



Photo: Dan Williams

Big changes for hunters

Check out the new rules, fees, application process for the 2012-2013 hunting seasons.

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After the burn

Wildfire destroys, nourishes wildlife

By Dan Williams

Three months after the most destructive wildfire in New Mexico history roared through the Jemez Mountains, elk biologist Stewart Liley surveyed the 157,000-acre “burn scar” from the air – and liked what he saw.

“We’re seeing good numbers of elk returning to the burn areas,”



Photo: Rourke McDermott

Liley said. He counted about 150 elk within the perimeter of the Las Conchas Fire when he flew over the

area in a helicopter in late September. Nearly all of the elk were drawn by new growth of nutritious shoots of grass, mahogany and oak.



Photo: Blake Swanson

Liley and others who pay close attention to fish and wildlife habitat agree that wildfire is an important component in the natural cycle that provides food, water and shelter for all wildlife species. The most beneficial fires burn at low intensity, clearing debris and leaving healthy forest behind. But even the devastating, landscape-scale blazes like this



Photo: Dan Williams

summer’s Las Conchas and Wallow fires can have positive influences on wildlife.

“Portions of the fire were very hot and will take years to rebound,” Liley said of Las Conchas. “But other areas burned in a mosaic pattern,



Photo: Blake Swanson

A charred elk skull and a few shoots of new green grass rest beneath what once was a thick forest canopy within the perimeter of the Las Conchas Fire, the largest wildfire ever recorded in New Mexico. Wildlife biologists say the fire in the Jemez Mountains will mostly benefit wildlife in the area by creating more meadows and allowing nutritious shrubs, grasses and forbs to grow.

and with the monsoons coming right after the fire, many pockets already are greening up and the elk are keying in on them.”

Mick Trujillo, hunt manager at the Valles Caldera National Preserve, watched the Las Conchas Fire

march through about one-third of the 88,900-acre preserve. Although some areas were devastated, others burned lightly or in patches that will open forest canopies and create new meadows. When fire crews attempted to stop the fire from

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Young shooters have a blast

Los Alamos club hosts 2nd annual state tournament

By Mark Gruber

Ah, the sweet smell of gunpowder in the morning. Not everyone can appreciate it, but to those who do, what fond memories it brings.

Those memories will be shared by a group of youthful shooters who attended the second annual Department of Game and Fish Youth Clays Competition. The event was Aug. 27 at the Los Alamos Sportsmen's Club.

Approximately 50 young shooters competed in the daylong event. Along with parents and coaches, more than 150 people attended the event. Teams represented Mora, Sierra County 4-H, 4-Corners Clay Busters in Aztec, Santa Fe County 4-H, Otero County 4-H, and Los Alamos. They competed in shooting trap, skeet and were introduced to "bunker trap." No one was disappointed in the competition or the scenery.

Trophies were awarded to the top scoring teams and individuals. Los Alamos had a five-member girls team that outscored several of the all-boys teams. Better luck next year, fellows.

Most competitors shot trap well, but on the skeet field it was a different story. This was due in part to a lack of training facilities, one coach said, but they all got out and did their best.

The bunker trap game was something new for the shooters, as bunker facilities are numbered in the country. It is a game developed in Europe (it's now



Photo: Lance Cherry

A young shooter takes her best shot at a clay target during the second annual Department of Game and Fish Youth Clays Competition at the Los Alamos Sportsmen's Club.

an Olympic sport) where targets are thrown from a group of 15 hidden traps. The targets are launched at speeds of 75 mph, twice the speed U.S. shooters normally see. Shooters are required to hold their shotguns at their waist and use shot shells with fewer pellets. This game provided ample opportunities for humility, but that didn't bother the shooters. Despite a few sore shoulders, some teams came back the following day to give bunker trap another try.

"This year's Youth Clays Competition was a major success, mainly due to the efforts of our volunteers, both from the sportsmen's club and from New Mexico Department of Game and Fish," said Frank Pytko, president of the Los Alamos club. "We're looking forward to doing it again next year."

The Department of Game and Fish is committed to assisting with statewide youth shooting sports. The agency has certified more than 50 shotgun coaches by providing National Rifle Association approved training in northern, central and southern New Mexico. The Department also has provided ammunition and safety gear to approved teams across the state.

For more information about the Youth Shotgun Program, please contact Mark Gruber at mgruber@state.nm.us. For more information about the Los Alamos Sportsman's Club, visit www.la-sc.org.

Mark Gruber is a Department of Game and Fish editor and coordinator of the Youth Shooting Program. He can be reached at (505) 476-8100 or mgruber@state.nm.us.

NE warden named officer of the year

Ty Jackson, whose colleagues at the Department of Game and Fish describe as a "complete conservation officer," has been named New Mexico Wildlife Officer of the Year, a prestigious award sponsored by the conservation organization Shikar-Safari Club International.

Jackson, currently the district wildlife officer in Cimarron, is responsible for law enforcement and a wide variety of conservation-related duties in one of the busiest districts in the state. His territory includes much of the Northeast Area, including the Colin Neblett and Elliott Barker wildlife areas, and the Valle Vidal. His wide range of skills include trapping, horsemanship and packing, and investigations. His expertise with firearms has earned him respect as one of the Department's top instructors.

"Ty is always someone we can count on to do anything that may come along," said Chris Neary, chief of the Northeast Area. "His many skills, complemented by his dedication to his job and respect from the public and his peers indeed make him a complete conservation officer."



Ty Jackson with a tranquilized black bear.

Jackson previously worked as a district wildlife officer in Eagle Nest and Mayhill.

Shikar-Safari Club International was founded in 1952 by an international group of hunters interested in exchanging ideas about the sport. Each year, the club sponsors an award for the Wildlife Officer of the Year in all 50 states, 10 Canadian provinces and the territories of both nations.

Shikar-Safari is recognized worldwide for its efforts in the protection, enhancement and preservation of wildlife, and has placed particular emphasis on endangered and threatened species through the promotion of enforcement of conservation laws and regulations.

Expect roadblocks statewide during hunting seasons

The Department of Game and Fish will conduct roadblocks throughout the state during hunting seasons to collect harvest data and to apprehend wildlife law violators.

Conservation officers also will check for compliance with the registration requirements and safety provisions of the Off Highway Motor Vehicle Act, and drivers of vehicles hauling wood products will be asked to produce documentation as required by the Forestry Conservation Act.



Department officers may be assisted by officers representing other law enforcement agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico State Police or county sheriff's departments. As a result, hunters may encounter minor delays.

To report a wildlife-law violation, please contact your local Department of Game and Fish conservation officer or call the toll-free Operation Game Thief hotline at 1-800-432-GAME (4263). Callers can remain anonymous and may be eligible for rewards if information leads to charges being filed.



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Department of Game and Fish Director Jim Lane, his wife Beth, son Christian and daughter Allison celebrate a successful turkey hunt.

Jim Lane is new Department director

Jim Lane, chief of the Department of Game and Fish Wildlife Management Division, was selected as the agency’s new director Oct. 13 by the State Game Commission.

Lane will be responsible for overseeing a department with more than 300 employees and an annual budget of more than \$34 million. His duties will begin Oct. 29, continuing the pursuit of the Department’s mission to conserve, protect, enhance, manage and propagate the state’s wildlife and its habitat for public recreation and food supply.

Lane will replace current Director Tod Stevenson, who announced plans to retire this month after having worked 33 years with the Department, including three as director.

As chief of the Wildlife Management Division, Lane was responsible for a staff of 17 and an annual budget of \$4.1 million. The division is in charge of big-game, habitat enhancement, wild turkey, small game, migratory bird, furbearer, bear and cougar programs.

In nearly three years with the Department, Lane has helped increase numbers of big-game licenses, improved communication within the agency and with sportsmen and landowners, established a four-year rule process to improve big-game and small-game management decisions, and initiated the process to delist endangered desert bighorn sheep. He previously worked with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources as an environmental scientist, wildlife division director, wildlife program coordinator and other positions. He holds a master’s degree in forestry from the University of Kentucky, and is a current member of the National Wild Turkey Federation and Ducks Unlimited.

