



Upper Snake Region Annual Habitat Report

2008 Activities and Accomplishments

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Issue 2

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Greetings.....and thanks for your interest in our second annual Regional Habitat Report. This is a brief summary of our activities to help folks better understand the habitat resources in the Upper Snake and know what's being done by IDFG to manage them. Habitat management isn't flashy but we have a deep conviction that "habitat is where it's at." As a veteran wildlife biologist once said, "we can't manage wildlife with parking lots and computers." Truly spoken. It takes real habitat, a resource that shrinks a little every day. Access for fishing and hunting is also part of our program. We hope you'll agree that 2008 was a productive and interesting year for the Upper Snake regional habitat program. This newsletter will be posted on the IDFG website on the "Wildlife" page, under "Habitat Newsletter" (Upper Snake). If you find it interesting, please tell your friends or pass it along. We can most effectively serve the public when the public is informed and involved, so if you have questions or want to share your thoughts, please give us a call.

Protecting Land for Wildlife

In 2007, Idaho Department of Fish and Game owned or managed **86,362** acres for

agement Area. In both cases, the landowners approached the Department about acquisition because they firmly



At 90 acres, the Schluter Acquisition is not large, but it protects habitat important for mule deer and other wildlife and keeps development in Meadow Creek Canyon at bay.

wildlife habitat in the Upper Snake Region. In 2008, two properties were acquired that added about 230 critical acres to the Tex Creek Wildlife Man-

believed that their properties should be in public ownership.

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Wildlife Management Areas

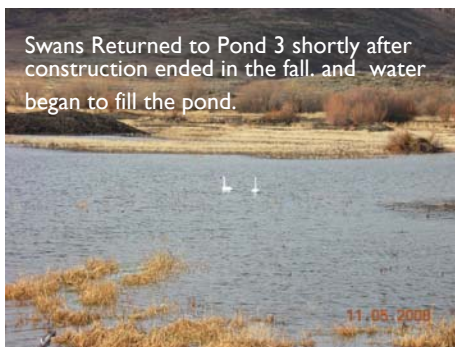
WMA Vision Statement

“Our WMAs will be managed to showcase exemplary wildlife habitat, promote positive working relations with neighbors and offer high quality wildlife-based recreational opportunities to the public.”

Sand Creek

Sand Creek WMA and Chester Wetlands Segment are located north of St Anthony. Both are very popular with hunters and fishermen and wildlife viewers.

From February to April, Sand Creek WMA personnel were very involved in an effort to feed hundreds of mule deer stranded by exceptionally deep snow on the Juniper Mountains. Dozens of volunteers helped with this effort to move tons of alfalfa pellets to the deer via snowmobile, snowcat and ATV.



Swans Returned to Pond 3 shortly after construction ended in the fall, and water began to fill the pond.

The leak in the Pond #3 dike at Sand Creek Ponds was repaired in the fall of 2008. At the same time, several irrigation head gates and delivery

pipes were replaced, nesting islands were re-built, several dikes were armored and approximately 50 acres of wetlands and adjoining uplands were treated with prescribed fire. This project was paid for largely from a North American Wetland Conservation Act grant through the Teton Regional Land Trust, that was intended to improve trumpeter swan habitat.

If you hunt Sand Creek during the fall you might notice livestock on the WMA. Livestock trespass is a common challenge. The manager is continuing to work with the permittees to reduce trespass.

Sand Creek WMA has a new technician. Duston Curreton, who has been the MDI Technician for the past three years, was hired as the full-time technician at Sand Creek WMA. Duston hails from Rexburg and received his Bachelor's Degree in Biology from BYU-I.

Duston is an avid outdoorsman and especially enjoys steelhead fishing with his brothers and dad. Duston, his wife Camille and their three children reside on the Chester Wetlands Segment.

Cartier

Cartier WMA is in Madison County along the Henry's Fork next to Beaver Dick Park. It is owned by the Bureau of Reclamation and managed by IDFG for waterfowl and upland habitat.

The Teton Regional Land Trust, using Cartier WMA as a keystone property, has nearly surrounded the WMA with lands protected from development by conservation easements. This effort will help protect the wildlife values at Cartier WMA.

Tex Creek

Tex Creek WMA is located 15 miles east of Idaho Falls. It is a popular big game and upland game hunting area and provides critical winter range for mule deer, elk and moose. It is a cooperative project with the Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Idaho Department of Lands and Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Tex Creek WMA concentrates efforts on improving winter range for mule deer, elk and moose and habitat for upland birds. This year they planted about 180 acres of grain for wildlife and 34,000 shrubs.

