

Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup Newsletter

Spring Newsletter

March 2011

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

Edited by Kylie Paul

We are lucky to have continued dedication from our volunteer board members. Pat Sweeney serves as our director and wildlife camera project, Rebecca Shoemaker works on finances, Surry Latham is our administrative coordinator, Genevieve Fix is our events coordinator, Cindy Gilbert works on administrative, outreach, and fundraising components, and Kylie Paul continues working on the newsletters and outreach.

We greatly appreciate continued support from several volunteers. Rickie Van Berkum very effectively leads the annual lecture series and has done so for several years. Will Hamilton helps to run our Bear Bin loaner program. Krist Hager helps with newsletter design oversight. Numerous folks are part of the Bear Alert program (and hopefully more will join!), with Pat Sweeney, Rickie Van Berkum, and Melissa Reynolds-Hogland as block leaders. Dale Chik continues to act as highway cleanup coordinator. While we receive essential energy and assistance from these great volunteers, we always need more help planning activities and starting projects!

We have a Facebook page. Please search for the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup and 'like' us! Feel free to post or share your photos of wildlife and the Ninemile area. And don't forget, we have a **website** at www.ninemilewildlife.org.

Do have **wildlife photos** you'd like to have included in our fall 2011 newsletter? If so, email them to us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com. You can also post them on our Facebook page.

You may have noticed we've slightly **changed our newsletter** format. A Ninemile resident who completed our wildlife survey asked us to make some changes to the newsletter in order to make it more environmentally friendly and cheaper, and to use the money saved for wildlife conservation. We've started that process by using only black and white ink rather than including color, to cut costs. We will also be switching to recycled and less heavy paper for the next round of newsletters. Thanks for the suggestion!



Elk considers turkey. Photo by Surry Latham

Please take advantage of our **Reduced Cost Bear Spray Program**. Because we believe that the more people in the woods carrying bear spray, the better off are both bears and humans, we've partnered with the Y2Y Conservation Initiative to provide residents of our area with effective bear spray for only \$25 a canister. Retail cost runs from about \$45, so this is quite the deal. For more information, visit our website at www.ninemilewildlife.org, email us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com, or call Will Hamilton at 626-0679.



MILL CREEK UPDATE

by Chris Bryant, The Nature Conservancy/Montana Legacy Project

In December of 2010, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) completed the third and final acquisition of former Plum Creek Timber land as part of the Montana Legacy Project. This project will conserve 310,000 acres across four counties in western Montana. The purchase included more than 24,500 acres of land in the Mill Creek and upper Sixmile Creek drainages north of Frenchtown. This field season, TNC land managers and contractors will be surveying and monitoring invasive weeds, road conditions, and stream health and setting priorities for potential restoration and stewardship opportunities in the future.

Under TNC ownership, this land is open for hiking, hunting, fishing and other recreational pursuits as outlined in TNC's open land policy. And, as with all land under TNC ownership, we will continue paying taxes to the county. Over the past two years, TNC representatives have given a number of public presentations on the project—providing local citizens an opportunity to ask questions and offer their perspectives. We will continue to offer these opportunities, please contact your local community council or TNC (contact Chris Bryant at 406.543.6681 or cbryant@tnc.org) for more information.



Great-horned owl. Photo by Charlie Janson

Golden-mantled ground squirrel. Photo by Kylie Paul



Pileated woodpecker. Photo by Charlie Janson



Winter in the mountains. Photo by Kylie Paul



by Pat Sweeney

Each newsletter, we are now going to feature a local wildlife species that you might not know much about.

One animal you may see often but overlook is a rabbit, good ol' Peter Cottontail. If you're going to see a rabbit in the Ninemile area, this Peter Cottontail will likely be a mountain cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*). There are over 15 cottontail (*Sylvilagus*) species found in the world, all in North, Central, and South America. The only similar species you're likely to come across in the Ninemile area is a snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*). The snowshoe hare has relatively long ears and its fur turns white in winter and brown during the summer. The smaller mountain cottontail is found lower in the valley. It has shorter, rounded ears and brown/gray fur along its back and sides with a characteristic white on the underside of the tail.