Lane currently lives in Rio Rancho with his wife, Beth, of 19 years; and children Allison and Christian.

“I’m extremely humbled to have this in-

credible opportunity to lead an agency of extremely talented professionals dedicated to the hunters, anglers and wildlife of New Mexico,” Lane said. “I look forward to working with everyone with a passion for our state’s natural resources and the recreation opportunities they provide.”

The Commission interviewed four finalists for the position Thursday in executive session, and then selected Lane in public session. Other finalists included:

• **Dan Brooks**, of Santa Fe. A 20-year employee with the Department of Game and Fish, he currently is chief of Law Enforcement, a position he has held for the past 10 years. He also has worked as a wildlife specialist, game warden and public information officer. Many people also know Brooks as the “Cast Iron Ranger,” for his appearances on the Department television show as an outdoor chef.

• **Dale Hall**, of Albuquerque has worked for the Department of Game and Fish for 22 years, the past 11 as coordinator of the Habitat Stamp Program and a \$1 million annual budget for enhancing wildlife habitat on federal lands. He also has been coordinator of the Landowner-Sportsman Program, guide-outfitter registrar, Northwest Area fisheries manager and assistant Hunter Education coordinator.

• **Tim Frybarger**, of Los Alamos, recently retired after 23 years with the Department of Game and Fish, including the past three as assistant chief of the Wildlife Management Division. He also worked as district wildlife supervisor in northwestern New Mexico, landowner-sportsman coordinator, guide-outfitter investigator, and district wildlife officer in Quemado.

• **Floyd Acord**, of Oklahoma City, was the only out-of-state applicant for the position. He currently is a security guard. He previously worked as chief of police in Cedar Lake, Okla., and as an oil field worker.

Get involved

Many organizations in New Mexico are dedicated to wildlife conservation, habitat improvement and wildlife-related recreation. Whether you are interested in birding, wildlife watching, hunting, fishing or trapping, chances are there is an outfit you’ll deem worth supporting. Here are some of them:

The Nature Conservancy: A national organization dedicated to the preservation of plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. In New Mexico, it has worked to preserve 1.4 million acres of landscapes and waterways. www.nature.org/newmexico.

Sportsmen for Fish & Wildlife: A conservation organization organized to promote the protection and enhancement of wildlife habitat, the quality of wildlife management programs and America’s family heritage of hunting and fishing. (505) 486-4921.

Audubon New Mexico: Devoted to the protection, preservation and enjoyment of the environment, with a particular emphasis on birds. The organization has chapters statewide, with headquarters at the Randall Davey Audubon Center in Santa Fe. (505) 983-4609, <http://nm.audubon.org>.

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation: A large national organization dedicated to ensuring the future of elk, other wildlife and their habitat. The organization actively supports efforts to protect and enhance elk country, conservation education and to restore elk herds. New Mexico information: (505) 892-1250, www.rmef.org.

New Mexico Muskies, Inc.: A group of anglers interested in fishing for tiger muskies in Bluewater and Quemado lakes formed this organization in 2008 as a chapter of Muskies, Inc. Information: Matt Pelletier, (505) 264-2999, www.newmexicomuskiesinc.org.

Friends of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge: An organization of about 1,000 members supporting the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and promoting appreciation and conservation of wildlife and habitat through environmental education. (575) 878-2320, www.friendsofthebosque.org.

Albuquerque Wildlife Federation: A volunteer organization focused on New Mexico’s wildlife and habitat resources. It offers monthly meetings with guest speakers, in-the-field habitat restoration projects and a monthly newsletter. (505) 281-4609, <http://abq.nmwildlife.org>.

Southwest Environmental Center: Works to reverse the accelerating loss of species worldwide by protecting and restoring native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands, through grassroots advocacy, public education and on-the-ground restoration projects. (575) 522-5552, www.wildmesquite.org.

Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen: An organization representing at least 15 sporting and conservation groups of diverse interests. The group’s three primary objectives are to “disseminate wildlife and habitat information, participate in habitat maintenance projects, and review and comment on proposals involving wildlife habitat.” (575) 526-5056.

Trout Unlimited, New Mexico: Dedicated to the restoration, protection and conservation of all coldwater fisheries, their tributaries and watersheds, and the fish that inhabit them. (505) 470-4878, www.newmexicotu.org.

New Mexico Wild Turkey Federation: Supports scientific wildlife management on public, private and corporate lands as well as wild turkey hunting as a traditional North American sport. (505) 869-3837, www.nwtf.org.

New Mexico Trout: Dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of trout fishing in New Mexico’s waters through protection and restoration of riparian habitats and through educating the public about trout fishing and the ecological and social value of trout habitats. newmexicotrout@gmail.com, www.newmexicotrout.org.

Safari Club International: Promotes wildlife conservation worldwide while protecting the hunting heritage and supporting many education and humanitarian projects. Southern New Mexico Chapter: LTC R.A. “Pancho” Maples, pancho1@plateautel.net. Northern New Mexico Chapter: Brian Payne, b_payne10@msn.com.

New Mexico Chapter, Wild Sheep Foundation: Formerly the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the organization’s goal is “putting more sheep on the mountain.” Members work with the Department of Game and Fish to increase populations of desert and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in New Mexico. Lanny Rominger, (505) 821-5064.

Ducks Unlimited, New Mexico: More than 1,500 members support the organization’s mission to restore and manage wetlands and habitats for North American waterfowl. Cindy Wolfe, cjwolfe@gilanet.com, (575) 854-3365.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation: Founded by Aldo Leopold in 1914, the organization is a strong lobbyist in the New Mexico Legislature, “dedicated to protecting New Mexico’s wildlife, habitat and outdoor way of life.” (505) 299-5404, www.nmwildlife.org.

Southeast New Mexico Wildlife, Inc.: A conservation organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing wildlife habitat, especially quail habitat, in southeastern New Mexico. (575) 393-2895.





Waiting for our draw results to see if we get to go hunting can seem like an eternity for most hunters. Some of us even spend the greater part of the year getting in shape, scouting and coming up with the best strategy. Despite all our anxiety and best preparations, however, Mother Nature can throw in a twist and leave us scrambling at the last minute.

As we all know, hunting conditions can change in the blink of an eye. All that's needed is a little rain, or a lack of it. When I prepare for a hunt I pay attention to water most of all. Animals have to drink, right? During years of good spring runoff and rich monsoon rains, the animals will be a little tougher to pinpoint because of the abundant food and water.

If hunters are willing to spend a little more time and effort, they can increase their odds of harvesting an animal during dry years. Walking a bit farther to a more remote water hole can make a big difference. So this year, try stepping a bit farther outside of the box and make the extra effort to locate your perfect water hole. Who knows, the buck of your dreams might be using it, too.

Ross Morgan is the Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Northwest Area. He can be reached in Albuquerque at (505) 222-4707 or ross.morgan@state.nm.us.

Photo: Gerry Johnson



Hunt your Thanksgiving turkey this fall

There are three subspecies of wild turkey in New Mexico: Merriam's, Rio Grande and Gould's. All have excellent vision, which makes them challenging to hunt. Newborn turkeys are called poults and enjoy eating insects, berries and seeds. Adult turkeys are called toms or gobblers and enjoy eating acorns, berries and small reptiles. Turkeys prefer open areas for feeding and mating, with good cover always close by.

Did you know?

- Turkeys have 5,000 to 6,000 feathers.
- Males and females are born with spurs.
- Some females may grow beards.
- Turkeys can run as fast as 25 mph.
- Turkeys can fly as fast as 55 mph.
- Juvenile male turkeys are called Jakes.
- Juvenile female turkeys are called Jennies.

Turkeys prefer lower elevations in the fall and winter when grasses and brush support insect life. Concentrating on good feeding areas is very important in the fall, as sexual attraction is not as important as it is in the spring.

