

Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup Newsletter

www.ninemilewildlife.org
 ninemilewildlife@gmail.com
 Facebook: Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup

Spring Newsletter

March 2012

Edited by Kylie Paul

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

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 *lecture series* is back! Please attend and bring friends and family. All lectures begin at **7pm**.

April 26 Heather Whiteley from Trout Unlimited will present **Creek Restoration in the Ninemile Valley** at the Alberton Senior Citizens Center in Alberton.

May 24 Kathy Settvendemie from Blackfoot Native Plants Nursery will present **Gardening with Native Plants for Wildlife** at the Alberton Senior Citizens Center in Alberton.

Ninemile Bird Walk on June 2 Want to learn how to identify birds in the region? Meet us at 8am sharp on June 2 at the Ninemile Ranger Station parking lot. All level of birders welcome. Bring your binoculars and a friend!

Adopt-a-Highway Pickup Day on June 23 Meet us at 9am at 29221 Old US Hwy 10 W. to pick up trash. It's a great way to get exercise, meet your neighbors, and help wildlife. Please bring gloves and water.

Remove unneeded wire fencing on Ninemile Ranger District on **July 14**. We are partnering with the Forest Service to remove barbed wire fencing that could injure or impede wildlife. Dress appropriately, bring loppers, pruners, or fencing pliers if you have them. Meet 1/2 mile up Butler Creek on FS Road 456 at 830am. Call Pat Sweeney with questions 626-1610.

More details to come on...

4th Annual Community Appreciation Potluck on August 19 at the Ninemile Community Center

'Not Just Cake' Auction 2012 on October 20

New leadership! We have added great new board members. Whitney Crosby, Jim Gouaux, and Jeannie Siegler were voted to join the fun cast of characters on our board, including Pat Sweeney, Genevieve Fix, Cindy Gilbert, Kylie Paul, and Surry Latham. We look forward to a productive year.

Get out your cameras and start snapping photographs of your favorite wildlife and wild places in our gorgeous region. We are accepting submissions for the 2nd annual **2012 Wildlife Photo Contest** from now through July 27, 2012. Attendees at the Community Appreciation Potluck will cast their in-person votes for the winners. Cash prizes will be awarded to the top three winners of the contest at the potluck. Learn more about the rules for submission on our website: www.ninemilewildlife.org.

MOOSE SIGHTINGS PROGRAM



Juvenile moose. Photo by Genevieve Fix

If you recall last fall's newsletter, we talked about the decrease of moose populations in northern states; in the last 25 years, the moose population in northwestern Minnesota has gone from around 4,000 to only 100! Research has found that this reduction is not due to hunting or increasing deer populations but is instead linked to decades of increasing temperatures: a.k.a. climate change. Moose become heat-stressed when temperatures reach over 23 degrees F in winter and 57 degrees in summer, requiring them to burn up energy to cool off. This extra energy spent cooling off then makes moose vulnerable to disease, parasites, and starvation.

Moose populations in Montana are not well understood. The public and managers started noticing fewer moose in the mid-1990s. Then came the drought and high temperatures of the 2000s, putting pressure on this cold and wet-loving species. Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks data on moose are sparse - much of what is known is based on hunter harvest. FWP-issued permits have dropped 48% since 1995, and hunter success rates have also dropped, indicating moose are harder to find. A new FWP study will soon be undertaken to better understand long-term moose population trends and to learn how predation, habitat, disease, parasites, and climate affect moose populations in Montana.

In the meantime, managers need every bit of information they can garner - and we want to help. We are starting a moose sightings program that involves all of YOU! If you see a moose, whether its in the region or anywhere across Montana, please send your sighting to us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com. We'll compile the information and send it to FWP monthly in a standardized format. When you see a moose, please take note of the following: where you are/it is (be as precise as you possibly can), the number, age class (calf/adult), and sex (bull/cow) of the moose, the date, and the time. If you see a moose fairly regularly and you think its the same moose, continue to document those sightings and simply note in your comments that it might be the same individual. The Workgroup will also be submitting observations of moose from our game cameras. Thanks so much for your assistance in helping increase the knowledge base of moose populations in Montana!

Snowy owl. Photo by Kylie Paul



Common redpoll. Photo by Pat Sweeney



Snowy owl. Photo by Kylie Paul



by Pat Sweeney

NINEMILE WILDLIFE: SPECIES IRRUPTIONS

Irruption—defined as a sudden, dramatic and rapid increase in a bird population. Bird species will irrupt for different reasons. Factors include the availability of food, suitability of climate/weather, and amount of predatory activity. Irruptions can be of two types; the first is caused by a dramatic increase in breeding activity that results in a larger bird population, while the second and more common irruption is caused by mass migrations, typically to follow food sources during winter months.