Mountain cottontail. Photo by Pat Sweeney

Mountain cottontails are confined to the intermountain areas of North America. They are found in a variety of habitats usually feeding in or near cover. Several live on my property, which is mostly open grassland with patches of shrubs and scattered trees. We have a large garden that is fenced to keep out deer, but the rabbits get through the mesh and often seek cover there

by Kylie Paul

Lead has long been documented as a serious environmental hazard to eagles and other predatory and scavenging avian species. The use of lead shotgun pellets for waterfowl hunting on federal and state lands was banned in 1991 due to lead poisoning in bald eagles, golden eagles, and numerous waterfowl species. However, lead-core rifle bullets as well as lead used for fishing weights are still used and available. Lead poisoning is both acute and chronic, slowly killing birds. It can cause birds to involuntarily clench their feet and make it impossible for them to stand.

In a study in west-central Montana in 2009, the majority of golden eagles captured and tested contained elevated blood-lead levels. Since golden eagles are scavengers, they frequently feed on gut piles and un-retrieved carcasses. The authors surmised the use of lead-core ammunition for hunting is the major source for lead exposure in golden eagles, though they cannot identify a particular source species or region, in part because of the overlapping timing of hunting seasons for various game species in different regions of the Rocky Mountains and the very large area visited by golden eagles during migration season. They believe a switch away from lead-containing hunting ammunition to alternative, less toxic materials are appropriate ways to protect these and other scavenging species.



Dead golden eagle. Photo by Kylie Paul

In terms of waterfowl hunting, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has supported the conversion to non-toxic (steel) shot because it believes that the continuing deposition of toxic lead into our environment, when a suitable nontoxic substitute is available, constitutes poor management of the wildlife resources involved. Non-lead shot is available and has greatly improved in its quality. MFWP notes that if you switch to steel shot, "you will also be able to leave your favorite waterfowling spot knowing that, hit or miss, you have not left a toxic substance behind that can continue to kill ducks and geese long after you have departed. At the same time, you will be doing your part to ensure the future of waterfowl and waterfowl hunting." The same likely goes for other forms of hunting and other wildlife species!

LEAD AND WILDLIFE

NINEMILE WILDLIFE: THE MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL

during the summer. Numerous times I have chased them out of my carrot or corn patch, but unlike Elmer Fudd I don't tote a shotgun – we enjoy the rabbits, especially since they don't seem to eat our garden. Their preferred food is grass and we've also observed them selecting dandelions. They'll often cut off a long stalk at the base and chew it as it disappears into their mouth like they are eating a strand of spaghetti.

Except during breeding season, which extends from spring into summer, mountain cottontails are generally solitary. During the breeding season they often interact by a series of charges, chases, and jumps with each other. It can be quite entertaining to watch them leap straight up in the air! These activities can lead to the birth of four to six young in each of up to five litters per season; that's up to 30 kits per female! Important to the daily process of ecology, their predators include bobcats, coyotes, and great horned and long-eared owls.

Gopher snakes and western rattlesnakes are major predators on juvenile rabbits in some areas.

If you would like to see a specific wildlife species highlighted in the next newsletter, please let us know. Or, even better, write a short article about the species and send it to us!

Elk, black bear, and moose. Photos from NWW remote cameras



WILDLIFE CAMERA MONITORING - UPDATE 2010

Our wildlife camera-monitoring project has been collecting data on wildlife activity for several years. This gives us interesting information on the species living in the region. Some folks may think having cameras out in the woods is an invasion of privacy. It is very important to know that these cameras are placed on private properties, with full participation from the landowner; no privacy is impinged whatsoever. If there are images of humans taken with the cameras, these are deleted, since they are of no interest to our efforts!

