

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

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APRIL 2015

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

WILDLIFE LECTURE SERIES

This year we are offering 2 lectures, both which will be held at the Alberton Senior Citizens Center, 1.6 miles from Petty Creek I90 Exit 77. These events are free. Please bring friends and family!

On **April 15, at 7pm**, Daniel R. Eacker, a graduate student in the Wildlife Biology Program at the University of Montana, will present on a topic of interest to many in the region: *Elk Calf Survival and Elk Population Dynamics in the Southern Bitterroot Valley*.

On **May 13 at 7pm**, Ally Kever, a graduate student in the Wildlife Biology Program at the University of Montana, will present on a frequently discussed issue in the West: *Management of Wolves in Montana: Priorities and Impacts*.

BIRD WATCHING TRIP

Join board members Pat Sweeney and Jeannie Siegler for our annual bird watching tour on **Saturday, May 16**. Meet at the Nine Mile Ranger Station at 8:00 am for a short orientation and birding in some prime areas in the Nine Mile and Six Mile Valleys. This will be mostly a drive and stop trip but it will feature access to the Checkpoint Ranch which has excellent bird habitat. No experience is necessary just be sure to dress appropriately for the weather and bring some snacks and water. We will be done by noon. Bring binoculars and your bird guides if you have them.

OTHER EVENTS

Our **Adopt-a-Highway cleanup is on Saturday June 27**. There are a couple of other events in the works that may also interest you (a "Healthy Acres" workshop by Missoula County Weed District and Five Valleys Land Trust **May 30th** and a workshop on "biological control of knapweed" **August 19** sponsored by Montana Land Reliance). To hear more, get on our email list: send a note to ninemilewildlife@gmail.com.

IN MEMORIAM

We are deeply saddened to have lost our friend and long-term board member, **Surry Latham**, on February 11 this year. Among her many activities, Surry was always willing to contribute her time and energy to the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup and helped make our community a better place for us all. She will be missed and our condolences go out to her family members, especially to her husband Don, her children, and her many friends.



SUPPORT YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL WILDLIFE WORKGROUP...THE NWW!



NWW's mission is to promote knowledge and stewardship of local wildlife and habitats. We do so through meetings, lectures, workshops, newsletters, Facebook and a website. We manage a community bear aware program, sell bear spray at below cost, sponsor construction of electric fences, promote and place bear resistant garbage containers. The annual lecture series brings experts from a broad spectrum of interests to share their knowledge with local citizens.

NWW is led by a small group of dedicated volunteers and runs on donations only. If you agree with the mission and appreciate our work and programs, please consider making a donation. Thank you for your generosity! And if you would like to be more involved and join our board, we would love to welcome new faces and new ideas!

And please submit topics or articles of interest for the newsletter, and send photos for the newsletter! Email us: ninemilewildlife@gmail.com.

REASONS WHY THE NINEMILE AREA IS SPECIAL FOR WILDLIFE AND FOR PEOPLE WHO ENJOY WILDLIFE-VIEWING

by Pat Sweeney



* If you drive up Petty Creek, you may find bighorn sheep. While there, check out the Petty Creek Sheep Viewing Trail to read interpretive signs and observe 1 of Montana's 45 distinct bighorn sheep herds.

* We still have a healthy moose population as evidenced by their abundant tracks and droppings. In our area, moose are protected from hunting on the north side of Interstate 90. A moose sighting could highlight your day.

* Elk are frequently seen here; a common viewing area for locals is the Check Point Ranch in the Sixmile Valley. All drivers know (and hopefully keep it in mind) that there are numerous white-tailed deer in our valleys and mule deer can be found at higher elevations.

* Beavers and otters are protected from trapping in Ninemile Creek above Pine Creek which is a good place to see beaver dams and lodges.

* Huson is the lower edge of the Clark Fork River-Grass Valley Important Bird Area (IBA) with a "continentally significant" status. More than 230 species of birds (over half of all species ever detected in Montana) have been documented in this IBA since the late 1990s. Species of continental concern that nest here include bald eagle, peregrine falcon, white-throated swift, Lewis's woodpecker, red-naped sapsucker, and willow flycatcher. Good habitat for birds continues past the IBA boundary and we have nesting peregrine falcons, bald eagles, osprey, sandhill cranes and lots of upland and forest birds that you won't usually find in the valleys. Large flocks of wild turkeys are abundant.

