

## What Ever Happened To The North Elkhorns Project?

Jodie Canfield, Wildlife Biologist and Elkhorn Coordinator

A court decision may not only decide the fate of the North Elkhorns Vegetation project, but also our ability to complete a study on the effects of fire on sensitive wildlife species.

The Rocky Mountain Research Station is leading the effort to determine the most productive habitats for cavity-nesting birds among three fire conditions (prescribed fire, wildfire, and fire exclusion) in the intermountain west. Two years ago, they approached the Helena National Forest about including the ponderosa pine thinning and prescribed burning project in the northern Elkhorn Mountains in their 8-state study.

Head researcher Vicki Saab was aware that the project was under litigation by two environmental groups, and that there was some risk of never having the opportunity to monitor the “post-treatment” results. But when Vicki toured the area two years ago, she was convinced

that the project, which thins out the smaller trees to open up the forest, had great potential to help us understand the trade-offs of active management versus no action.

So we rolled up our sleeves and went to work collecting information about the structure of the forest in two areas – a treatment area that is part of the North Elkhorns Vegetation Project, and a control area that would not be thinned or burned. We found that the younger trees in the forest were shading out the shrubs and grasses, making it tough for many wildlife species to find food. The delicatessen of this forest is its aspen groves, which need to be periodically rejuvenated by fire.

Last spring, contract biologist Lisa Bate and seasonal employee Troy Bader took on the task of documenting all the birds that live in the 2 areas, and following cavity-nesting birds until they found their nest trees. They

tracked down 25 woodpecker nests last summer – all located in aspen groves. Then the fun began. Using a “peeper” camera, they were able to look into the nest cavities and count the eggs and then the hatchlings. In this way, they collected data on mortality rates through the nesting season. How do eggs disappear and young birds die? Lisa suggested that they become a menu item for red squirrels while woodpecker parents are busy finding insects for their hatchlings. Cavity-nesters are important because they eat bugs and control the levels of insects that attack the forest.

The Rocky Mountain Research Station will continue to compile and analyze the data we’ve collected so far while we wait for disposition of the lawsuit. Data on birds in the two areas will be collected for one more spring. This will give us one page in the story about the relationships between the forest and its occupants. We hope we can complete the thinning and



Large, fire-scarred Ponderosa Pine we want to maintain on the landscape.

burning and add to our knowledge of management trade-offs.

## Insects Attack Area Forests

Jack Kendley, Forest Silviculturist

The continuing drought is weakening area trees and making them more susceptible to insect attack. Three major insects are active in the area.

The Douglas-fir beetle is a bark beetle that takes advantage of weakened Douglas-fir trees. This insect has become quite active in trees damaged by the fires of 2000. Control measures have been taken using pheromones to trap the insect or in some instances to disperse it from high value stands such as campgrounds or old growth forests.

Mountain pine beetle is a bark beetle that is attacking ponderosa

pine, lodgepole pine and whitebark pine. The insect is quite active in ponderosa pine in the Helena area and in the southern Big Belt Mountains. Bark beetle attacks can be identified by pitch oozing from infested trees and boring dust around the base of the tree.

Western spruce budworm is a defoliating insect that attacks new foliage on Douglas fir. The insect is active in the Flesher pass area and the upper Sulphur Bar drainage near Deep Creek.

Every year the insect activity on the Helena National Forest is mapped. Insect activity

has roughly tripled between the mapping done in 2003 as compared with 2002. There is a great deal of information on the internet about insects and diseases that affect conifers, including the pathogens which are active in the Helena area. You can acquire information initially at [www.forestryimages.com](http://www.forestryimages.com) or simply type in the name of the insect or disease on any search engine.

There are new reports of a fatal fungus attacking blue spruce, the most predominant conifer growing in Helena. The Cytospora canker is especially severe in older blue spruce trees

during periods of prolonged stress. Needles on infected trees turn brown and die and display large areas of dried resin. Branch pruning will reduce the spread of the fungus and deep and thorough watering will improve the health of the tree.