Jim Bates, former president of the New Mexico Wild Turkey Federation and considered by some to be an expert when it comes to turkey hunting and management, advises hunters to get out and look for sign such as scratch marks and dusting areas at the base of large trees. He says the best way to hunt fall turkey is to find a good flock and flush them in separate directions. The flocks are often very large and can be located by walking or driving in areas of good turkey habitat.

Once the birds are split up, sit down and hide at the point they were flushed and start calling. Bates says to use a yelp call, which will encourage the adult hens to try and assemble their young. Be patient and before you know it, you may have several turkeys surrounding you. Other tactics include whistling, trilling, or scratching in conjunction with velps.

When hunting turkeys, remember that it is illegal to use any centerfire or rimfire rifle or pistol, or to shoot a turkey roosting in a tree or structure. Non-toxic shot is required on all Wildlife Management Areas.



Photo: Dan Williams

Hen turkeys are fair game during New Mexico's fall hunting season.

Turkey hunting can be an exhilarating experience. Calling broken flocks of turkeys in the fall can be a very enjoyable method of hunting them, and can prove to be quite successful.

The extension of fall turkey season provided a great opportunity to hunt turkeys during deer and elk seasons. So remember to get out this fall, buy a

turkey license, and maybe, just maybe you'll be lucky enough to bag your Thanksgiving turkey.

Richard McDonald is a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer in the Southwest Area. He can be reached in Las Cruces at (575) 532-2100 or richard.mcdonald@state.nm.us.

Southwest



Wardens need your eyes, ears

By Clint Henson

As summer turns to fall and hunters venture into the woods in search of deer, squirrels, turkeys and other game, conservation officers are sharing the excitement in the cool mountain air. For them, it's time to work, and it's always busy.

Longer seasons and added responsibilities have made contacting hunters in the field challenging for today's conservation officers, commonly called game wardens. And when it comes to chasing poachers, there's always a feeling that "the big one got away."

Poaching is prevalent in our remote New Mexico forests, and there are simply not enough game wardens to cover all the hunts and patrol all the back roads. Did you know that a typical officer's district covers more than 1,600 square miles? Or that there is one game warden for every 27,000 New Mexico residents? No wonder many hunters and anglers say they haven't been checked by a game warden in years!

Fortunately, New Mexico's game wardens have lots of help – the eyes and ears of hunters, anglers and other citizens who hate to see our wildlife resources being plundered. A plausible scenario:

It's early fall and you and a friend go into the forest with a fuel wood permit. You just need a pickup load of wood to



get you through the winter and you find a nice downed tree in the wood-cutting area and cut and split wood until lunch-time. You take a break and pull out the burrito that has been warming on the dash and you both sit down to enjoy the picnic. You have been watching a small herd of deer down the canyon and you pull out your binoculars to have a closer look. As you're watching, a pickup truck drives by the deer, slows to a stop and out the passenger window you notice the barrel of a gun, then you hear it, the crack of the rifle shot. A buck jumps and runs into the trees and the rest of the herd follows.

Boiling mad, you tell your friend to call the game warden, but there's no cell service. So what can you do?

You start by getting as much information as you can. Write down the date and time, and where you saw the violation. Write down the description of the vehicle with as much detail as you can. See if it has "an elephant's trunk," something that makes it different than any other vehicle, such as a bumper

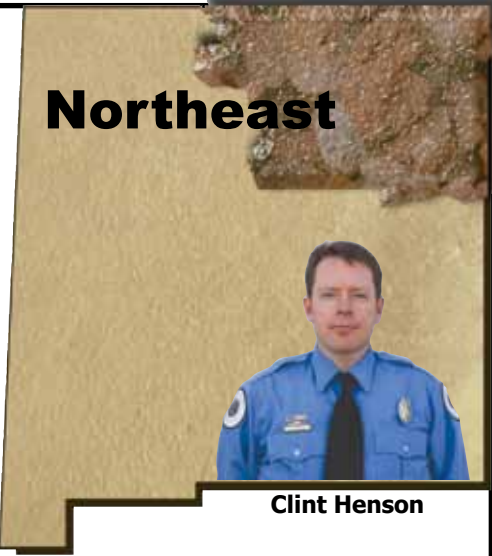
sticker or a dent. Write down which side of the vehicle the shot came from and make a note of what the shooter was wearing – hat color, etc.

For your own safety, don't approach the vehicle or try to question or detain the hunters. Leave that to the game warden, a commissioned law enforcement officer trained to deal with such situations.

As luck has it, as you continue to watch, the hunters come out of the woods with a field-dressed deer and load it into the truck. They continue up the road and give a friendly wave as they drive by. You can make out the license plate number on the truck and you write it down. Your truck is loaded with wood and you make it back home before dark. You go in and tell your wife what you saw and then call Operation Game Thief, 1-800-432-4263.

The dispatcher on the phone asks what you saw and then gives you an OGT case number. If charges are filed on the case, you will receive \$500 for the information and remain anonymous. The game warden in that area gets a phone call as soon as the information comes in. The warden matches the license plate with a name and address, and begins the investigation.

When the officer gets to the house, he sees a truck that matches your description. After interviews, he discovers that the passenger was wearing the same hat you described. He gives permission for a DNA sample, but insists he did not shoot from the road.



Clint Henson

The next day, the officer goes to the scene, finds the gut pile and photographs tire and foot prints. In the road, he finds a spent rifle cartridge that matches the hunter's rifle. At this point he has enough evidence to get a search warrant, and he returns to the house and seizes the deer and the rifle. The hunter breaks down and confesses that he shot the deer from the road.

"They always ask, 'Who turned me in,'" the officer says. "And we always say, 'There are a lot of eyes in the woods.'"

The Department of Game and Fish received 183 Operation Game Thief tips last year, resulting in 132 cases and 64 charges being filed.

Clint Henson is a game warden and public information officer for the Department of Game and Fish. He can be reached at the Northeast Area office in Raton at (575) 445-2311 or clint.henson@state.nm.us.

Check out the Capitans for deer, elk, turkeys

By Mark Madsen

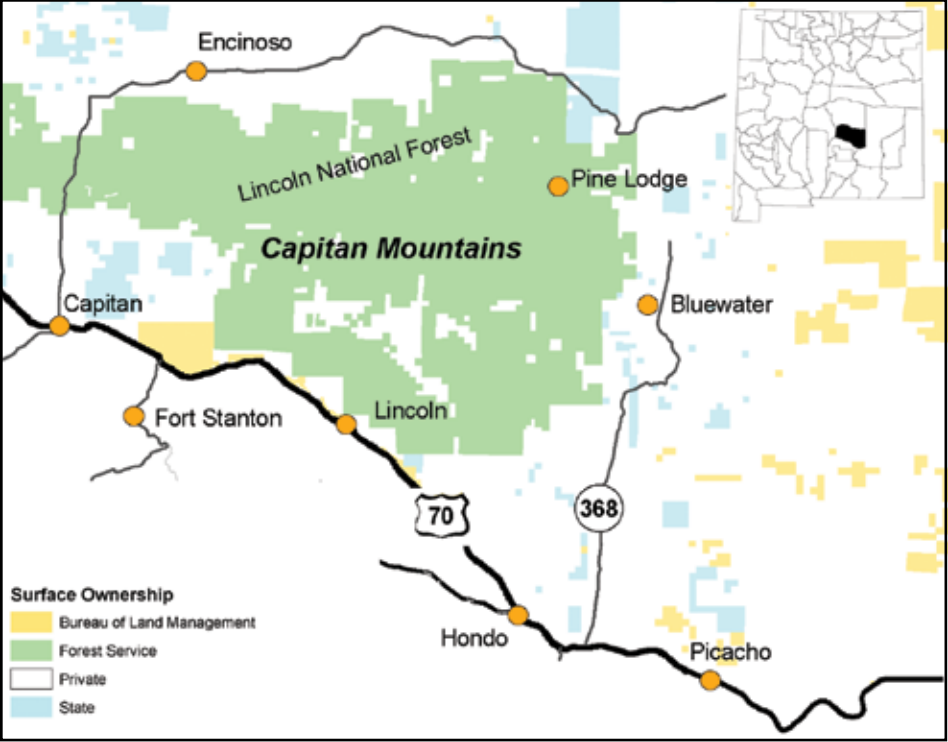
The Capitan Mountains, in Game Management Unit 37 of southeastern New Mexico, are unique to the state, being the only mountain range that runs east-west. To hunters, the Capitans are home to a large deer herd, some trophy elk and plenty of wild turkeys.

