

New Mexico

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Wildlife

Enjoyment Challenge Opportunity

Inside: Sandhill Crane Youth Hunt

- Elk Survival Rates ■ Hunters Helping the Hungry ■ It's a trophy ■
- Operation Game Thief ■ Snow Geese ■
- and more.



Iconic mammal takes center stage

By Zen MocarSKI

It took 240 years, but the United States finally has a national mammal: the bison.

Fans of the bald eagle have no need to fear; the national animal since 1782 has not been replaced. Instead, the bison joins other national symbols such as the oak as the national tree and the rose as the national flower.

Already the state mammal in Kansas, Oklahoma and Wyoming, the bison's national designation became official May 9 when President Obama signed it into law.

"There were many potential animals to choose from, but the bison is a great choice," said Elise Goldstein, assistant chief of the Wildlife Division of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. "They are large, powerful animals not to be trifled with."

Had it not been for the efforts of former President Theodore Roosevelt and conservationist William Hornaday, the bison might not have survived into the 21st century. The two formed the American Bison Society to save the animal from demise.

"Unregulated and market hunting, along with introduced disease from domesticated cattle, sent bison numbers plummeting," Goldstein said. "The population dropped from historical highs in the millions down to just a few hundred. ."

Market hunting, which has been outlawed for over a century, was particularly devastating to the herds. Since protections went into place, bison numbers slowly have improved, with the population now estimated at approximately 500,000.

However, few of those are of pure lineage. With few exceptions, such as those found in Yellowstone National Park, most of the bison seen today have interbred with domestic cattle. Despite this fact, visually distinguishing between the two bison is virtually impossible.

Bison are the largest land mammal in North America, with the adult males standing up to 6 feet tall and weighing around a ton. Despite their size, they are known to reach speeds up to about 35 mph and can jump.

Although herbivores, bison can be unpredictable and are responsible for numerous dangerous encounters.

The current designation will not affect the bison's status and they can still be hunted in areas where legal hunting is permitted.

Primarily a grassland animal, bison will graze for a period of time before resting and chewing cud. While the bison population has grown to approximately 500,000, the majority have interbred with domestic cattle. Several locations, including Yellowstone National Park, still have populations of pure lineage. NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.

Get involved in conservation

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

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New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations

It is the mission of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to conserve, regulate, propagate and protect the wildlife and fish within the State of New Mexico, using a flexible management system that ensures sustainable use for public food supply, recreation and safety—and to provide for off-highway motor vehicle recreation that recognizes cultural, historic and resource values while ensuring public safety.

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Cover: Elizabeth Landon, 13, at her first Sandhill Crane Youth Hunt, Casa Colorado near Bernardo.

NMDGF photo by Karl Moffatt.

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Sandhills

Youth crane hunt

By Zen MocarSKI



Putting food on the table only part of the fun

The hours passed for three young hunters who lay stealthily in tall alfalfa, waiting for the moment when time would stand still, the moment when their prey would come within range to strike.

Nov. 7, 2015, they were in an alfalfa field surrounded by corn fields at the Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area between Belen and Socorro for the Youth Sandhill Crane Hunt hosted by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Twenty youths were involved in the hunt, 12 at Bernardo and eight at the Casa Colorada area to the east. Altogether, the hunters had harvested 17 cranes, and some were not ready to call it a day.

“About 10 more minutes and then we’ve got to start getting our gear together,” said Tim Finnegan, father of one of the hunters, over a walkie-talkie.

No response.

“I know you can hear me,” he said.

Still nothing.

“Oh, he’s never ready to give up,” Finnegan said from his hiding spot in the corn field. “He’d spend all day out there if he could.”

But with the birds heading to their loafing locations and the 1 p.m. shooting deadline approaching, it was about time to quit.

The effort wasn’t without its reward. While 15-year-old Braden Finnegan was the only one in this group to get a crane, the three youths and two fathers didn’t see it as a numbers game. None believe the only successful hunt involves a harvest.

For these five, hunting is about a respect for nature, a desire to be outdoors and a love for the hunt.

“This was a blast,” said Ethan Walker, 16, following his first sandhill crane hunt. “It was absolutely amazing. I didn’t get one, but the experience was great. It was a lot of fun. I missed the one shot I had, but I guess that happens to everybody.”