We monitored six cameras for much of the last calendar year, to learn more about animals in the region. No attractants were used to draw animals to the cameras but they were set up in areas we expected animals to pass. Some of the images were of the same individual animals but they were not counted if they were caught



Bull moose. Photo from NWW remote cameras

in sequential pictures and appeared to be the same animal. We had 995 working camera days on six cameras during which we captured 1,335 wildlife images. We had the following number of photos: 1,164 white-tailed deer; 47 coyotes, 32 red fox, 29 elk, 20 black bears, 10 moose, 8 turkeys, 5 mountain lions, 4 sandhill cranes, 2 raccoons, 1 bat of unknown species, and 1 wolf.

After four years of collecting data along the I-90 corridor, we retired three cameras at those locations. We added two cameras up the West Fork of Petty Creek, so we now have cameras on both sides of the Clark Fork River. One advantage of having cameras up Petty Creek is that I often get to see the local herd of bighorn sheep during the drive. We continued monitoring with three cameras in the upper Ninemile Valley and one near the Clark Fork River. We did have one camera stolen during big game rifle season, perhaps by a hunter or hiker who thought it best that his image at that location should not be shared with other people? If that individual is reading this article, please erase your image from the data card and return the camera (...it can't hurt to ask...).

If you'd like to see some of the better images, visit our web site at <http://www.ninemilewildlife.org>. If you would like more information or have any questions on the camera monitoring project you can contact Pat Sweeney at 626-1610.

by Pat Sweeney

WILDLIFE UPDATES!

by Kylie Paul

Believe it or not, Jamie Jonkel with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks captured a black bear on January 11 in the Ninemile Valley! The bear was getting on porches and eating birdseed, garbage and devouring feed left out for turkey and deer. Sadly, he had a severe injury and was quite thin, so he had to be euthanized.

Jamie has some ideas about ways to keep bears out of trash and therefore keep them alive and away from our homes: Folks can keep their cans enclosed in stout buildings or structures until the day of pickup and place the cans out on the day of pickup. Bear-resistant roll outs and dumpsters can have a short life span—as do the standard roll outs and dumpsters—therefore Jamie has been really emphasizing bear-resistant enclosures or buildings that house the roll outs and dumpsters. He thinks this approach would work well at certain sites in the Ninemile and Sixmile Drainages. For example, multiple cans are stored at the intersection of Whitetail Ridge and the Ninemile Road. The homeowners could get organized and construct a bear-resistant fence or structure that would contain multiple roll outs. The fence or structure could be left open on the day of pickup. Or the gate could be rigged with an automated system of some sort—garage door remote, counter weight, timer, etc. This would work well in certain areas. Or the community could start working with Allied Waste and the County on providing a centralized bear-resistant site for garbage drop off.

Jamie reminds us that feeding turkeys and deer is illegal in the state of Montana – primarily because it attracts predators to your home site. Jamie has only received the occasional report of lion tracks—but where there are deer and turkeys there will be lions.

Livestock carcasses also attract wildlife to residential areas and lead to conflicts. Removing them from the area reduces the risk of attracting animals such as bears, wolves, coyotes, and lions from approaching your property. Jamie Jonkel will pick up and dispose of livestock carcasses. Please contact him if you need assistance at JaJonkel@mt.gov, 406-542-5508 or 406-544-1447(cell).

To get updates about bear activities around your home, check out www.ninemilewildlife.org/bear_aware.html to join the group and to receive the emails.



Grizzly bear track. Photo by Kylie Paul

Grizzly and cubs in the Ninemile. Photo by Krist Hager

Hairy woodpecker. Photo by Pat Sweeney

Ruddy ducks. Photo by Charlie Janson



Wolves and horses in the Ninemile. Photo by Krist Hager



by Kylie Paul

Last fall, Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup distributed wildlife surveys to roughly 100 residents in the Ninemile area. Our intent was to gather local knowledge about wildlife crossing locations along the Interstate 90-Ninemile Corridor; increase our understanding of how fellow residents of this corridor live with and feel about wildlife; and to improve our knowledge of how to better apply the Workgroup's efforts. Twenty-five people responded to our survey. Thank you to those who responded!