Part of the Lincoln National Forest, the Capitans are rough and rocky, basically one rock piled on top of another. Wildlife habitat runs the gamut, with thick pinon-juniper and ponderosa pine in the lower elevations and a mixture of conifers, ponderosa pine, oak brush and open grassy meadows in the higher country. Like most of southern New Mexico, perennial water is in short supply with a few springs along the north slopes.

Two separate mountains, east and west, make up what people commonly call the Capitans. The mountains are separated by the "Capitan Gap," the well-known spot where Smokey Bear was found during a forest fire in the spring of 1950.

Hunting in the Capitan Mountains takes many forms. The area is known for good mule deer and turkey hunting and its reputation is growing for offering some trophy elk. Good populations of bears and cougars give hunters even more opportunities.

The Capitans and Unit 37 historically have been among the better mule deer hunting areas in New Mexico. Hunters fortunate enough to draw a Unit 37 license will find most of the deer in the lower pinon-juniper habitats around the base of the mountains. Higher deer numbers tend to be found on north and south of the east mountain. Places like Boy Scout (Pine Lodge), Copeland, and Seven Cabins are good places to look for deer on the north side. Pancho,



The Capitan Mountains in southeastern New Mexico are the only range in the state that runs east-west instead of north-south. They also are home to one of the state's largest deer herds.

Photo: Mark Madsen

Ellis and the country south of the Baca campground are good spots to try on the south side. Deer hunters also should check out the burn scar of the Peppin Canyon fire, which opened up a lot of country on east mountain, providing good browse for the deer herds. Deer also can be found on west mountain, especially on the western and southern slopes. A few are at home on the top of the mountain.

Unit 37 is not normally an area

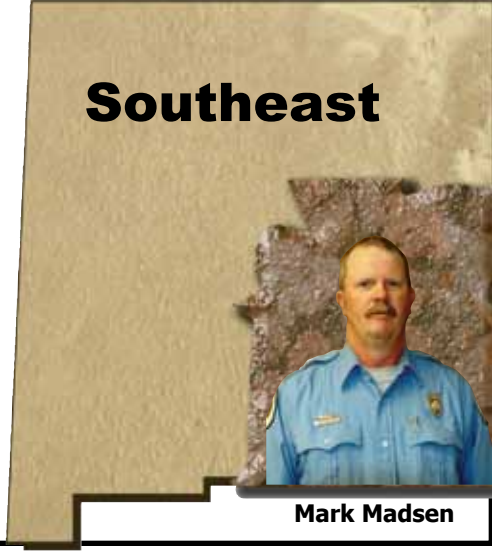
mentioned around the campfire or water cooler when it comes to talk about elk hunting. However, some quality bulls have been taken out of the unit over the last several years, including several that scored over 350. While elk numbers aren't as high as they are in southeastern Units 34 or 36, hunters shouldn't overlook the opportunities in the Capitans. Elk can be found on the west and east mountains in habitat types ranging from the lower pinon-juniper country to the mixed-conifer in

the higher elevations. The challenge is finding the small scattered herds.

Turkey hunting on the Capitans can be excellent, especially during the spring. The north side of the east mountain historically has provided the best opportunities. Hunters should concentrate around the springs and seeps on the north side of the mountain. Turkey numbers also are increasing in the area surrounding the Baca campground on the south side.

Water is a limiting factor in the Capitans and always a good starting point for hunters in search of game. Most of the springs and seeps are on the north slope, and may or may not have water, depending upon winter snow pack and, of course, rain. Other water sources include livestock drinkers and dirt tanks, which also rely on precipitation. Another source of wildlife water are trick tanks funded by sportsmen through the purchase of Habitat Stamps.

Mark Madsen is the Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Southeast Area. He can be reached in Roswell at (575) 624-6135 of mark.madsen@state.nm.us.



Mark Madsen



Wildlife dollars and sense

That fish cost how much?

By Marty Frentzel

When the New Mexico Tourism Department implemented a new “Ecotourism” initiative in July 2009, the goal was to create an alternative revenue stream for existing businesses by creating rich and unique travel experiences for visitors.

This is amazingly similar to what New Mexico Territorial Game Warden Thomas Gable was proposing in 1911. In his first report to the Territorial Legislature, he was hoping New Mexico would follow Colorado’s lead and build some fish hatcheries.

“Colorado is reaping a veritable harvest from tourists, and furnishing great sport for the home angler. This state (Colorado) has established nine hatcheries, which are maintained by legislative appropriation, this being found necessary to meet the constantly increasing demand.”

A century later, New Mexico has six cold-water hatcheries that raise trout and salmon, and one warm-water hatchery. The maintenance of our hatcheries is performed using state fishing license money and Federal Aid to Sport Fish Restoration dollars distributed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

As Gable predicted, the state does reap a significant fishing economy – estimated to be more than \$300 million in 2006 alone. The Fish and Wildlife Service performs a National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation every five years and currently is updating these figures.

Return on investment

Across the nation, getting outdoors is big business. Southwick Associates of Florida released a report at the end of September stating that outdoor recreation, natural resources conservation and historic preservation in the United States all have measurable economic impacts.

Altogether the impact is \$821 billion annually, accounting for 6,435,000 jobs and \$99 billion in federal and state taxes. Where does that money come from? People who go camping contribute an estimated \$306.8 billion and fishing is estimated to be worth \$69 billion.

What share of this belongs to New Mexico? An estimated 248,000 anglers ages 16 and older spent 2,596,000 days fishing in New Mexico in 2006. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates each angler spends \$49 a day. Frankly, I think that’s not high enough. Having just returned from a four-night fishing trip to Red River, I know I spent \$80 on gas and almost \$150 on the private campground where we parked the trailer. That’s slightly more than \$57 a day just for gas and lodging.

So what did I get for the \$230? Using prices from my favorite local import store, the eight trout my wife and I caught in the private pond are worth about \$49.90. That’s based on each fish weighing about a one-third of a pound. I will smoke those fish resulting about 2 ½ pounds of trout, and the import store sells quarter-pound cans for \$4.99. We caught the equivalent of 10 cans.

Because I also spent time “watching wildlife” in the campground – that includes mule deer, bats, mallards, dippers, mountain chickadees, Stellar’s jays and robins – it might be possible to develop a dollar value for that phase of the trip, too.

The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates wildlife



Photo: Dan Williams

The trophy trout water of the San Juan River is one of the biggest contributors to New Mexico’s \$300 million a year recreational fishing economy, financed by hunters and anglers through license sales and federal excise taxes.

watchers spend \$38 each day on their activity, but what part of each of my days should be attributed to wildlife watching and how much of each day should be calculated as fishing? I’ll say I spent one hour each of the four days fishing and one hour wildlife watching. Dividing the \$49 rate for fishing and the \$38 rate for wildlife watching by 8, then multiplying that by four days, I received a total of \$24 of fishing time and \$19 of wildlife watching time.

That means the trip that cost me \$230 just for gas and lodging returned a total of \$92.90.

Unfortunately, the Fish and Wildlife Service does not estimate the value of breathing fresh air in the mountains, the value of separating from work for a few days to relax, or the value of watching a 4-year-old kid catch a 22-inch rainbow on a short, child-sized fishing pole.

One can, however, determine the value of that kid’s fishing pole. There is a 10 percent federal excise tax charged at the manufacturing level on fishing tackle. If that rod cost \$15, \$1.50 went to the U.S. Treasury. The Treasury then distributes that money to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which uses it to finance the Sport Fish Restoration Program in states like New Mexico.

