

## Highlights On Wildlife

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Young Aspen stand.

The Helena National Forest Wildlife Program continued to flourish during 2003. Despite an intense fire season that precluded our ability to achieve some of our habitat enhancement projects, we worked hard and accomplished many innovative projects that will benefit wildlife that live on the Helena National Forest. Read on for a general overview of these accomplishments!

### Habitat Restoration

This year we restored about 325 acres of habitat that benefited many wildlife species. Habitat restoration projects included:

**Aspen restoration** Aspen stands across much of the Forest are declining, in part due to lack of fire and overbrowsing by domestic and wild animals. Aspen provides food and habitat for many wildlife species, especially cavity-nesting birds and ruffed grouse. A key part of our wildlife program includes restoration of aspen stands. This year we protected 5 acres of aspen in Slim Sam Creek (Townsend) through construction of brush fences and maintenance of existing fences.

**Noxious weeds** Noxious weeds reduce the food available for many species of wildlife. The wildlife program contributes to the very active weed management program on the Helena National Forest. In conjunction with key wildlife partners that included the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and the Foundation for North American

Wild Sheep, 225 acres of noxious weed infestations in the Elkhorn Wildlife Management Unit were sprayed with herbicide. An additional 50 acres of weed infestations were controlled on the Lincoln Ranger District.

### Riparian Enhancement

Streamsides are extremely vital to many wildlife species. In fact, these habitats are used proportionately more than any other habitat type relative to their availabilities. This year we protected approximately 20 acres of riparian habitat from livestock damage along Staubach Creek in the Elkhorns.

**Prescribed Fire** Until recently, we didn't fully appreciate the vital role fire plays in maintaining wildlife habitat. Today, prescribed fire plays an important role in slowly restoring this ecological process to the land. This year we enhanced 25 acres of bighorn sheep habitat through the use of prescribed fire. Thanks to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks for partnering up with us!

**The Return of the Natives** This year, we helped Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks reintroduce ten mountain goats to the Scapegoat Wilderness, a great way to help celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this beautiful wilderness near Lincoln.

### Inventory and Monitoring

This year we continued several monitoring efforts in order to expand our knowledge of where animals live across the Forest, and to better understand the effects of our habitat management projects.

**Forest Carnivore Winter Track Surveys** Following animal tracks through fresh, powdery snow is one way to determine who's about in the woods. This year we conducted winter track surveys in several areas across the Forest including the Big Belt Mountains

and the Blackfoot country in and around Lincoln. As in 2002, we inventoried about 70,000 acres on snowmobiles and on skis with the help of the Student Chapter of the Wildlife Society at Montana State University. These efforts told us that there are lynx, coyotes, bobcat, and marten (as well as lots of rabbits and squirrels) living in the Helena National Forest.

### Goshawk Inventories and Monitoring

During 2003, we continued to be dive-bombed by goshawks--thank goodness for hardhats! Adult goshawks are staunch defenders of their young, which make them easier to locate than most raptor nests, if you don't mind having a screaming bird hurtling at you! There are about 20 known goshawk nests across the Helena National Forest. This year, in addition to monitoring those nests, we surveyed an additional 21,000 acres looking for new nests.

**Other Raptor Surveys** The Helena National Forest is home to a wide variety of birds of prey or raptors, including the threatened bald eagle, and the once-endangered peregrine falcon. There are at least 2 known bald eagle nests and 2 known peregrine falcon eyries (a nest on a cliff) on the Helena National Forest. In addition to monitoring these known nests, we surveyed 1,700 acres in hopes of locating additional eyries. In a separate effort, raptor surveys continued on Roger's Pass on the Lincoln Ranger District. This has been an ongoing effort to count raptors as they migrate south for the winter. This year we also surveyed for flammulated owls in the Elkhorns. To be effective, these surveys must be conducted at night. Quietly moving through the night forest in hopes of detecting this elusive owl is an experience not to be missed.

### Landbird Monitoring Program

This year we monitored the response of tall willow riparian

communities to different livestock grazing regimes. This is the second year of this study and part of a larger, 10-year study designed to understand regional landbird trend and the effect of land management activities on these landbirds.

### Mountain Goat Monitoring

2002 saw the return of the natives to the Scapegoat Wilderness. During 2003, we continued to monitor the success of this reintroduction.

### Grizzly Bear Education and Monitoring

Each year we partner with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to promote safe recreation practices to help make humans and grizzly bears more compatible. In addition to overall education on how humans and grizzlies can coexist, the program includes relocating bears with "bad behaviors".

**Please see also related monitoring/inventory stories on woodpeckers, North Elkhorns project, and lynx.**

### Partnerships

Each year the Wildlife Program depends on partner contributions, both in dollars and in-kind service, to accomplish a vast array of projects. This year our partners contributed about \$100,000. We'd like to recognize and thank you. Without you, we really couldn't do it!

- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
- Montana Department Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Audubon Society,
- Wild Things, Unlimited
- Foundation for North American Wild Sheep
- Wildlife Research Institute
- Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- And the many, many citizens who volunteered their time!