Tex Creek WMA also gained a new technician. Clay Hayes grew up on a cattle ranch in Florida where his fascination with wildlife began. He went on to earn a B.S. in Natural Resources from the University of Florida and a Masters in Wildlife Sciences from Mississippi State University. Clay has always been passionate about wildlife habitat management and is happy to be working in Southeast Idaho. He and his wife, Liz, are expecting their first child this spring.

Deer Parks

Deer Parks is located on the Snake River north of Menan. It is owned by the BLM and managed by IDFG. It was created as partial mitigation for habitat lost to Palisades Reservoir.

Deer Parks had a busy year. The manager is still catching up on a lot of equipment issues from the original owner. This year he replaced two pivots and two underground mainlines.



Hundreds of acres were sharecropped at Deer Parks WMA this year. The Department's share of the production was left standing for wildlife and

was an irresistible magnet for wildlife all winter long.

Mud Lake



A volunteer removes ducks from a trap at Mud Lake WMA. Ducks are tested for disease and banded to help determine migration movements.

Mud Lake WMA is a waterfowl production area located at Mud Lake/Terreton area. It is also a popular area for hunting upland birds, waterfowl and big game as well as fishing.

Avian Influenza sampling and duck banding were conducted at Mud Lake WMA during 2008. Ducks are live-trapped using swim/walk in traps. The trapping starts about mid-September and must be completed 10 days prior to the opening of any waterfowl hunting season. The banding gives biologists information on duck movements when bands are returned. 315 ducks were banded at Mud Lake WMA in 2008 and over the last three years we have banded approximately 542 ducks at Mud Lake WMA.

Market Lake

Market Lake WMA is located near Roberts. It is a waterfowl production area and is popular with waterfowl, upland bird and big game hunters.

Avian influenza (AI) testing has been a prominent program at both Market Lake and Mud Lake WMAs. In the Upper Snake Region, the Department, Idaho Waterfowl Association and Eastern Idaho Retriever Club sampled a total of 163 waterfowl species for AI in 2008 from August through December (later birds were hunter harvested birds). To date, H5NI-high Pathogen strain of AI has not been detected in North America.

Market Lake WMA personnel have been busy this year treating 500 acres for weeds, establishing food-plots and working on a new master plan to dramatically improve efficiency and habitat quality.

Although the WMA is mainly for waterfowl production, it is very important to big game as well. White-tailed deer, mule deer and moose all live year round on Market Lake WMA. Over 200 pronghorn also winter on Market Lake WMA, underscoring the intrinsic value of preserving habitat for all species.



Pheasant Releases Continue

In the Upper Snake Region, pheasant releases continue to be popular with hunters. In 2008, we released 1,948 roosters between Mud Lake, Market Lake and Cartier WMAs. This is a reduction of 22% from 2007 because of budget constraints. Each bird costs \$16 so a special WMA pheasant permit is required to hunt them.

Market Lake WMA maintains a special area where adults are encouraged to bring kids out to hunt. In 2009, Mud Lake and Cartier WMAs will also reserve areas for youth hunting.

Mule Deer Initiative

The Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) is a concerted effort to improve mule deer habitat, populations and hunting and continues to be a top priority of the Department of Fish and Game. Projects completed this year include planting 82,000 shrubs on winter range from Arco to Tex Creek. About 650 acres of existing CRP was improved by removing sod forming grasses and replacing them with native bunch grasses and forbs such as alfalfa, small burnet and milkvetch. These species provide much better forage and cover, not just for mule deer but for a number of other native species as well. Another 650 acres were prepared for seeding.

Our new technician for MDI is Randy Poole. Volunteers know Randy from his efforts last year as AmeriCorps' MDI Volunteer Coordinator. Randy grew up in Idaho Falls and earned a Bachelor's degree from ISU. Randy is an avid hunter and fisherman, and especially enjoys muzzleloader hunting. Randy and his wife, Sheree, have four children. Randy enjoys fly fishing, hunting, camping, photography, and spending time with his family.

Did you know?

In the Upper Snake Region alone, thousands of acres of winter range are lost each year, mainly to housing and other human development. Habitat biologists work hard to minimize the impacts of developments on wildlife.