The Federal government started this process in 1950 when Rep. John Dingell and Sen. Edwin Johnson sponsored legislation to fund sport fish restoration. They modeled their act after the Pittman-Robertson Act that Congress approved in 1937 to fund Wildlife Restoration nationwide. The Pittman-Robertson Act will celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2012. That act takes the 11 percent federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition, handguns, and archery equipment and plows it into state programs such as wildlife trapping and transplanting, studies of wildlife species, purchases of wildlife habitat and surveys of wildlife populations.

Right now, a third of the \$38 million budget of the Department of Game and Fish comes from federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration programs. The agency spends the money first, and then the state is reimbursed for activities that have prior approval by the Fish and Wildlife Service. In most cases, the state is required to provide a 25 percent non-federal match. For some programs, Hunter Education for example, the Fish and Wildlife Service allows the Department of Game and Fish to use volunteer hours as the non-federal match.

What’s in it for New Mexico?

So what does this money do for the state of New Mexico? What kind of unique travel experiences does the money provide?

The legendary fly-fishing on the San Juan River and the Rio Grande are part of the package. Hunters from throughout the nation apply for licenses valid in the Gila National Forest. The elk in the Gila – restored to this habitat during the 1950s – are there thanks to Wildlife Restoration dollars.

Equally important as the wildlife that was restored are the thousands of acres of habitat purchased and managed using that money. Fenton Lake State Park was purchased as a waterfowl feeding and nesting area, but today it is managed as a state park. The state paid \$1,531.08 for its share of the property, and federal funds covered \$4,593.22. In the fiscal year that ended June 30, the park had 117,613 visitors who paid \$97,374 in fees.

Other State Game Commission-owned properties are managed as State Parks when that doesn’t conflict with the wildlife-management aspects of each property.

The State Game Commission paid \$95,440.45 for the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area, which includes the four campgrounds in Cimarron Canyon State Park. Wildlife Restoration moneys covered \$286,321.38. During the fiscal year that ended June 30, Cimarron Canyon had 142,770 visitors pay \$101,723.00 to use that facility.

Sport Fish Restoration money built several dams across the state, including Clayton Lake. Last fiscal year, Clayton had 61,753 visitors who paid \$36,602.00. All state parks stimulate local economies.

In this day and age, only Warren Buffett seems to want to pay more taxes, but the folks who enjoy the outdoors appear to get their money’s worth. Whether you want to go birding at Lake Roberts or elk hunting in Cimarron Canyon, the Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Acts have made our lives better.

What a bargain these taxes have been.

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Big changes in store for NM hunters

Legislation brings more resident licenses, paperless applications

By Dan Williams

New rules, license fees and application methods will require New Mexico hunters to do some homework before planning their hunts for the 2012-13 seasons. Dramatic changes adopted by the State Legislature or approved by the State Game Commission will affect the application process, season dates and how many licenses are reserved for state residents.

The changes were designed to streamline the application and licensing process, provide more hunting opportunities for state residents, and to make drawing results and refunds available much sooner.

“In passing Senate Bill 196, the Legislature gave us the opportunity to make big-game hunting more accessible to New Mexico residents,” said Alexa Sandoval, the Department of Game and Fish Administrative Services Division chief.

Going paperless

Say goodbye to paper application forms. Beginning next year, applications for all licenses will be made through the Department’s online application system at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Hunters who have applied for licenses the past three seasons already are familiar with the system, as they have been required to obtain a Customer ID Number online before applying. Going paperless will simply extend that process. Since the Department first began offering online applications in 2005, the number of online applicants has increased from 54 percent to 82 percent.

“One of the biggest advantages of applying online is that it reduces errors,” Sandoval said. “If a hunter makes a mistake, the system will catch it and it can be corrected right away, reducing the chances of the application being rejected.”

Having all applications online will eliminate time-consuming sorting and counting, further increasing accuracy and speeding up the process considerably. Hunters will know their draw results one month after the deadline, instead of having to wait three months under the old system. Unsuccessful applicants also will receive their refunds much sooner.

“Going paperless will save the Department – and the sportsmen and women who supply all our funding -- lots of time and money, which is especially important in today’s economy,” Sandoval said.

License and application fees will be charged at the time of application. Applicants can pay by credit card or electronic check, a new convenience beginning next year. Once an application is complete, it can not be changed, only deleted.



Help available

Hunters who need help applying for 2012-13 licenses online can get it from a real person over the telephone or at one of several locations with public computers staffed by Department of Game and Fish representatives.

Paper application forms no longer will be accepted beginning next season, requiring all hunters to apply online by using a Customer Identification Number at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Assistance will be available from Feb. 2, 2012, through March 20, 2012, or by calling a toll-free number to be announced soon. The Department also plans to arrange for computer access in public locations statewide for hunters who need access to computers.

Look for more information and updates on the Department website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Applicants can reapply, and will receive a refund for the deleted application after the draw.

First, get your Game-hunting License

The new legislation requires everyone who hunts or applies for a license in New Mexico to purchase a Game-hunting License or a combination Game-hunting and Fishing License. The licenses are good for hunting small game and waterfowl, and will serve as the foundation that allows hunters to apply for public-land deer, elk and other special drawing licenses. They also will be required before purchasing any over-the-counter big-game or turkey license.

Hunters who are unsuccessful in the drawings are encouraged to keep the Game-hunting or Game-hunting and Fishing License and use them throughout the license year, April 1-March 31. If requested, refunds will be available for hunters who purchase a Game-hunting License. Game-hunting and Fishing licenses will not be refundable.

Game-hunting (\$15 for residents, \$65 for nonresidents) and Game-hunting and Fishing licenses (\$30, residents only) will be available online or over the counter from license vendors statewide. Senior and junior hunters, handicapped and some military may be eligible for discounts.

More licenses for residents

State law now requires that 84 percent of draw licenses for deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, javelina and Barbary sheep be available only to New Mexico residents, an increase of 6 percent over recent years. The new law also increases resident odds by including them in the 10 percent draw license allocation for hunters who contract with registered New Mexico outfitter. Draw licenses reserved for nonresidents were reduced to 6 percent from 22 percent.

This year, the Department received 141,462 applications for about 65,500 licenses for deer, elk, antelope, ibex, javelina, bighorn sheep and Barbary sheep. The early drawing for oryx licenses attracted 12,724 applicants for 2,764 licenses. The license allocation quotas do not apply to oryx, ibex or bighorn sheep hunts.

Next year’s special drawing licenses for hunts on state Wildlife Management Areas also will be reserved for state residents only.

Later draw for oryx

The application deadline for public oryx licenses will be moved to March 28 beginning next season to coincide with drawings for deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, ibex, javelina and Barbary sheep. The move made it necessary to reschedule some early oryx hunts to later in the season.

A bonus for resident outfitters

To be eligible for the 10 percent draw license pool for hunters who use outfitters, applicants – resident or nonresident – must contract with a New Mexico registered outfitter. Beginning next year, outfitters in the pool have specific requirements that establish residency status for their business. The new law also requires hunters to have signed a contract with the outfitter before applying for a license in the 10 percent pool.

The cows stay home

Another bonus for resident hunters came from new legislation that limits the sale of public-land cow (antlerless) elk licenses to New Mexico residents only. That’s 22 percent more licenses -- about 4,500 -- for resident hunters who don’t care so much about antlers and enjoy wild meat. Last year, the Department sold 21,235 public-land cow elk licenses, so hunters who want to increase their odds of going elk hunting next year won’t go wrong by making an antlerless hunt their second or third choice. Using a primitive weapon boosts the odds even more.

Details about the changes will be available in the 2012-13 Big-game and Trapping Rules & Information booklet, available soon at Department offices, license vendors statewide, and on the Department website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

No boat? No problem!