In the process, Ethan and his younger brother Wyatt, 14, gained a new appreciation for the large birds.

“I enjoy being out and being able to see stuff,”

Ethan said. “I’ve never seen the cranes that close before. They’re really cool to see. I didn’t imagine how big they are.”

“I thought it was really fun,” Wyatt said. “I didn’t want to leave. It’s an adventure just being out there. I don’t like the city that much and enjoy that which has been given us.”

Neither brought home a bird, but both plan to try again in 2016.

“To me it’s a successful hunt if I just see stuff,” Ethan said. “I still got to go out and have an experience.”

All three had at least one shot at a crane, but it was Braden’s shot that brought down a bird.

“I got it pretty early,” Braden said. “It was right after one wave came off the roost and three came in and I got one.”

Braden’s been on youth crane hunts in the past, but it was the first for his friends Wyatt and Ethan.

“Neither had bird hunted before,” Braden said. “I thought this would be a good opportunity to introduce them to bird hunting. It’s one of my favorite hunts. I find it humbling that I have the opportunity to just be on the hunt and to have birds as large as me land next to me.”

While it might’ve been the first bird hunt for Wyatt and Ethan, none of the three is a hunting newcomer. All have participated in a variety of big- and small-game hunts. They value the experience and the opportunity to put food on the table for the family.

This hunt, however, now ranks near the top for all three.

“I enjoy the little things, like hearing the cranes on the roost,” Braden said. “I enjoy all the preparation. I was up until 9:30 the night before the hunt making two-dimensional decoys and then I got to show them (Wyatt and Ethan) how to set them up for how you want the birds to come in.”

“It was a great day hunting and seeing them,” Ethan said. “I definitely want to try again next year.”

None, however, lost out on a meal. The Walkers and Finnegans got together a few weeks after the hunt and Braden’s bird was shared with all.

“The meat ranks up there with some of my favorites, like venison,” Ethan said.

“It was really good,” Braden said, after explaining how the bird was prepared.



Seems fitting for the threesome who have already been hunting together for years and all of whom participate in 4H.

It’s all part of friendship, spending quality time away from the home and developing a healthy respect for wildlife and the outdoors, they said.

“Youth hunts like this is the most important thing Game and Fish is doing right now,” Braden said. “We need to have the next generation of people getting out hunting. A hunt like this gives kids a great opportunity to see what hunting can be.”

Above: Braden Finnegan stands proud with his sandhill crane following his participation at the Youth Sandhill Crane Hunt in November 2015. Twenty youths participated in the hunt, which resulted in the harvest of 17 cranes.

Opposite: Braden Finnegan (left) and Ethan Walker stand at the ready in a Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area field. Finnegan harvested one bird and the two families shared a dinner. NMDGF photos by Zen Mocarski.

A passion for cranes

People with a passion for large, loud, elegant birds will enjoy winter trips to the Bernardo Waterfowl Area south of Belen and Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge south of Socorro.

The two areas are favorite wintering stopovers for thousands of sandhill cranes, providing hunting, wildlife watching and photographic opportunities.

Sandhill cranes are tough to miss, with an average body length of nearly 4 feet and a wingspan of about 6 ½ feet. They can weigh more than 10 pounds.

Despite the birds' size, sandhills usually are heard before they're seen. They can travel in numbers reaching into the thousands, filling the air with loud trumpeting calls that can be heard miles away.

During courtship, their talents go well beyond the musical calls. The males are quite adept at dancing, stretching their wings, pumping their heads and leaping into the air. Once they mate, it's for life, which can span two decades or more.

The oldest sandhill crane on record was at least 36 years and seven months. Originally banded in Wyoming in 1973, it was later found in New Mexico in 2010.

The sandhill crane population has been increasing by 5 percent a year since 1966. Hunting dollars, along with federal stamps, help conservation agencies manage and create and/or improve wetland areas, which benefits waterfowl, cranes and numerous other wildlife.

Hunting also provides the opportunity for agencies to implement annual monitoring to assess population status, and information collected at hunter checkout stations provides data on what subspecies are harvested, giving the necessary information for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine harvest limits. Measurements of harvested birds also provide biologists with an index of population health, as weight can be an indication of annual forage production.

Growing up hunting

Two fathers, each dressed in camouflage and looking every part the hunter, sat motionless among the corn stalks.