Irruptions are difficult to predict but one species that occasionally shows up in Montana is the charismatic and popular *snowy owl*. These birds breed on the Arctic tundra and migrate 'south' to winter on open plains. The Mission Valley is one of the most important wintering areas for birds of prey in the Northwest. No sightings are known to have shown up in the Ninemile area but this year snowies have famously arrived in the Polson area, just as they did six winters ago. Sharon and I went up to see them twice this winter and we were not disappointed. We got to share our experience with plenty of other owl seekers and we counted 10 of the large white owls on one visit and 5 on the next. This year most of the birds we saw were in a housing development perched on rooftops and towers.

Another irruptive species that has been at our house from December 4th until this writing in February is the *common redpoll* (see

picture above). This is the first sighting of this species for us at our property and they have been here in large numbers eating cutleaf birch seeds or feasting on the Niger thistle seed popular with pine siskins and American goldfinches.



Snowy owl. Photo by Pat Sweeney

The common redpoll is a very small, acrobatic finch, about the same size as the siskins and goldfinches they may be seen with. Adult males sport a bright red crown and sometimes a reddish wash on the breast. The short, conical, yellow bill is surrounded by a patch of black and the back is streaky gray and brown. It has white wing bars. Adult females look similar to males but are generally darker and streakier, with little or no red in plumage except on the crown. Because of its size, this is one bird you need to be close to or to see through binoculars to identify. You will find the common redpoll in Montana during the winter usually as a transient. They are not expected to overwinter in our area. No breeding records exist in Montana for this species.

One study suggests that common redpoll irruptions follow a year of a heavy seed crop in the boreal forest where they breed, resulting in a high population increase. The next year the large population of birds range farther south to find adequate food.

So grab your binoculars and a bird book and take a closer look at those birds outside your window. You just might see something you didn't expect.

A TANGLED TALE: FISHING LINE AND BALING TWINE

Fishing line that is left behind can maim and eventually kill wildlife of all sizes and species. An animal cannot untangle itself from fishing line. Birds can easily get tangled and may become stuck dangling from a tree or nest, especially since birds often use fishing line to build nests. Fishing line cuts into skin and eventually to the bone of legs and feet, maiming them and causing infection, possibly resulting in an agonizing death. Lines with fishing hooks still attached obviously cause severe damage to wildlife that swallow or get tangled in them.

Similarly, baling twine is often picked up by osprey for nesting material and the adults or nestlings get tangled in it, with sometimes deadly results.

Please make it your personal goal to pick up all fishing line and baling twine, regardless if it is yours. It is a very easy way to play a direct role in reducing dreadful circumstances for birds and other wildlife.



Osprey tangled in baling twine. Photo by Stephen Bodio

Fishing line and lures can cut into skin and bone

Raccoon. Photo by Julia Flagg



Bald eagle. Photo by Julia Flagg



Wild turkey. Photo by NWW Cameras



BATS! OUR HELPFUL NEIGHBORS

by Kylie Paul

It's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's a bat! If you've seen what looks like a small brown bird flying erratically at dusk, it's likely you're looking at a bat. Of the approximately 1,000 species of bats worldwide, 15 of them occur in Montana. Some live here year round such as the (species of concern) Townsend's big-eared bat, while others migrate south each fall. Bats are more closely related to shrews and moles. Though they look a bit like flying mice they are indeed not rodents.

Bats are as loud as planes...kind of. They emit high-frequency calls from their vocal chords at decibel levels equal to a jet engine's. We cannot hear the high frequency sounds they make in a constant stream. Similar to whales, they deploy sophisticated sonar to navigate and find food. Insects are a main food source in Montana; in one night, a single little brown bat (that's a species, not just a description – *Myotis lucifugus* is the species Latin name) will eat 4,000 mosquitos!

Bats have been roosting types – day roosts for sleeping, night roosts for digesting prey and resting (it's a lot of work to eat on the fly!), female maternity roosts for rearing young, and winter roosts called hibernacula during winter/cold months. Bats roost in caves and attics, in rock outcrops, under bridges, and between the loose bark and trunk of old, large trees. These roosts can be destroyed or abandoned if large trees are logged or burned, caves are vandalized, mines are sealed, and old homes torn down. Bats produce only one to two pups per year, so populations or colonies can take time to recover if something happens to them.