Hit the lake banks for some spectacular fall fishing

By Karl Moffatt

It's a beautiful fall day on the rocky banks of Conchas Lake, far out on the endless plains of eastern New Mexico -- and the bass are biting.

Armed with a basic spin-casting rod and a simple plastic tube for a lure, the angler drops the rig into the water, where it free falls to the bottom, skipping off the rocks as it goes.

Suddenly the line begins to peel out and with a snap of the reel's gate and a jerk upward, the fight is on. The fish struggles violently to break free and the rod bends as the reel sings.

After a brief, furious battle, a good-sized smallmouth bass is splashing on the surface. Just then, a powerboat motors by and the two fishermen on board wave while admiring your catch.

It's fall in New Mexico and one of the best times of year for angling as fish are feeding heavily to fatten up for the winter. And one of the best parts of fall fishing is that an angler can do very well right from the bank -- no boat required.

Northeastern action

Conchas and nearby Ute Lake are two great places to fish in the fall, right off the shoreline with standard gear, just a little know-how and of course, a valid fishing license, says Eric Frey, Northeast Area fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish. Both lakes boast huge numbers of smallmouth, largemouth and white bass, walleye, crappie, catfish and other species that are all actively feeding and can be found near the surface, along the shoreline and in coves, he says.

Anglers need little more than a medium-weight rod outfitted with 10- to 15-pound-test line and some No. 6 and No. 8 bait hooks and a couple of bobbers to fish with live bait such as minnows or worms. Minnows should be hooked through the lips and fished with little or no weight on the line and changed out after about 10 or 15 minutes, Frey says. Put the bobber about three feet above the bait.

Schools of native bait fish such as shad are a primary food source for fish in many of the state's lakes, which is why minnows work so well, Frey says.

And worms, well, they're just plain good eating to many fish.

Those who don't want to deal with live bait can use various plastic lures such as Wacky Worms and tubes with jig heads, which are equally effective. These can be fished without a bobber and dropped straight down off a sheer rock face or out into deeper water and slowly retrieved with an occasional jig or lift of the rod to let the lure rise and fall.

Tube lures and to some extent, Wacky Worms, are meant to imitate crayfish, another primary source of food for fish in many of our state's lakes, Frey says.

For newcomers to these two lakes, Frey suggests that anglers try out the rocky banks at Conchas by the north campgrounds. At Ute, try the coves and shoreline on the far end of the lake by the northern campgrounds and marinas.

Bass are notorious for hanging around underwater structures such as large rocks and submerged trees, so look for these when scouting.

All bass and walleye under 14 inches in length at Ute and Conchas must be released, unharmed, back to the water.



Clayton Lake lunkers

Clayton Lake is another great spot for great fall fishing while enjoying a wonderful fall day at a spectacularly scenic spot, Frey says.

"It's like a little oasis out there on the plains," he says.

Clayton Lake produced several big walleye this year during Department surveys that exceeded the state record, a 32-inch, 17-pound fish caught there in 1989, Frey said. But like anything worthy of catching, the walleye at Clayton Lake can be finicky and difficult to entice due to the natural food base they enjoy there, Frey says. That's why it's always good to be prepared to fish for other species, such as trout, while fishing from the banks at Clayton.

Fishing here with a bubble makes casting a wooly booger, Pistol Pete or some Power Bait a breeze, Frey says. Simply thread the fishing line through any size plastic bubble with the fat end of the post toward the bait, then tie on a swivel with about two feet or more of line and then attach a lure or some bait. Don't forget to immerse the bubble under the water to fill it about halfway, and then jam the post in to close it off and get to fishing.

It's not too late to get in some fishing at Clayton Lake before it closes for the season Oct. 31 to accommodate resting migratory waterfowl. Expect the fishing to be hot when it reopens April 1.

A southwestern jewel

Many lakes in other parts of the state offer great fall bank fishing, including one of the state's best-kept largemouth bass fishing secrets, Bill Evans Lake in southwestern New Mexico.

Ute Lake in far northeastern New Mexico offers some of the state's best fishing for smallmouth bass such as the one shown by Karl Moffatt at left. The lake also contains healthy populations of largemouth bass, walleye and catfish, all of which can be easily caught from the bank or from boats.

Photos: Karl Moffatt

Bill Evans features very clear water as it is pumped up to the reservoir from the Gila River some 300 feet below, says Kevin Gardner, the Department's Southwest Area fisheries biologist. The lake is easy to get around and is free of trees and bushes to snag lines.

The state's record largemouth bass, measuring just over 26 inches and weighing in at almost 16 pounds, was caught at Bill Evans Lake in 1995. Gardner suspects there are others just like it lurking in the depths.

Gardner suggests anglers use lures that imitate the crawdads that inhabit the lake. Or join the kids and try to catch a live one, and if successful, slip the point of a No. 4 or 6 bait hook into its tail, facing forward, and then cast the crustacean back out into the depths.

"This should limit the number of smaller fish you'll catch and allow you to go after those big ones," Gardner says. "And it'll be fast and furious if one takes it."

The lake is also teeming with sunfish, which makes for a great outing for kids armed with bobbers and worms. Soon the water will be cool enough to support trout, and the lake will be stocked with plenty to make it a wonderful fall and winter fishing destination.

For more ideas on where to try your luck during the fall fishing season, consult the department's weekly online fishing report at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Karl Moffatt is a longtime New Mexico journalist and avid outdoorsman who posts regularly on his blog at www.outdoorsnewmexico.com.



Nature doesn't kill bears . . . people do

By Dan Williams

It's been a bad year for bears in New Mexico – worse for some than others. It's also been a rotten year for conservation officers with the Department of Game and Fish, who are charged with euthanizing bears that are so habituated to humans that they have become safety threats.

Conservation officers hate to kill bears.

“It's a horrible thing to have to do,” said Clint Henson, an officer in Raton. “My oath was to protect wildlife, so it's difficult to put bears down, especially when it's because of human behavior.”

Henson and other officers in northeastern New Mexico responded to five to 10 bear calls a day during the summer. Some of the bears were displaced by wildfires; others found their way into towns because drought dried up their usual food sources. The story was similar statewide.

From Raton to Los Alamos, Silver City and Ruidoso, the state's estimated 7,000 bears were on the move this spring and summer. Displaced by fires and driven by drought, they were searching far and wide for food to sustain them and their cubs, and to pack on fat to carry them through the winter. More than usual found their way into neighborhoods, where dumpsters, bird feeders, pet food and trash left by careless residents provided sustenance, and in many cases, death. Some of the troublesome and dangerous bears were trapped and relocated. Others were euthanized.

“Bears that are habituated to human food will continue to come into town regardless of natural conditions,” said Rick Winslow, the Department's large carnivore biologist. “We can try to relocate them, but usually relocation is unsuccessful. Because they're already habituated – and dangerous -- we eventually end up euthanizing them.”

From April to October, the Department euthanized 227 bears, the most on record. Another 37 bears died on state highways, some of them while trying to return to their old haunts after having been relocated.

The problems were compounded by a surge in the statewide bear population. Conservative hunting harvest strategies combined with good environmental conditions led to good breeding success for bears over the past six years, Winslow said.

“So what we had was a booming bear population suddenly faced with drought and wildfires,” Winslow said. That lack of food left many bears underweight going into the winter, when they need their fat the most.

“This winter, bears will be less likely to hibernate and will continue to search for food,” Winslow said. “Breeding success in terms of cubs produced this season is likely to be very low.”

There was no shortage of bear cubs this year, as the staff at The Wildlife Center in Espanola can attest. The center is the only place of its kind in New Mexico equipped to treat and house injured or abandoned wildlife. In early October, the center housed 33 bears, some displaced by the 157,000-acre Las Conchas Fire.

The center's bears, most of them yearlings and 2-year-olds, should have enough fat to get them through the winter in the wild, said Kerry Mower, wildlife disease and health specialist for the Department of Game and Fish. Whether they can make it on their own next year is another story.

Are we there yet, Mom?