* Our large prey base supports a healthy carnivore population. Black and grizzly bears, mountain lions, gray wolves, coyotes and the occasional wolverine can be found here along with most of the smaller carnivores (though our fisher monitoring effort in 2012 didn't find any here, though they've been here in the past).

* The "Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy" delineates the Ninemile as a demographic connectivity area that provides good habitat and an essential link that can be used as a stepping stone to allow wide-ranging animals such as grizzlies to move between large protected ecosystems.



* Conditions creating favorable habitat for bat roosts are relatively rare but recent bridge surveys found that one of our bridges has a bat maternity colony. Bats reproducing here will help keep our mosquito population in check!

* Most of our area is managed by the Forest Service, while conservation easements protect a large percentage of the private land in our valleys from development and loss of wildlife habitat. This helps ensure opportunities for hunters and wildlife watchers for now and into the future.

* Organizations and agencies continue to restore old mining areas to a more natural functioning state. This improves water quality and riparian habitat important to fish and wildlife. Mining restoration has reclaimed much of the upper Ninemile Creek and its tributaries.

* Many of our residents are good land stewards and show their appreciation for our beautiful area and abundant wildlife by working individually or collaboratively with organizations and agencies to enhance wildlife habitat. Things like controlling weeds, and managing forests, grasslands, gardens, livestock and homes in a healthy and wildlife friendly manner all contribute to our quality of life and make it a joy to live or visit here.

Golden-eye duckling. Charles Janson.



Snowshoe hare tracks



Northern harrier



UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE UPDATE: FIRE MANAGEMENT IN THE NINEMILE/ALBERTON REGION

by Jeffrey Hayes



Roman Creek ecosystem maintenance burning



One year after prescribed burning.



View of White Mtn burning from Schley Mtn

Thanks to this update and pictures from Jeff Hayes, Assistant Fire Management Officer-Fuels at the Ninemile Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest.

The Ninemile Ranger District has several large timber sale projects in the implementation stage. The Barrette Creek Fuels Reduction Project, Frenchtown Face Ecosystem Restoration Project, Petty Rock Timber Sale, and the South Fork Fish Project which are focused on reducing fuels from harvest and understory thinning adjacent to many private landowners. Prescribed burning will reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor while providing for healthy stands of timber, increasing the quality and quantity of forage for elk, deer, and other wildlife habitat, maintaining water quality and stream stability. The thinning treatments will also likely increase herbaceous under story plants that support insects, which flammulated owls prey upon. Additionally, these areas will also be suitable nesting and foraging sites for flammulated owls, goshawks, and pileated woodpeckers. Portions of some of the projects will maintain and enhance big game winter range and migratory corridors for elk and mule deer. Without the prescribed burning, forage for big game would bottom out in productivity.



In 2014, the fire and fuels management program accomplished several burns across the district. In the spring, approximately 350-400 acres were under-story burned in the Roman Creek, Houle Creek, and Stoney Creek Drainages utilizing both hand and aerial ignition. One hundred acres were prescribed burned in the Printers Creek Drainage in Petty Creek. Approximately 250 acres were burned using a helicopter and plastic sphere dispenser in Corral Creek as part of the Petty Rock Timber Sale. In the fall, 1,400 acres were ignited near White Mountain Lookout as part of the South Fork Fish Project. Additionally, 150 acres were prescribed burned in Barrette Creek as part of the Barrette Creek Fuels Reduction Project.

In 2015, the fire and fuels management program has prescribed burn units planned in Moncure Creek as part of the Barrette Creek Fuels Reduction Project. In the Frenchtown Face Project, prescribed burn units are planned in Roman Creek, Isaac Creek, Stoney Creek, Sixmile Creek and the Butler Creek Drainages. The South Fork Fish Project has prescribed burn units located in Owl Creek, Oriole Creek, and Lupine Creek. Some of the objectives of these projects are to maintain and improve wildlife security and habitat, maintain water quality and fish habitat, maintain and improve forest health and reduce the risk of high severity fires and damage from insects while maintaining a natural appearing landscape. Mule deer and elk winter shrub forage production will be increased from the combined thinning treatments followed by prescribed burning. The prescribed burning will stimulate vegetative growth of the understory to improve winter range and return forests to more natural conditions. The Ninemile Ranger District, Lolo NF has received funding through partnerships with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Foundation on many of the burn acres in the Frenchtown Face Project to improve elk and wild turkey habitat.