Winter Range Research

Winter range is critical seasonal habitat used by big game species. It must provide forage, a place to escape the more extreme weather found on summer ranges and security from disturbance so fat reserved garnered on summer range last as long as possible.

Winter range use by mule deer at Tex Creek WMA is the focus of a research project conducted by habitat biologist Eric Anderson, who is also the manager of Tex Creek WMA.

Eric is investigating mule deer use of the different habitats to determine which habitat components are most important to winter survival for mule deer. Over the past several years, he has marked adult female deer with GPS radio collars and collects habitat use data every two hours.

When the data is analyzed it should reveal significant use patterns that will help Eric to focus management activities on those aspects of habitat that provide the most benefit to wintering mule deer.

Volunteers

Volunteers are the backbone of many of our efforts to improve habitat for mule deer. This past year, AmeriCorps volunteer, Randy Poole, served as our MDI Volunteer Coordinator and did a great job recruiting volunteers and accomplishing dozens of projects. Four hundred and eleven volunteers donated over 5,553 hours last year for mule deer and other fish and wildlife projects in the Upper Snake Region alone. Jay Mincher was honored as Volunteer of the Year for dedicating over 150 hours of service to wildlife. In 2009, AmeriCorps volunteer Kaleb Phelps, will lead the MDI Volunteer Program. Kaleb grew up in Blackfoot and earned a Bachelor's degree from BYU-I in biology and a Masters of public administration from Boise State. Kaleb is a triathlete and hopes to be a top finisher in this year's Rush Triathlon.

If you would like to volunteer to help fish or wildlife, please call Kaleb Phelps at 208/525-7290.

Fawning Habitat Research



A project is underway in Units 69, 66 and 66A (mule deer that winter at Tex Creek WMA summer in these units) to determine the characteristics of habitats selected by mule deer does when they have their fawns.

Habitat Biologist Curtis Hendricks is following does marked with GPS radio-collars. These collars collect location data every two to four hours and help to pinpoint the activities of the does during the fawning season. Curtis and his crew also track the does from the ground as they near parturition and find the fawns immediately after birth. Fawns are also fitted with tiny radio collars to help determine habitat use and survival during their first weeks of life.

A more precise understanding of how the does and fawns use plant associations, cover densities and other habitat variables will help managers to target habitat restoration and improvement efforts.

Access Management

There are 55 access areas in the Upper Snake Region. They stretch from Teton Valley to Mackay and vary from well developed boat ramps to walk-in fishing access. Almost all of the 55 access areas require weekly maintenance and cleaning during the summer.

This program is different from the Access Yes! Program which pays landowners to allow access. Many of the access areas in the Upper Snake are owned by IDFG. Others are managed cooperatively with different agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management. Several are agreements with private landowners.

The crew has been working hard to bring access areas up to standard with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

Henry's Lake (Frome Park)



The slab for the new boat ramp weighed 50 tons but was pushed into place with hardly a ripple.

Frome Park is a picnic/boat launch access area on the west side of Henry's Lake, a popular destination for anglers from around the world. It is owned by Fremont County and jointly managed by the County and Idaho Department of Fish and Game. A project began in 2004 to improve the facility by replacing restrooms and adding sidewalks and docks that would accommodate users with disabilities. In 2008, the boat launching area was slated for reconstruction, including lengthening the ramp further into the water. When water levels were at their lowest in the fall of 2008, Jim Moore, Access Manager for the Upper Snake Region of Idaho Department of Fish and Game, moved a crew onsite to begin the final phase of construction. They were immediately faced with a dilemma. The lake was not low enough to allow them to work where the new ramp was to go. They could construct a barricade completely around the area and pump the water out but they were reluctant to do this because of the inevitable sediment stirring that would occur.

Jim and his assistant, Mike Tomchak, finally came up with a unique solution: they would pour the slab above the water line on a temporary mound and slide it into place using two D-6 Caterpillar crawlers. Sounds easy except that the steel reinforced concrete slab would weigh nearly 50 tons. But after Jim and Mike were through engineering the project, not only did the ramp slide exactly into place, moving it hardly created a ripple on the lake surface.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game provided \$50,000 for this renovation. \$37,000 came from state motorboat funds and \$13,000 from regional access budgets. Most work was performed by IDFG Access Program personnel and inmate labor from Idaho Department of Corrections. Fremont Co. provided demolition and offsite disposal of the old ramp and supplied most of the project's required fill material. The public put the ramp to the test immediately after completion and all comments have been very positive.

