important! It's great to exercise our right to vote. Thanks all!

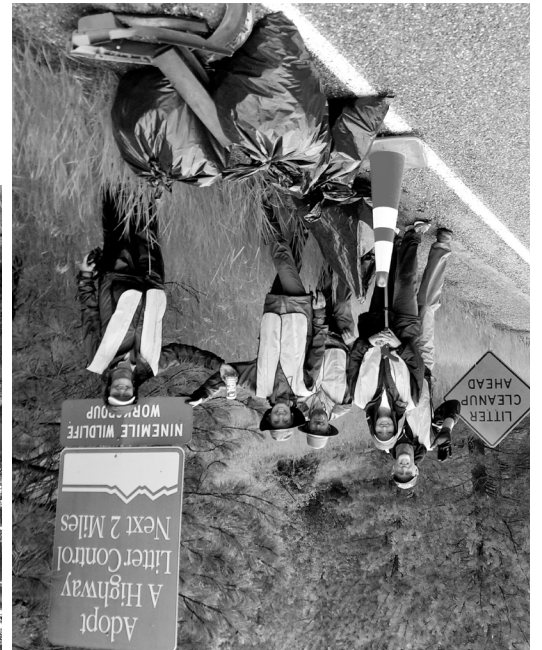
Confused? Concerned? Go to <https://app.mt.gov/voterinfo/> to find out more if you'd prefer, but make sure you're signed up for that if you want it.

IT'S TIME TO VOTE! NOVEMBER 6 is voting day. Every vote counts, whether its local or bigger elections. Every vote impacts wildlife in one way or another. PLEASE VOTE! Make sure you're registered. Vote via mail-in ballot if you'd prefer, but make sure you're signed up for that if you want it.

This year's 'crop' of fawns. P. Sweeney.



NW volunteer trail clearing crew.



We had a great time working together on trail maintenance and litter pickup. Next year will be just as fun!

SUPER FUN EVENTS!