Neither was actually hunting.

They sat quietly, smiling and watching as their sons lay in the grass fields hunting for sandhill cranes.

"It was exciting for me," said Tim Finnegan. "For me, it's about getting out with the kids. I just enjoy being out with them."

Finnegan and Jonathan Walker enjoy hunting, but view this time in their lives as a chance to pass on a tradition that runs thick in their families.

"Hunting was a big part of me growing up," Walker said. "I prefer to watch the kids hunt. I get a lot of enjoyment watching them outdoors. I don't need to pull a trigger to enjoy hunting."

Finnegan agreed.

"It's something I enjoyed growing up with my dad," he said. "We don't force things on them. It's something they enjoy. They started coming out with me at 5 years old.

"We know the importance of family. I didn't want to burn them out. If they got cold, we'd pack up and go home."

Both fathers said the hunting experience is an important part of their boys becoming men. The young men learn about dedication and commitment, while developing confidence and a sense of pride.

"I'm proud of them," Walker said. "There's an appreciation seeing them become young men of character."

"I think they learn about responsibility and consequences," Finnegan said. "They have rules they have to follow. With guns, safety's a priority. If they didn't follow the rules, the day was over."

Walker said hunting is only a small part of the educational process. With the impact humans have had on the landscape, he's instilled the ideals of modern wildlife conservation.

"We try to teach them more than hunting," he said. "I've taken them out to help with habitat restoration efforts."

"My youngest son is already thinking about a career in wildlife conservation," Finnegan said. "He's definitely got the bug."

Catching that bug is made easier by special youth hunts that provide opportunities to participate.

"It can be difficult to draw tags for quality hunts," Finnegan said. "If New Mexico did not have the youth hunt program, it'd be difficult to recruit future hunters. It can be discouraging."

"These youth hunts are important," Walker said. "They get to meet and develop a personal connection with the people that manage the wildlife in the state. They also give the kids an opportunity to try something new that is managed."

"Youth are the future of our sport and they need opportunities like this to get involved."



Wyatt Walker watches as Ryan Walrath, the Game and Fish A-Plus program manager, measures the wing size of a harvested sandhill crane. Regulated hunting has helped produce a 5 percent increase in the sandhill crane population each year since 1966. NMDGF photo by Zen MocarSKI.

Mount Taylor elk calf survival rates

a concern for
Game and Fish
biologists

By Zen Mocarski

Wildlife management can be challenging, especially when research data has yet to be collected and a theory needs scientific support.