Wind turbines can be deadly to bats. For unknown reasons, bats seem to chase the spinning blades of wind turbines, and the rapid change in air pressure behind the blades cause

blood capillaries in the lungs to explode. By altering wind turbine operations during summer in low-wind conditions when bats may be active could significantly reduce fatalities.

Since 2006, a white fungus has spread to 16 states and three Canadian provinces that has killed more than one million bats. The manner in which this 'white-nose syndrome' kills bats is still unknown. It is suspected that people exploring caves are helping spread the fungus via their clothing. There are now caving equipment decontamination orders and other regulations set forth by state and federal agencies to give bats a fighting chance in Forest Service caves. At this time the fungus has not shown up in Montana or other Rockies states; for the sake of our bats, we need to keep it that way.



Frightened hoary bat in hand. Photo by Kylie Paul

As an individual, there are many things you can do to help bats. On your property, protect big trees and snags, particularly those near water. If you do not have large trees, you can build or buy a bat house, which will provide a place for bats to raise their pups in a location that you can choose. There are many websites describing how to properly build and site a bat house. You might fear that bats carry rabies; however, less than one-half of 1 percent of wild bats carry the disease, far lower than in the level carried by skunks and foxes. If a bat gets into your house, leave doors and windows open so it can eventually fly out; they want to get away from you as much as you want it to leave your home!

To learn more about bats, head to Bat Conservation International (batcon.org). They have information on bat natural history, bat house construction plans, bats and rabies, and a video on how to safely remove a bat from your home. Also head to http://animalran.geextension.montana.edu/articles/wildlife/bats_montguide.pdf.

'NOT JUST CAKE' AUCTION

by Genevieve Fix



Perusing the auction wares

In October we held our annual "Not Just Cake" Auction. It was a great fun-filled evening. Mr. JR Strand did a wonderful job at auctioning the fantastic donations we received and at the end of the event delighted us with cowboy poetry. Community members donated scrumptious homemade cakes, pies, pastries and treats, jams, syrups, honey, pickles, garden produce, chocolates, gift certificates, and other items. From talented crafters and artists we received a knitted hat, crochet bag, jewelry, greeting cards, table runner, mirror, table, and picture.

The following businesses donated goods, gift baskets and gift certificates: Bernice Bakery, Bronc's Grocery, Fat Belly Deli, Good Food Store, Grizzly Hackle Fly Shop, Grizzly Liquor, International Wildlife Film Festival, King Ranch Golf Course, Lakeland Feed and Supply, Native Ideals, Pearl's Cafe, River Edge Resort, Rockin' Rudy's, Smoke Jumpers BBQ, Sportsman's Bar, and The Dark Room.

To all of you who attended and to our generous donors and buyers, thank you so much! We raised over \$2,000 which will be used to support our NWW programs in 2012. To share suggestions, comments, and feedback about the event, please contact Genevieve Fix, NWW Events Coordinator, at blackedelweiss@dishmail.net. Our 2012 auction will be on Saturday, October 20th, so please mark your calendars!



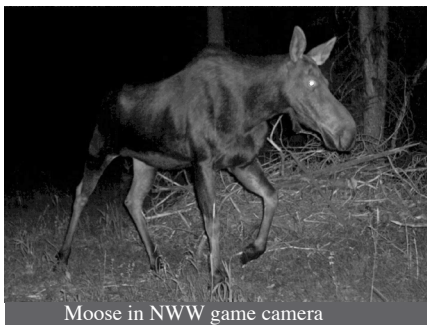
by Pat Sweeney

WILDLIFE CAMERA MONITORING RESULTS FOR 2011

This is the 6th year that the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup has used remote sensing cameras to record wildlife in our area.

With snow (difficult access) and cold (short battery life) determining when cameras will go out we set most of our cameras out in early April and pull them near the beginning of November. Our cameras are getting old and as a result, two cameras broke down and needed to be replaced during this past season.

This year we had three cameras in the upper Ninemile Valley and one along the West Fork of Petty Creek. Three of the cameras were placed in or near riparian areas in the same location as last year. One was in a new location away from water. This upland location detected only deer until October arrived when it also showed turkeys, a coyote and an elk. As you might expect, the riparian sites had a wider variety of animals captured in photos.



Moose in NWW game camera

The following lists the number of individual wildlife detected this past year: white-tailed deer (658), elk (13), moose (13), coyote (13), turkey (12), wolf (7), black bear (7), mountain lion (5), red fox (3), raccoon (2), striped skunk (2), and sandhill crane (1). We also recorded the occasional human, dog, cat, and miscellaneous non-identifiable critter. One surprise is that in our six years of collecting data we have never recorded a bobcat in our images. They certainly occur throughout the region, and two of our unknown critters photographed were likely bobcats but we cannot be sure.