All burning will be weather and fuel condition dependent. If ignition takes place, there is potential the burning could limit public access in this area. For public safety, recreationists are asked to be aware of fire crews and vehicles in this area. Prescribed fire road signs will be posted along roads in the prescribed burn area. The prescribed burn will be ignited only if operational safety, fuel moistures, weather conditions and air quality parameters are met.

Moose in the Clark Fork. Jim Merifield.



One year after burning in Sixmile. J. Hayes



Turkeys in Roman Creek after burning. J. Hayes



KILLER SONGBIRDS: THE NORTHERN SHRIKE

by Pat Sweeney

One bird I look forward to seeing every winter is the northern shrike. I'll often see this robin-sized songbird perched on wires as I drive the roads in our area, but even more special is spotting the one that appears to set up its territory in our yard every year. The northern shrike is approximately 10 inches in length. It is gray above and white below, with a black mask through the eyes and a finely barred breast. The wings are black with white patches, and the tail is black with white outer feathers. Immatures are similar to adults, but the mask is faint, and the breast is more heavily barred.

This year we noticed that our bird feeders didn't have as much activity about the same time we noticed the shrike perched in our crabapple. Could this be a coincidence, or it could it be that most of our feeder birds have decided to eat somewhere else as a shrike was nearby. You see, shrikes are unique in that they are the only songbirds that consistently prey on vertebrate animals, which could include the birds visiting our feeders. Like the bills of falcons, shrikes' bills are hooked, with a tooth-like structure on the upper mandible and a corresponding notch on the lower bill. Unlike true raptors however, the shrike lacks the powerful talons that hawks use to dispatch their prey.



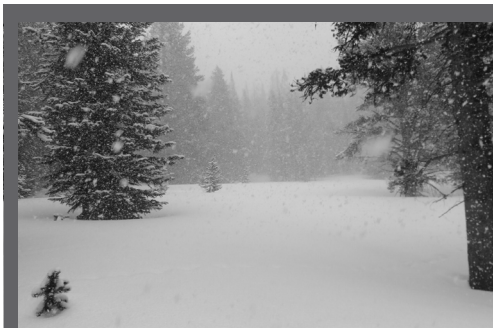
Northern shrike. P. Sweeney

Shrikes perch up high to search for a meal. Once prey is sighted, the bird drops from its perch and attacks in a slightly undulating flight. It knocks flying victims to the ground with a blow from its bill or seizes them with its feet. Once on the ground, it kills with a series of bites. Another hunting strategy is to move through the branches of trees trying to flush birds, which are then pursued. Birds as large as jays and mourning doves may be taken, as well as many smaller birds such as chickadees, snow buntings, crossbills, sparrows, and redpolls.

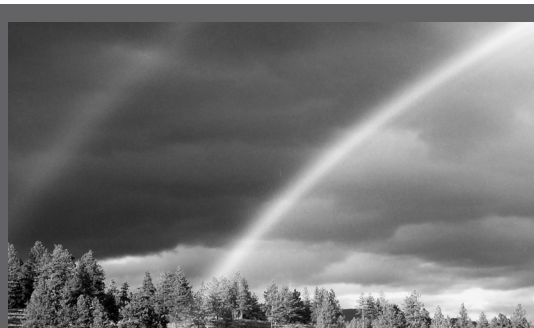
Shrikes also feed on small mammals, and insects, sometimes impaling them on spines or barbed wire fences to store them for later consumption. This habit has earned them the nickname "butcher birds." We've never seen them kill any birds near our house, but they do spend a lot of time gleaning insects and spiders hiding in nooks around our windows and siding, and probably forcing our feeder birds to find a meal someplace safer.