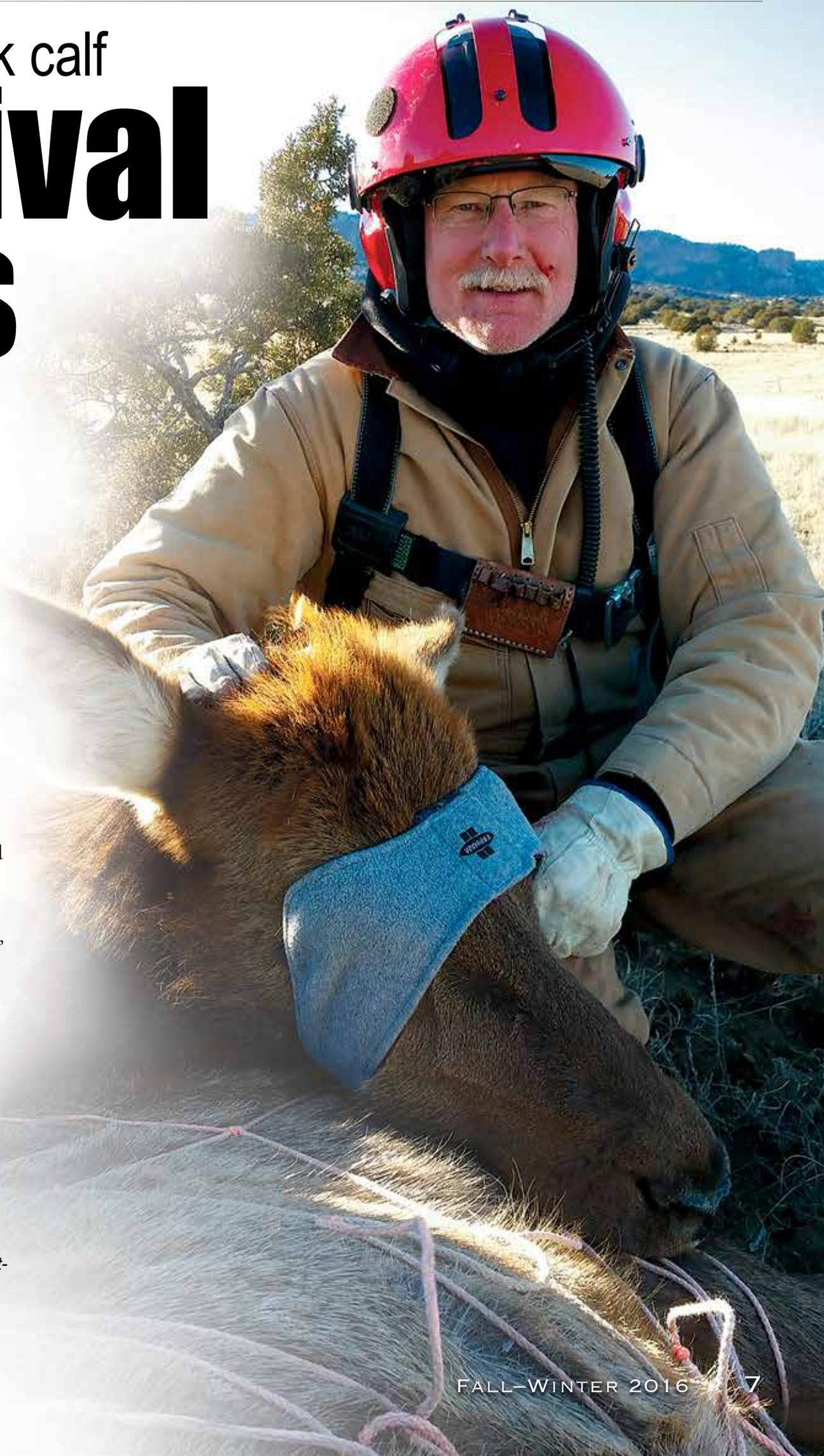
While wildlife surveys can provide New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists with insight to population trends, they don't provide answers when a decline is documented.

So, when biologists noticed a continued downward swing in elk calf survival around Mount Taylor, the question was: Why?

Determining a problem exists and understanding the cause are two different puzzles, and getting the pieces into place can be challenging. The task becomes more daunting when researchers have difficulty finding and monitoring the calves.

The only conclusions for which biologists are certain is that Mount Taylor elk herd numbers have been declining and calf survival rates have been low for more than five years.

Darrel Weybright, former assistant chief of wildlife management for the Department of Game and Fish, poses with the last elk he net-gunned before retiring in March. Department biologists are working to understand high calf mortality rates around the Mount Taylor area. NMDGF photo by Nicole Quintana.



“Scientifically, we’re just not sure what is happening,” said Nicole Quintana, big-game manager for Game and Fish.

In the summer of 2015, biologists captured 13 calves in the area and fitted each with an ear-tag transmitter, but the goal was to capture more.

“When you aren’t sure where exactly to look, calves can be extremely difficult to find,” Quintana said. “We planned to tag between 25-30. Thirteen simply isn’t a good sample size for developing a data-based management recommendation.”



In a little over six months, approximately 50 percent of those captured calves were dead. While that amount of mortality might sound high, it’s actually good.

“Based on our aerial surveys, we expected that number to be higher,” Quintana said. “This piece of information makes the mystery more puzzling.”

To find answers, it was time to consider other options. While researchers have suspicions, they want answers.

“Of the 13 calves, we saw some coyote predation, but the sample size was too small to draw any conclusions,” Quintana said. “We also would like to know if they suffer from bear, lion and possibly golden eagle predation. Or if another factor is at play.

“Right now we just aren’t sure and we’re looking for a larger number of calves to study.”

As it turns out, transmitters similar to those used to track wildlife can also inform researchers when cow elk give birth, providing locations where biologists can concentrate their efforts to begin monitoring larger numbers of offspring.

Game and Fish personnel headed to the Mount Taylor area with the goal of capturing adult females instead of calves.