Other Projects

Maintenance on 55 access sites is a big and expensive job. This aspect alone takes considerable time for the access crew to accomplish. Some days the crew may drive 300 miles to service a couple of areas.

Consistent facility upgrades require considerable planning. The Access Manager first must budget well in advance to improve a facility. Then he must be sure all permits and surveys are in order before starting work. All this has been done to refurbish the Roberts Gravel Pond and Warm Slough access area is in the works.

Actual work will begin in summer 2009.

The Access program also helps with a myriad of other projects. This year they spent considerable time helping Sand Creek WMA with the renovations at the Sand Creek ponds, plowed snow to allow angler access at Mud Lake WMA, hauled hay and other feed for emergency big game feeding, moved snow at the regional office and many other activities.

Did you know?

Over 300,000 sportsmen and women use IDFG managed access areas in the Upper Snake Region each year. With the exception of the South Fork Fee Area, there is no charge to use these facilities.

The Upper Snake Region is known for its passionate anglers and hunters, volunteers, active conservation groups and non-governmental organizations. In addition, we are fortunate to have an outstanding group of scientists in our partner agencies and Universities that help IDFG to accomplish its mission. We are proud of our efforts and accomplishments over the past year, but we know full well that we could accomplish very little without the cooperation and support from the many groups and individuals who help us. In addition to the countless anglers and hunters who've simply expressed support for what we do, we'd like to thank our partners:

Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Teton Regional Land Trust
IDFG Volunteers
Private Landowners
Ducks Unlimited
Rocky Mtn Elk Foundation
Mule Deer Foundation
Pheasants Forever
The Nature Conservancy
Bureau of Reclamation
U.S. Forest Service
Bureau of Land Management
Fish and Wildlife Service
Brigham Young University-Idaho
Idaho State University
Dr. John Kie
Dr. Terry Bowyer

Did you know?

Noxious weeds such as leafy spurge and knapweed have infested over 8 million acres in Idaho (source: Idaho Dept of Ag) reducing forage and habitat for wildlife by as much as 90% in

some areas.

In 2008, The Upper Snake Region of the Department of Fish and Game spent \$200,000, including grant money, to control noxious weeds. 3300 acres were treated.

Biologists actively participate in Cooperative Weed Management Area groups as part of a larger coordinated effort with counties and other state and federal agencies to combat this menace to wildlife.

Acquisitions—Continued from page 1

Landowners Jerry and Bea Schluter, even donated over 20 acres to help make the deal work.

The new total acres owned or managed by the Department in 2008 jumped to 86,592 acres. This sounds like a lot of property, and certainly these acres are critical for wildlife management and hunting and fishing access. However, this represents only about one half of one percent of the area within the Upper Snake Region (13,193,600 acres) where wildlife, fish and access receive top priority.

Acquisition of key properties continues to be an essential part of wildlife conservation and management. As real estate agents like to point out, "they aren't making any more land" and each time land is converted from habitat to some other use, wildlife loses.

The Department of Fish and Game does not try to acquire every available piece of property. The goal is to acquire key habitats to make sure they are protected in sufficient size and quantity to provide for the needs of wildlife forever.

various sources. One primary source is from the sale of big game tags. One dollar of every elk, deer and antelope tag is set aside to acquire or improve habitat and for emergency winter feeding. However, this generates less than half a million dollars statewide each year.

Another source is mitigation for federal hydropower projects such as Palisades Dam. Mitigation is a process where damage to one resource is "made up for" or mitigated by protecting habitat in other places.

Called conservation buyers, wealthy private donors may buy property for the Department. Other individuals, such as the Schluters, choose to donate property. One of the benefits of this includes tax incentives.

Foundations such as the Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation also help provide a source of funding for habitat acquisition. You don't have to be wealthy to participate in habitat protection if you are a member of a foundation. Ordinary citizens can make contributions that will help acquire and protect habitat.

Fish and Game-owned properties provide a number of benefits for wildlife enthusiasts. Hunters and fishermen directly benefit from acquisitions that provide open space for hunting and waters for fishing and protect habitat values such as winter range.

However, surveys indicate that 39% of the people who use of these properties are visitors there just to enjoy wildlife viewing or the scenic beauty of these areas.

These properties are definitely family oriented with hiking trails, camping (in some areas) and plenty of open space. Schools also frequently use the properties as outdoor classrooms.

The properties are not taxed but the Department pays fees in lieu of taxes (FILT) to the county where the property resides.