The majority of those that responded have lived in the region for 10 or more years. Many folks have plans to maintain or improve natural resources on their property, with several having a conservation easement already in place. We learned that the majority of those who responded are concerned about wildlife in the Ninemile, as well as barriers to wildlife movement, wildfires, residential development, and noxious weed management. Many people attempt to minimize negative interactions with wildlife, such as storing garbage in a secure area, not having bird feeders, and feeding pets inside the house. We received a wide range of opinions on how wildlife activity in the region has changed over the years, what the Workgroup can do to help with wildlife management and conservation, and hopes and expectations for future of wildlife in the area.



Yellow-headed blackbird. Photo by Charlie Janson

Most folks said they were willing to periodically update the Workgroup with information on wildlife activities – we would love to hear from you! Please contact us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com. We will continue to review the results to determine ways we can improve the Workgroup's approach to wildlife efforts in the area. And if you still have the survey lying around the house or if you look on our website and print out the survey and fill it out and mail it to us, we would still love to receive your input. This information is always important for us to compile, and with more responses, we'll have a better understanding of wildlife and humans in the region.



A big thanks to Transwild Alliance for funding for this project.

SURVEY RESULTS

UPDATES

Cake Auction 2010 by Genevieve Fix

A great group of people filled the Ninemile Ranger Station on October 7th for our 3rd annual Cake Auction. The event started with tasting all the goodies, and then it was time for the auction. Mr. JR Strand, our returning auctioneer, did a wonderful job at selling the cakes, jams, pickles, photographs, and more that were generously donated by members and friends! We ended the evening listening to JR's cowboy poetry.

Our thanks and appreciation to all of you who helped the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup raise almost \$1,300 by donating and/or buying items. We love our cake auction for the chance to raise some funds and have a great time in the process. This year we intend to make a few changes, mainly by decreasing the sugar load and instead asking for donations of the great harvest canning and other hand-made goods out there. But don't worry...there will still be cake! Please contact Genevieve Fix at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com if you are interested in donating.



Auctioneer JR Strand selling the wares

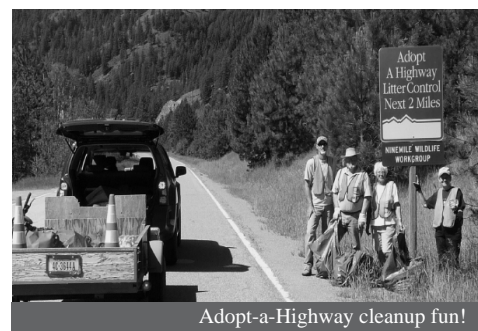


Pat Sweeney displaying cake

Adopt-a-Highway by Pat Sweeney

In 2010, the highway department installed new signs marking both ends of the two-mile stretch of Highway 10 a little southwest of the West Ninemile Road. This section was adopted by the Workgroup and each summer, all are invited to join fellow members and Adopt a Highway coordinators Dale and Kandy Chik to clean up the area between those signs.

Last summer, neighbors and Workgroup members had a leisurely walk along our adopted section, picked up roadside trash which filled several bags, and enjoyed some pizza for lunch. As adopted sections go, this one is a gem. Not only is it along the lovely riparian zone of the Clark Fork River, but this stretch of road is kept pretty clean as it doesn't get much traffic and residents often pick up cans and litter as they go on their frequent fitness walks. If you'd like to help out this summer, look for an email announcement to join us for our third annual clean up, or look on our website for the specific date.



Adopt-a-Highway cleanup fun!

by John Zunski

STORY CORNER: Biscuit and the Bear

The day was hot when Biscuit the dog, (a lab/pitbull cross) and I went huckleberry picking in the Ninemile region last year. Biscuit's job was to provide security. My job—fill the bucket.

Nose to the ground, Biscuit set about her job as I settled into my favorite patch. Within moments, there was a ruckus. I looked up, seeing a flash and wondering why Biscuit was running at me. Realization struck: That's not Biscuit, that's a BEAR!