In February, using a helicopter and a net gun,

And it’s important to find answers. In a healthy elk population, surveys indicate about 40 calves for every 100 cows. In the Mount Taylor area, Game and Fish biologists have been documenting 20 to 30 calves per 100 cows over the last few years.

“We’re looking forward to discovering what is happening to the calves,” said James Pitman, the elk program manager. “If we don’t have a good herd structure, it will directly impact future hunting opportunities.”

Pitman said a stagnant or dropping population can have long-term impacts for the herd.

“You don’t want to have these low calf-to-cow counts for a long period of time,” he said. “At 40 or more calves per 100 cows, the population can handle natural predation and remain healthy and growing. However, when the recruitment remains low for years, the population begins to decline.

“Whether it be predation, disease or old age, recruitment is no longer replacing the number of animals lost.”

Quintana and Pitman believe communication and cooperation has played an important part in the effort to find a cause for the low survival rates.

The area for the study includes a variety of private, public and tribal lands.

“We’re working with a lot of private landowners, federal agencies and tribal leaders who are also curious about what’s happening,” Pitman said. “I find it exciting. The cooperation has been great.”

Once extirpated from New Mexico, elk have been restored to the state’s landscape with the help of sportsman dollars. Conservation efforts such as the current research of low calf survival rates will play an important role in maintaining a healthy elk population for future generations to enjoy.

the crew managed to capture 40 cow elk and suffered just one mortality. Of those captured, 30 received vaginal implant transmitters and were fitted with collars.

The vaginal transmitters give off a special signal when the cows give birth and the collars help biologists find the location following birth. When the elk began giving birth in May and June, biologists traveled to the area and tagged the calves.

“We caught and tagged the calves so they can be remotely studied,” Quintana said. “This way we can monitor survival and investigate the causes of mortality.”

The project, partially funded by the Elk Enhancement Program — dollars received through the auction and raffles of two elk licenses — is expected to continue for several years.

Left: Shawn Carrell, Jemez conservation officer for the Department of Game and Fish, looks on after releasing a cow elk. The elk was fitted with a GPS collar and a vaginal implant transmitter. The transmitter is designed to be expelled during birth, allowing biologists to locate the calves quickly to affix radio tags. NMDGF photo by Nicole Quintana.



Finding elk calves

By Karl Moffatt

As dawn broke over Chivato Mesa, a group of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists, conservation officers and volunteers fanned out in search of calving elk.

They climbed hilltops and used binoculars and spotting scopes to scan the vast meadows and clusters of scrub oak that dot the countryside.

In the distance, Mount Taylor loomed as the sky faded to white in the June heat.

The group were looking for a lone cow elk wandering off into a thicket to give birth or retrieve a hidden calf. It was a long hike with no guarantees, the crews were highly selective of where they searched.

The work got easier when the department's airplane arrived to track radio transmissions from collared cow elk that have expelled vaginal implant transmitters upon giving birth.

But it was the arrival of a helicopter that really improved the crew's odds. Calves were spotted from the air and easily captured as they hunkered down to hide from the noisy copter.

Calves were caught and released quickly to reduce stress, and in most cases the crews watched as calves reunited with their mothers.

After several weeks of work using these methods, crews were able to capture 38 calves, a large enough sample size to conduct a definitive, scientific study.

The tagged calves will be monitored from aircraft and on the ground so any mortalities can be immediately investigated to determine the cause.

Calves can die from many causes, including predation by coyotes, bears, cougars and sometimes golden eagles. Other potential reasons for mortality are disease, abandonment or other natural causes.

Conclusions from the study will be helpful to the department as it makes future management decisions about the Mount Taylor elk herd.

Left: James Pitman, elk program manager for the Department of Game and Fish, with an elk calf fitted with an ear transmitter. The eyes of the animal are covered to minimize stress. NMDGF photo by Storm Usrey.

Below: An elk calf lies still after researchers attached an ear transmitter. Calf survival has been low in the Mount Taylor area and researchers are trying to understand the reason. In the event of a death, researchers can respond to the scene quickly to identify the cause. NMDGF photo by Katelyn Shanor.



Elk Forecast Positive projections for elk hunters

By Zen MocarSKI



Above: Strong precipitation in the winter of 2014 and a good monsoon season last year helped produce an abundance of forage, which has been beneficial to the elk population and the overall health of herds around New Mexico.