Photo: Mark Meier

A bear cub hitched a ride on its mother's back across a 1-mile stretch of Navajo Lake, just across the New Mexico border in Colorado on Aug. 4. The mother bear was last reported seen in October 2002, when she was captured in Tijeras and released in the Zuni Mountains.

Bear leaves Tijeras troubles for cool waters of Navajo Lake

By Dan Williams

Mark Meier thought he saw some odd-looking water birds on the surface of Navajo Lake when he was out boating Aug. 4 near the New Mexico-Colorado border, so he decided to take a closer look.

“When I got closer, I could see a mama bear with a cub riding piggyback, swimming from west to east across the lake. I was lucky to have my camera; otherwise it would be just another fisherman's tale,” Meier said. He backed off so he wouldn't disturb the pair while he watched them complete their approximately 1-mile swim, and then climb onto the bank and disappear into the woods.

Meier's camera captured an image that delighted everyone who saw it. The image also revealed that the mother bear had an ear tag indicating it once had been captured and relocated. The ear tag was green, showing the bear had been caught in New Mexico. The number on the tag – 56 – gave New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists all they needed to dig into the bear's past.

“This bear has really gotten around,” Department Large Carnivore Biologist Rick Winslow said. “Our records show she was caught and relocated at least four and likely five times.”

With a rap sheet as long as her arm, Bear No. 56 compiled a travel log stretching more than 200 miles. She grew up in the Sandia Mountains just east of Albuquerque, where she spent October 2002 raiding trash cans, chicken coops -- and sometimes houses -- in Tijeras.

That year was especially busy for game wardens responding to bear complaints – the second-busiest in history next to this year. Despite the large number of calls, game wardens became familiar with Bear No. 56:

- **Oct. 1:** The bear was tranquilized when it wouldn't leave the porch of a residence on Raven Road in Tijeras. She already had one ear tag (No. 770) and was fitted with another (No. 56). She also was given a radio collar and became part of an ongoing bear study. Officers released her about 30 miles away in the Manzano Mountains.
- **Oct. 6:** The bear returned to Raven Road, where she would not leave a residence. She was tranquilized and released deeper in the Sandia Mountains, still sporting two ear tags and a radio collar.
- **Oct. 17:** The bear returned to Tijeras, where she was tranquilized when she would not leave someone's porch off N.M. 14. She no longer had her collar – it was later found on another porch – and she was relocated to the Ellis trailhead in the Sandias.
- **Oct. 26:** Once again, the bear returned to Raven Road, where she was chased up a tree and tranquilized. This time, officers decided to put more distance between her and Tijeras, so she was taken to the Zuni Mountains, about 100 miles to the west.

That was the last time Bear No. 56 was reported seen until she turned up in Navajo Lake, another 150 miles north. She had a tag in her right ear and a hole in her left ear where tag No. 770 had fallen or been torn out.

Winslow said it was remarkable that the bear covered so much territory, and perhaps even more remarkable that she was not euthanized after becoming so habituated to humans and causing so much trouble. Problem bears commonly are euthanized the third time they are captured.

“There have been bears that we've relocated numerous times – for various reasons,” Winslow said. “This definitely is one well-traveled – and lucky – bear.”



After the burn

... continued from Page 1

burning through the main valley, Trujillo asked them to stop and let the grass burn.

“It was a good thing happening,” Trujillo said. “When you look at it now, that grass is green and new – and the elk are loving it.”

Enhanced habitat

By late September, Valles Caldera staff were seeing more elk on the preserve than they’ve seen in years, many of them drawn by green grass no longer available to them in the more severely burned areas. Every morning and evening, large herds could be seen – and heard – as the elk performed their annual mating rituals.



A pair of bull elk, above, explore an area near the perimeter of the Las Conchas Fire after it burned 157,000 acres of their habitat in the Jemez Mountains in June and July. At left, a female black bear with paws so badly burned she could not walk sits quietly under a tree spared by the fire. The bear was tranquilized and taken to The Wildlife Center in Espanola. Her injuries were so severe she had to be euthanized.

U.S. Forest Service experts estimated that about 20 percent of the Las Conchas Fire burned at severe intensity, some of it so hot that some scientists say the ponderosa pines will never return and the entire ecology of the areas will be forever changed. Stands of trees will be replaced by shrubs and some grasses, which could be good for wildlife once it returns.

“For browsers like deer, it will mean more food because new browse such as mountain mahogany and oak will come up in patches across the landscape,” said Donald Auer, a wildlife biologist and habitat specialist for the Department of Game and Fish. “Elk are more generalists and will go for the new grasses and forbs.”

Liley said the Las Conchas fire will create an “enhanced” habitat for elk, giving them more open meadows flanked by stands of timber for cover. “A fire like that opens the canopy. All of a sudden the grasses can dominate and grazers like elk benefit,” he said. Whether the fire will lead to an increased elk population is uncertain. “But it will definitely make the elk in the Caldera much more visible.”



A pair of elk, with cattle in the background, graze peacefully in the Valles Caldera while the Las Conchas Fire rages a few miles away.

Driven by high winds and fueled by decades of thick, dry timber left by years of fire suppression and logging, the Las Conchas Fire raced through 43,000 acres in the first 14 hours, consuming untold numbers of wildlife in its path. Most of the mobile animals, such as deer, elk and bears, were able to outrace the flames and find shelter.

Liley said he doubted many elk perished in the Las Conchas Fire, despite its speed and ferocity.

“Elk are so fast to respond to fires like this,” Liley said. “They can cover a lot of ground in a hurry.”

The timing of the fire and subsequent monsoon rains also helped newborn elk calves.

“We got lucky; the rain came at a time when the elk calves were vulnerable and needed high nutrients and rich milk that the new grass provided,” Liley said.

Displaced bears, starving raptors

Most of the black bears in the Conchas Fire area were able to dodge the flames, but they were forced into new areas where competition was fierce for little food. Many found their way into Los Alamos and into the hands of Conservation Officer Blake Swanson. He trapped and relocated several bears after the fire and responded to calls about bears daily.

Some bears injured by the fire did not make it. Others were taken to The Wildlife Center in Espanola for rehabilitation and eventual release.

“We received at least six bears related to the Las Conchas Fire and we also got bears from the Track Fire near Raton,” said Katherine Eagleson, executive director of the center; the only one of its kind in New Mexico. She said the center also received several deer fawns, foxes, hawks and eagles.

“The raptors weren’t injured by the fire; they were starving because the combination of fire and drought took away their food sources,” Eagleson said. “They depend on rodents and other small mammals, and the fire killed most of them.”

Small mammals, amphibians and reptiles were hardest hit by the Las Conchas Fire.

“When you get a rip-roaring fire going through,

you’re going to lose a lot of animals. They have no place to go,” Department mammalogist Jim Stuart said. “Unless they can get underground far enough from the heat, they will die.”

Endangered species such as the meadow jumping mouse and the Jemez Mountains salamander are especially vulnerable to intense wildfires, Stuart said. “For species on the edge that depend on a fairly specific riparian zone, you can lose an entire population. Even if they survive the fire underground, they have nothing to come back to the surface to.”

Fortunately, much of the known riparian habitat that supports the meadow jumping mouse was outside the Las Conchas Fire perimeter. The Jemez Mountain salamanders, however, likely took a serious hit.

Bats and birds within the fire perimeter most likely escaped unscathed and eventually will recolonize as the area regrows, Stuart said. “But fires that occur in June can take nests and young.” The Las Conchas Fire started June 26.

“They’ll come back; those areas will always support wildlife,” Eagleson said. “But it’s never going to be the same.”



Some areas of the Las Conchas Fire burned in a beneficial mosaic pattern, above. In other areas, the fire burned so hot that it left almost nothing behind.



Fires create safe havens for native trout

Sterile streams become clean slates for restoring Rio Grande cutthroats

By Dan Williams

When fisheries biologist Kirk Patten sees a wildfire the magnitude of this summer’s Las Conchas Fire, he can’t help thinking positive.