I stood up. The black bear hit the brakes, its hindquarters fishtailing. Like gunfighters, we stood face to face. I could have reached out and flicked its nose. Its eyes were golden and its cinnamon fur was thick and matted.

Odd how the brain works - my first thought— I'm going to feed a bear a huckleberry. My second thought— He ain't getting my huckleberries! I can hear you shouting: "Bear spray, get your bear spray!"....it was in the jeep.

Everything I read about bears clicked. The one staring me down was a sub-adult male. Since it was a black bear, I knew I needed to establish whose boss. At my feet lay a large stick. Eye on the bear, I picked up the stick, jumped up and down and yelled like Braveheart. At least that's my story. I probably sounded like pubescent twelve-year old. The bear yipped, turned tail, and ran into the woods.

Did that just happen? I wondered, full of adrenaline, pacing back and forth. Having followed the bear's trail, Biscuit returned, tongue hanging and tail wagging, asking her own question, "Did you see that bear? Oh boy, did you see that bear?"

Biscuit had done her job, and I had only partly completed mine, before I decided we should head out of the bear's territory. While I didn't give any to the bear, Biscuit was rewarded with a handful of huckleberries.



Black bear

NWW EVENTS

Please check out our website www.ninemilewildlife.org or join our email list (email us at ninemilewildlife.com) for event updates

* **Our free-admission lectures series is back!** Please attend and bring friends and family. All lectures begin at 7pm.

March 24 at the Ninemile Ranger Station. Amy Cilimburg, director of Bird Conservation and Climate Policy for Montana Audubon, will be presenting "Montana's Birds and Wildlife in a Warming World."

April 28 at the Alberton Community Center. Denver Holt, founder and president of the Owl Research Institute, will be discussing Owls in Montana.

May 26 at the Alberton Community Center. Rob Roberts, who leads mine reclamation and habitat restoration efforts for Trout Unlimited in the Clark Fork watershed, will be presenting "Settled, Mined and Left Behind: TU's Efforts to Improve Fisheries and Water Quality in Ninemile Creek."

* **Ninemile Bird Walk. May 21.** Interested in learning how to identify birds in the region? Meet us at 8am sharp on Saturday May 21, at the Grand Menard parking lot. We'll go birding with several expert birders. We welcome all level of birders. Bring your binoculars and a friend.

* **3rd annual Community Appreciation Potluck. August 21** at 3pm. More details to come via a postcard and our website.

* **Fundraiser Formerly Known as the Cake Auction. October 8.** Our Cake Auction is only slightly changing, focusing a bit more on home-baked goods and a little less on sugary food...but don't worry! Taste-testing, cakes, and auctioneer JR Strand will still be there for our fun annual fundraiser.

* **Pint Night for Ninemile Wildlife. November 9** from 5-8pm at the Northside Kettlehouse Brewery in Missoula. For every pint of beer or root beer purchased, 50 cents will head to the Workgroup.

COMMUNITY-WIDE WILDLIFE ACTIVITIES – in order to know, enjoy, and conserve wildlife

*The 34th International Wildlife Film Festival will be occurring in Missoula May 7-14, 2011. We encourage you to attend! Check it out at www.wildlifevideos.org/festivals/iwff/index.html. You can also rent wildlife films from previous festivals by stopping in the Roxy Theatre on Higgins Ave in Missoula.

*The Montana Natural History Museum in Missoula puts on a fun and educational array of events for all ages to learn about our natural environment. Check out their events list at www.montanaturalist.org/community-activities/.

Gray jay. Photo by Kylie Paul

Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup



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Renew Your Membership!	\$10.00	_____
Individual Membership	\$10.00	_____
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Place a checkmark beside type of yearly membership

Please become a member or renew your membership with the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup! Fill out this coupon and mail it along with your membership payment to: Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup, PO Box 435, Huson, MT 59846



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P.O. Box 435
 Huson, MT 59846
 ninemilewildlife@gmail.com