Background: While elk populations and overall health are strong for the 2016 hunting season, late monsoonal rains could make for a difficult hunt because elk will likely disperse across the landscape due to the amount of available forage.

NMDGF photos by Dan Williams

When habitat conditions are strong, wildlife tend to flourish and the overriding factor is precipitation.

Adequate rainfall and snow in 2014-15 produced an abundance of available forage, resulting in healthy elk herds throughout most of New Mexico.

“We had a prolific monsoon season in 2015, which created an abundance of late-summer and fall forage and elk entered the winter in great body condition,” said James Pitman, elk program manager for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Pitman said during a winter capture effort, biologists documented high levels of rump fat for that time of year, which is a good sign for healthy elk.

“Overall, I think our elk herds came out of winter in great shape,” he said. “In addition, the fall survey indicated high calf recruitment and excellent bull-to-cow ratios.”

For hunters, the prognosis contains good and bad news. The bonus is healthy elk. Good forage at the right time of year also promotes good antler growth.

However, Pitman said, the resulting habitat conditions can make for a more difficult hunt.

“If we have another strong monsoon season, and there are high levels of available forage and water, elk will likely disperse across the landscape, which can make for a more difficult hunt,” Pitman said. “Bow hunting

over water sources in the early season may not be an option.”

Pitman is confident those putting in the effort will find some large, healthy animals. Game Management Units 36, 34, 15 and 16A-E are sought-after locations.

“Herds in the southeast have the highest bull-to-cow ratios in the state,” he said. “This includes the Ruidoso herd in unit 36 and the Sacramento herd in unit 34. There will be a lot of younger bulls, but there are still plenty of larger ones to be found in both areas.

“It’s also no secret the Gila herd holds the potential for harvesting a monster bull. Based on what we saw last year, I’m confident hunters will find big bulls there again this year.”

Hunting in recently burned areas where the old and decadent vegetation has burned off and stimulated new growth can result in some great hunts. However, while fire is generally beneficial to elk, hot wildfires can result in barren areas elk avoid. However, burns are generally good for elk and elk hunting.

For the best chances at success, Pitman said hunters need to do their homework and get out into the field and glass for elk prior to taking to the field.

“A good forecast should not replace preparation,” he said.

Don't ever wrestle a bear. Doesn't matter how big a person might be and how small it is, just don't do it.

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. It was spring 2008 or 2009 when I was the Las Vegas Supervisory District sergeant. You'd think I'd remember not just the year, but the exact date, but I don't. The details, however, are something a person remembers for a long time.

Following a long 10-hour road trip from San Antonio, Texas, to Watrous, N.M., I was looking forward to getting comfortable and relaxing, but minutes later a call came in about a bear under a house in Watrous.

So much for a relaxing evening. Off came the vacation clothes and on went the Game and Fish uniform.

As with most calls of this nature, I arrived to see about 25 on-lookers doing exactly what they shouldn't be doing, making a potentially dangerous situation even more dangerous by taking pictures and milling about the area.

As I pondered going under the house to investigate, a yearling 100-pound bear appeared and walked to a dog bowl for a few bites before retreating under the home.

The homeowner allowed me to place the dog's bowl in the bear trap, which I had backed up close to the house. Sure enough the bear walked within feet of me and straight into the trap.

Simple. The bear was tranquilized and ear-tagged. All that was left was to bring the bear to a release site and let it go.

Or so I thought. Turns out the day was far from over.

Nearly packed and ready to head out, a yell from up the street caught my attention. A person was waving his arms and pointing at another bear rummaging through a trashcan it had knocked over.

Back to work. I started mixing up the drugs to repeat the process.

I chased the 75-100-pound bear up a hillside, and got a shot into its hind leg. Not ideal, but I was happy.

The bear went down and, with the help of some others, we got it into the bed of the truck and ear tagged it. Recalling the bear trap was already occupied, I figured the bed of the truck would suffice for a 30-mile drive to McAllister Lake, where a second bear trap was available.

I was optimistic the tranquilized bears wouldn't be a problem.

Well, when it comes to wildlife, there are no set formulas or hard-and-fast rules that apply across the board. Drugs are not an exact science and height, weight, overall health of an animal and placement of the tranquilizing dart can all influence the length of time an animal remains unconscious.