This must have been a windy year as we had numerous pictures taken with no images of what set off the camera. This could be caused by a quick moving animal such as a flying bird but most likely resulted from the wind blowing tall grass or branches. When I unloaded one of the cameras I found that there were 1,276 images but only thirty having any animal showing in the picture. This obviously shortens the battery life and lengthens the time spent analyzing the photos. Good thing technology has advanced where we are no longer using expensive film to record our images!

You can see images of our local wildlife caught on our remote cameras when you visit our web site. If you would like more information or have any questions on the camera monitoring project you can contact Pat Sweeney at 626-1610.

REASONS AND WAYS TO VOLUNTEER

There are two volunteer projects scheduled this summer with NWW. Mark these dates on your calendar and look for future postings on these projects. If you would like more information, contact Pat Sweeney at 626-1610. Also see the front page of this newsletter for more info!

Adopt a Highway Pickup Day on June 23rd—Litter can act as an attractant to wildlife causing vehicle collisions and can directly harm wildlife and even fish if it ends up in the river.

Remove unneeded wire fencing on Ninemile Ranger District on July 14. Removing wire fencing improves wildlife habitat by reducing the probability of injury or death to large animals that could collide with or get entangled in the wire, or to birds that could fly into the wire.

These events will be: *fun!* (you'll interact with others working on a common goal); *healthy!* (you'll be outside and get a bit of exercise); and *a benefit to wildlife!* Volunteering has a meaningful, positive impact on your community. It can have many benefits for you too. Here are some reasons to volunteer:

- *Be part of your community*—We sometimes take for granted the community that we live in. What better way is there to connect with your community and give a little back? As a volunteer, you return to society some of the benefits that society gives you.
- *Motivation and sense of achievement*—It may be true that no one person can solve all the world's problems, but what you can do is make that special corner of the world where we live just a little bit better.
- *New interests*—Sometimes we do get locked into the "rat-race" of life and volunteering offers an escape from everyday routine and helps create a balance in our lives. Finding new interests through volunteering can be fun, relaxing and energizing.
- *New experiences*—Volunteering is a brilliant way to get life experience.
- *Meeting a diverse range of people*—Volunteering brings together a diverse range of people from all backgrounds and walks of life giving you an excellent way to develop your interpersonal skills. Volunteering also offers an incredible networking opportunity. Networking is an exciting benefit of volunteering and you can never tell who you will meet or what new information you will learn and what impact this could have on your life.



Bull elk. Photo by Paul Reed



Elk herd in the Ninemile. Photo by Jan Pierce

WILDLIFE TRACKING - MYSTERIES UNCOVERED!

Truth be told, working in wildlife conservation and wildlife biology doesn't usually guarantee actually seeing wildlife all that often. This is especially the case for rare and/or nocturnal animals. Wildlife tracking through the interpretation of tracks and signs is a method to understand animal presence and behavior that has been used for millennia. It's an exciting way to learn about animals you may never see...and it's a fun learning process. We've included a few tips for folks on how to begin learning or refining your skills in tracking. Even if you've learned them all, conditions may make it difficult to identify tracks to species. There are several good books out there to learn more about wildlife tracks and signs.



Muskrat tracks on ice near shoreline

*To start, consider what kind of animals might live in the area in which you're tracking, whether you're in forest, grasslands, riparian streamside, desert, sagebrush, etc. This will help to narrow down your field of identification.

*Important track features to examine include the number and placement of toes. If you find a 2-toe track, it is likely the hoof of an ungulate (deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, bison, etc). Ungulate tracks may also show dewclaws, the small toes found higher on the leg and covered by a horny sheath. All canine and feline tracks register four toes, as do rabbit tracks. Rodents including squirrels, mice, voles, and porcupine have four toes in the front and five toes in the back. Five toes may indicate a member of the weasel family such as an otter, badger, marten, or fisher. Bears and beaver also have five toes, but their track size and shape are very different.

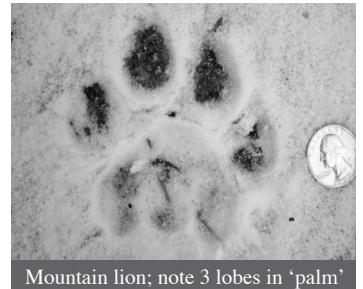
*Track size is thus important to note; knowing the relative size of species will assist in track identification (i.e. you'll never confuse a rodent with a bear!).