“It’s a rare opportunity,” said Patten, who oversees the Department of Game and Fish program to restore native Rio Grande cutthroat trout to its historic ranges. “A fire and the subsequent flooding can be a major reset of the system, giving us streams with no other fish to compete or interbreed with the natives.”

To Patten, such a stream is the perfect place to put pure-strain native trout. The only other way to achieve that is by using fish pesticides combined with electroshocking and relaxed bag limits. Even then, fires are more effective – and less controversial.

While a devastating fire like Las Conchas does not immediately kill the fish in a stream, the flooding that carries hundreds of tons of debris and ash often leaves the stream bed without life.

“In some cases, the flooding after a fire becomes a full-blown scouring of the stream channel,” Patten said. “It knocks out habitat, fills in pools and kills the fish and invertebrates. Eventually it will recover, sometimes in a year or two, longer in other cases.”

Although Department biologists have yet to evaluate the full extent of the Las Conchas Fire, Patten said the intense blaze likely wiped out all the fish in as many as 10 small streams and destroyed 690 miles of fish habitat. Among the probable losses to fire and flooding were three populations of pure-strain Rio Grande cutthroats, some of them restored after previous wildfires.

About 2,500 cutthroats, maybe more, were lost in the Rio Capulin, and small populations were lost in the Rio del Oso and the Medio Dia.

“We waited 10 years after a fire to restock the Rio Capulin,” Patten said. “Now it looks like we’ll be doing it again.”

How long biologists may have to wait for streams to recover in the Las Conchas Fire area depends on factors such as location, fire intensity in the upper watershed and precipitation. Eventually, as many as seven more small streams may be suitable to sustain new popu-



Photos: Kirk Patten

Polvadera Creek in the Jemez Mountains was a thriving, healthy stream that supported trout and many species of invertebrates and other life in 2007, above. Below, the same section of the creek is shown in 2010 after flooding from a wildfire wiped out the stream channel and destroyed virtually all life in the system. The Department of Game and Fish is restocking the stream with native Rio Grande Cutthroat trout.



lations of natives, Patten said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Having more streams with pure-strain Rio Grande cutthroats would contribute significantly to Department efforts to restore more of the native fish to their historic ranges and keep the subspecies off threatened and endangered lists. Pure populations of the native fish have been reduced to about 90 small streams in New Mexico, about 11 percent of the subspecies historic range in the state.

Trout populations in two streams Patten would like to see restored with native cutthroats somehow survived the Las Conchas Fire and flooding. Surveys of the two major streams in the Valles Caldera National Preserve, the Rio San Antonio and the East Fork of the Jemez River, showed brown trout somehow clinging to life despite heavy ash flows.

Monsoon rains that hit the area after the fire sent tons of ash and debris into the streams, coloring the water dark black at times and lining the banks with soot and charcoal. It was remarkable anything survived, yet the vigorous brown trout and a few rainbows somehow found a way. By the end of the summer, anglers were again fishing the East Fork, although the San Antonio was still restricted.

Officials at the preserve are continually monitoring the fish in both streams, but it is doubtful either will be a candidate for Rio Grande cutthroat restoration anytime soon, as such a project would require removing all the non-native fish. For now, Patten has his eyes on the smaller streams that took the brunt of the Las Conchas Fire.

“Having more small, isolated populations will definitely help,” he said.

Portions of the Las Conchas Fire scorched the watershed of the Rio San Antonio in the Valles Caldera National Preserve. When monsoon rains hit the area after the fire, flooding threatened the stream’s trout population.

Photo: Blake Swanson





Photo: Dan Williams

Rufous hummingbird

Bring birds to your backyard

Food, water, shelter will make birds feel right at home

By Kevin Holladay

Do you have a garden? Do you like to grow your own vegetables? Even if you are not a gardener it is not too late to grow a backyard garden for birds. It won't look the same as a vegetable garden with rows of zucchini, but it will have a lot of the same parts.

There are easy steps you can take that will attract birds to your backyard. Birds will spend more time in your yard if they find three basic elements of what makes up a habitat: food, water and shelter. Watching birds in your yard can be fun, relaxing and even adventurous.



Photo: Dan Williams

Broad-tailed hummingbird

Provide food

The first place to start a bird garden is to provide food. Unless you already have bird-friendly flowers, shrubs and trees in your yard, put up a bird feeder with some kind of seeds. A sturdy plastic feeder that dishes out seeds will work fine.

The best overall seed is black-oil sunflower seed. Nearly 50 species of birds eat sunflower seeds, including house finches, chickadees, nuthatches, juncos, titmice and grosbeaks. Avoid cheap mixtures of milo (sorghum) or millet. If you want to try and attract pine siskins or goldfinches in the fall and spring, hang up a niger seed (often sold as thistle seed) mesh sock or tube.



Photo: Jim Stuart

Cedar waxwing

long as they are not creating any wildlife nuisance problems.

Lots of different plants will attract different kinds of birds to your yard. Whether you live in the city, suburbs or out in the country, most homes have room for a few flowers, shrubs or trees.

Some great bird-friendly plants in New Mexico include columbine, purple coneflower, globemallow, coreopsis, zinnia, cosmos, marigold, firewheel, black-eyed susan and Mexican hat. Don't forget berry-producing shrubs such as chokecherry, serviceberry, buffaloberry, three leaf sumac and New Mexico olive. Many birds such as robins, bluebirds and thrashers love the food and cover these shrubs provide.

Hummingbirds are found throughout the state and



Photo: Dan Williams

Lesser goldfinches enjoy eating niger, or thistle seed from hanging mesh socks.

will visit your backyard to drink the nectar from wildflowers. Main hummingbird plants include penstemon, cardinal flower, beebalm, salvia, wild hyssop (agastache) and hummingbird trumpet.

Supply water

Once you get feeders up it is time to start providing water for birds to drink and bathe in. Birds need to keep their feathers clean to stay warm in the winter. If they can't get the dirt out of their feathers, they lose the ability to trap warm air next to their skin.

Set up a simple, shallow plastic water dish on a stump or stack of blocks in an open area. By keeping it away from shrubs and trees, cats and other predators won't be able to sneak up on the birds. If your water freezes at night, empty the dish the night before and fill it up in the morning. Or you can buy special heaters that sit in the water.

Give them shelter

A dense thicket provides places where birds can nest, perch, and escape from predators. Plant shrubs, wildflowers and vines in bunches to create hiding spaces and cover that look like the natural environment.



Leave dead limbs and trees in place if it's safe. Insects that live in decaying wood are an important food source for woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches. Cavity-nesting birds such as nuthatches, bluebirds and many woodpeckers need old trees to nest in.

Recycle dead branches for a brush pile for birds, such as sparrows, wrens and towhees. It gives them hiding places and some protection from storms. Add your old Christmas tree if you have one.

If you don't tidy up your yard and flowerbeds in fall, birds will love you for it. Leave the dead seed heads on flowers when they fade. Goldfinches, pine siskins and even woodpeckers will feast on the seeds. Instead of bagging up fallen leaves, rake them under your shrubs to make a well-stocked "grocery store" of insects that birds will find. In spring, those dead leaves, grasses and plant stems will be a "hardware store" for birds searching for nesting material.

Keep birds safe

Keep your feeders clean by washing them every week. If feeders get dirty they can be home for diseases that can kill or injure birds.

When birds fly from feeders, they can crash into windows. Half of all birds that hit windows die from their injuries. If you hang thin strips of gift-wrap ribbon on the outside they will move with the breeze and warn birds of danger ahead.

Make sure that you are not harming birds by allowing your cat to roam outside. Cats are superb bird hunters and will keep birds from feeling safe in your backyard.

There are many more steps you can take to attract and help birds. Check out www.allaboutbirds.org or visit the Department of Game and Fish at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

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Photo: Dan Williams

Ladderback woodpecker

Winter is a good time to keep birdfeeders full of black oil sunflower seeds, a favorite food of more than 50 bird species. It's also a time when you don't have to worry about birdfeeders attracting bears.

Photo: Dan Williams