About halfway through the trip, I noticed the bear in the bed of the truck beginning to stir. The bear was trying to stand. No drugs were left, so tranquilizing it again wasn't an option. So, I forged on, keeping an eye on the still-groggy bruin.

It became more sure-footed with each passing minute, so I'd swerve the truck just a bit to get it back down on the bed and repeated the process until I reached McAlister.

This is where it got interesting.

I couldn't just let the bear wander off due to my proximity to Las Vegas, so I needed a way to get it into the second trap. I had a plan, and it wasn't complicated: get close to the second trap, sneak up on the still somewhat-dazed bear, grab the nape of its neck and back, run to the trap and shove it in.

Wildlife don't follow plans well.

The bear was more coherent than anticipated. After succeeding in grabbing it I learned what is meant by the saying "got a tiger by the tail." Even as a 270-pound former collegiate linebacker, I was not prepared for the wrestling match that ensued.

The bear turned itself around and I found myself face-to-face with its formidable claws and sharp teeth. We held onto each other and I danced toward the second trap.

Once next to the trap, a few wrestling moves had the bear nearly inside. I freed one hand to lift the heavy, guillotine-type trap door. I managed to raise it just enough to get the bear inside and let the door slam shut.

Exhausted, I slumped to the ground to catch my breath following a fight I had not anticipated.

I stood up, dusted the fur and dirt off myself and examined my wounds. Short of a few scrapes and scratches, I was ok. To my dismay, my pants suffered a worse fate; they were torn and ruined.

I got some much needed sleep, woke up a bit sore, and headed out the door to complete the process that began the evening before. Both bears were released safely and, to my knowledge, were not heard from again.

Live & Learn

By Capt. Andrew Gray



Capt. Andrew Gray places an ear tag onto a tranquilized bear he captured in Watrous. As Gray can attest, even younger bears are built for a life in the wild. They are powerful and possess formidable teeth and sharp claws.



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Dynamic hunter education camps provide new option for youths

By Ross Morgan

Right: Jeremy Lane, the Game and Fish Southwest Area public information officer, assists a young hunter education participant on the proper stance and handling of a shotgun prior to shooting it during a hunter education camp at Philmont Scout Ranch. NMDGF photo by Ross Morgan.



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Parents and youths are having fun learning at the new New Mexico Department of Game and Fish hunter education camps.

These camps deviate from the more traditional classroom-heavy learning experience. Instead, the focus is more interactive for eligible youths 11 years of age and older.

Any hunter in New Mexico under age 18 must have passed a hunter education class unless enrolled in a Mentored-Youth Hunting Program.

“These camps are aimed at helping students learn the material by giving them a mixture of class time and hands-on training so they can become safe and ethical hunters,” said Jennifer Morgan, hunter education coordinator for Game and Fish.

The camps do not replace the traditional two-day classroom courses or the online opportunity, but provide another venue for individuals who grasp material better when there are more interactive activities.

“The traditional classes are heavy on lecture followed by a written and proficiency exam,” Morgan said. “While this style works well for many students, others, such as those that have a hard time concentrating in such an environment, can benefit from the camp-style teaching.”

Students who participate in the camps embark on a busy, family-oriented class. They, along with a family member, interact more with other students in the camp environment, get hands-on training and shoot shotguns, .22 rifles and compound bows.

Even downtime is filled with activities.

“Evening events such as a scavenger hunt and S’mores around a campfire promote friendship and help ease the tension of being in a learning environment,” Morgan said.

Game and Fish personnel continue to learn the most efficient and effective activities and teaching styles for the camps. Few have been conducted and, depending on location, are limited to 10-20 students plus a parent or legal guardian.

Camps begin with check-in on a Friday afternoon followed by dinner and instruction about the parts of a firearm, a review of firearm safety and the importance of eye dominance. Later, the students learn about zones of fire, firearm and ammunition matching, conservation, wildlife identification, fence crossing, safety on the trail, hunter ethics and firearms handling.

More hands-on activities take place Saturday.

In the afternoon, students have the opportunity to shoot and hone their firearms-handling skills on the range. The time on the range focuses on the importance of safe firearm use.

“This time on the range helps emphasize the importance of safe firearm handling before taking the final exam,” Morgan said. “Then, to break the tension, everyone sits around a campfire telling stories and making friends.”