The northern shrike is circumpolar in northern latitudes and is known as the great grey shrike in Eurasia. The scientific name, *Lanius excubitor*, means "sentinel butcher." *Lanius* is the Latin term for a butcher, while *excubitor* is Latin for a watchman or sentinel. This refers to the birds' two most conspicuous behaviors; storing food animals by impaling them on thorns and using exposed tree-tops or poles to watch the surrounding area for possible prey. Large bones and similar inedible parts of prey animals are usually not ingested, but smaller ones such as tiny bones or the wing covers of beetles are eaten and later regurgitated as pellets.

During winter, check wires and other high perches for this sentinel butcher, as they arrive to Montana around October and leave around April. You may find its cousin, the loggerhead shrike, in Montana during spring and summer, as those arrive in May and leave in August. Loggerheads are more commonly found east of the Continental Divide than in our region. Both these species have similar behaviors and look similar with northern shrikes a bit larger and paler than the loggerhead shrike. Check your bird book to identify the differences. In Montana you can pretty much look at your calendar to differentiate the two songbird predators. Keep an eye out to spot these interesting birds!



Winter, for a short time.



Pot o' gold. Sharon Sweeney.



Dragonfly. Charles Janson.

CITIZEN SCIENCE : COME JOIN ME!

by Jeannie Siegler

'Citizen Science' (according to Wikipedia, also referred to as crowd-science, crowd-sourced science, civic science, networked science) is actually a new term for some old practices. In 2014 'citizen science' officially appeared in the Oxford Dictionary as scientific work undertaken by members of the general public. In our area there are several ways to participate in the collection of science data. For instance, you may be familiar with National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count or Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (and Audubon) eBird program (an online checklist/reporting program).



Since 2013 I've been participating in The Glacier National Park Citizen Science Program, coordinated by the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center (CCRLC). I'm involved in the High Country Citizen Science Project – I and other citizen scientists participate in backcountry surveys to collect data on the number and distribution of three species of concern found in Glacier's high country: mountain goats, pikas, and bighorn sheep.



Our training includes a one-day session in how to use a GPS, observe a designated area in the field for a specific time, photograph species if possible and accurately record data in a designated format. All information concerning the species observed is tallied and then entered into a larger regional database for further study.



Even though we are volunteers of varying experience, the results over the last five years show that by recording accurate and timely information our results are statistically similar to information collected from professionals. This is great news – using volunteers for data collection can be much cheaper to conduct important research, and we can increase capacity of the researchers since there are many of us covering lots of sites at any given time!

Here in the Ninemile Valley we hike, ride or hunt in our beautiful region. We are observant of our wildlife as we move along the trails or climb the high peaks. Even our own NWW through our Bear Aware program records bear sightings in any given season. If you think it might be fun to try some "citizen science" in our area, such as observing pikas, for example, give me a call and maybe we can partner a hike this year and do some observations in our valley.

See you on the trails! *Jeannie Siegler* (626-5611)

A FEW COOL WEBSITES TO PARTICIPATE IN CITIZEN SCIENCE

- scistarter.com
- ebird.org
- iNaturalist.org
- wildthingsultd.org/wildlife-observation-mapping-tool/
- wolverinefoundation.org/wolverine-identification/wolverine-observation-data-entry-form



Harvest in the Ninemile.



Moose. Jan Pierce.



Springtime. Pat Sweeney.

NINEMILE WILDLIFE WORKGROUP

LIKE us on Facebook and check out updates and pictures there
www.facebook.com/ninemilewildlife



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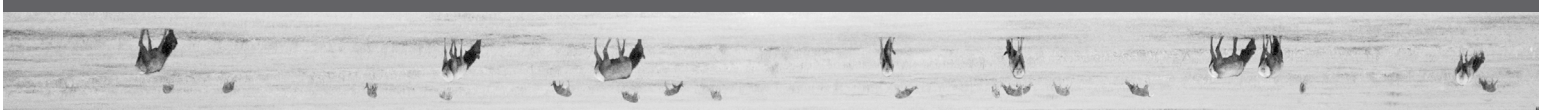
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Please consider supporting our organization so we can continue our mission! Tax-deductible donations can be sent to the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup! Please fill out this section and mail it with your donation to:

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