*The shape and placement of the toes can be an identifier – in the rear feet of weasels, the smallest, fifth toe is found farther back in the track than other four toes. In coyotes, the outer toes are farther back and tucked in behind the middle two toes, whereas the outer toes of bobcats are nearer the top of the track and somewhat alongside the middle two toes.

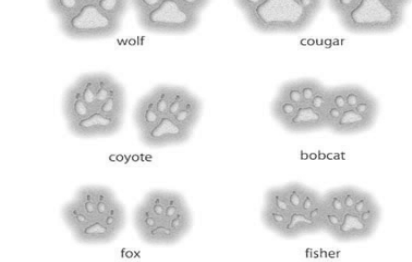
*The shape of the toe pad can be used for identification. Teardrop-shaped toes are a feature of feline tracks as well as minks and smaller weasels. The larger pad (palm) shape and size is important – if the top of the palm pad has two lobes and the back of the pad has three lobes, this is a feline track. Meanwhile, a canine track appears to have one lobe in front and two in the back.

*If nails can be seen in the track, indicated by small triangular marks in front of it, those are claw marks. Most cat tracks will not show claws but canine tracks certainly will. One key to distinguishing between a grizzly bear and a black bear is to compare the size of claws – if the claw marks are close to the toes, this indicates a black bear, while claw marks 2-3 inches from the toes are likely that of a grizzly bear with their enormous digging claws.

*Once tracks are examined, the pattern in which the tracks are spaced can help you identify a species – the width of the track pattern (called the straddle) can be measured, the length of space between one track to the next track made by the same foot (called the stride), the width of the foot itself, and several other measurements are useful. Examining and measuring these patterns is particularly important when two species have similar tracks, such as between mountain lion and lynx. You can also tell via this gait analysis whether the animal was walking, trotting, galloping, bounding, and so on. To do so, you need to be able to distinguish between the front and rear foot of the animal.



Mountain lion; note 3 lobes in 'palm'



From Montana Outdoors Nov-Dec 2006

As you become more adept at identifying footprints, you'll soon be able to 'read' which direction the animal was heading. If the animal has claws, then it's simple as the claw marks point to the direction in which they were heading. If there are no claws, look closer at the ground and you can often see where mud, dirt, or snow has been pushed back by the animal's feet. You can also learn to track animals by examining their scat/feces, as the size, shape, texture, and location of droppings can be indicative, and by looking for beds, wallows, nests, tunnels, burrows, dens, and cavities, other signs on vegetation and fungi, and finally, the kill site and remains of a prey item can indicate the predator species.

The most important step is to go out and have fun uncovering the mysteries of wildlife action in the region!

THAT'S CHEAP BEAR SPRAY!

Bears will soon be emerging from their dens. It's time to put away your bird feeders and make your garbage and livestock feed inaccessible. Please also 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're providing residents of our area with effective bear spray for only \$25 a canister. Retail sells at about \$45, so this is a screamin' deal. For more information, visit our website at www.ninemilewildlife.org, email us at ninemilewildlife@gmail.com, or call Pat Sweeney 626-1610.

Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup



Name _____

Address _____

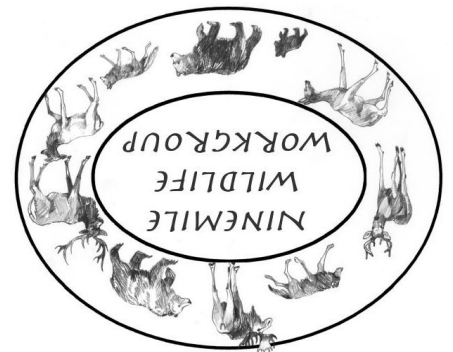
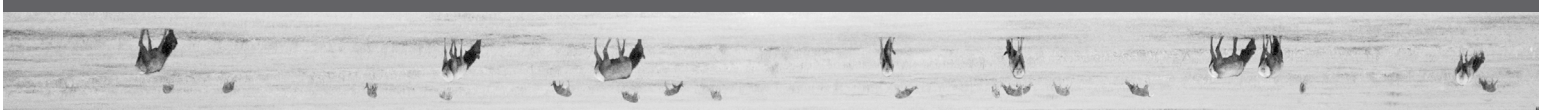
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Please become a member or renew your membership with the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup! Fill out this coupon and mail it along with your membership payment to: Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup, PO Box 435, Huson, MT 59846



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