Sunday involves a review-and-question session followed by the final exam and learning about survival, blood-trailing and game care.

The exam is no picnic. Game and Fish personnel take safety, finding the animal and proper care of the meat quite seriously. The youths learn the importance of different colored blood after the shot and how it relates to retrieving an animal.



There’s also information on best shot placement.

They also learn what should be done if lost in the wilderness and needing to spend a night in the field.

“I hope this program continues so our youths will be safe in the outdoors,” said Charles Pacheco, grandfather of a student. “The emphasis on safety and responsibility is important and it was covered thoroughly. The staff at Philmont Ranch also did a wonderful job making sure we were well-fed and comfortable.”

To ensure all students have the opportunity to listen and participate equally in the hands-on training portion, they are broken into small groups. The small groups allow instructors to have one-on-one training with the students to ensure they understand the material and techniques that were taught.

For more information on these camps and anything else related to hunter education, please contact the Hunter Education Department at 505-222-4731 or visit wildlife.state.nm.us/education/hunter-education.

Wildlife has no better ally than a conservation officer.

The name alone, “conservation,” suggests their duties involve the protection of wildlife for future generations. Whether they are combating poaching, conducting population surveys, assisting in habitat projects, participating in relocation efforts or conducting classroom education, it all points to protecting and enhancing the state’s wildlife resources.

Hunting is another important tool, helping to manage populations, with the license dollars supporting management measures at no cost to state taxpayers.

The entire cycle unfolded before the eyes of Conservation Officer Derek Theobald.

September 2012

Theobald responded to a report of an elk trapped in a cattle guard at Fort Bayard but, after arriving at the scene, was unable to locate the animal.

He called the reporting party, who explained the elk wasn’t stuck between the cattle guard bars; it was trapped in an expansive hole beneath the crossing. Upon closer inspection, in a hole almost big enough for Theobald to stand upright, he spotted a young elk.

The animal was tranquilized and, with the help of a U.S. Forest Service officer, a rope was tied around the animal and pulled out. An ear tag, number 356, was affixed to the animal prior to its release.

October 2015

Nathan Kempton was on his first elk hunt with his father, Brandon, a conservation officer, in Unit 24, including Fort Bayard. Adan Jacquez, a fellow conservation officer, helped guide the young hunter.

The trio set out early one morning and started calling for elk just as the sun was rising. One bull eventually responded and the three began attempting to pinpoint the location.

After moving stealthily for a few hundred yards, a lone bull elk was spotted and the group concealed themselves by a small juniper tree and continued calling. The bull moved slowly in their direction and Nathan got his rifle ready on his shooting sticks.

Having recently completed hunter education, Nathan was determined to find the perfect, broadside shot, but it wasn’t there. With the bull now within 100 yards, his father and Jacquez saw an opportunity with a nearly-broadside, quartering-toward shot. Nathan fired and the bull went down almost immediately.

As the group approached the downed animal to begin field dressing the meat they took note of an ear tag. Theobald, who arrived to share in the excitement of a friend’s son harvesting his first elk, noticed the ear tag and decided to check his records.

“It was hard to believe,” Theobald said. “This was the same same elk that was stuck three years earlier. And we weren’t terribly far from that same spot.”

That young elk from the cattle guard had grown into a nice, mature 7x7 bull.

Trapped beneath the cattle guard, the animal easily could have starved to death. Instead, it was rescued, matured to a bull, had ample opportunity to reproduce and pass on its genetics and was then harvested to feed a family.

Hunting, fishing and trapping fund wildlife conservation, and sportsmen and women should be thanked. However, don’t forget about the conservation officers; you never know what might have become of your harvest without them.

Right: Nathan Kempton (right), the son of Game and Fish Conservation Officer Brandon Kempton (center) poses with the 7x7 elk he harvested in 2015. Brandon and fellow Conservation Officer Adan Jacquez noticed an ear tag on the elk and it turned out to be the same animal that had been freed from beneath a cattle guard three years earlier.



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Conservation Coming Full Circle

By Jeremy Lane





Bighorn sheep Thriving in Rio Grande Gorge



With exceptional vision and climbing ability, steep rocky terrain is the ideal habitat for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Since being introduced into the Rio Grande Gorge, bighorn sheep have adapted well and their population has grown from 48 to about 280. NMDGF photos by Dan Williams.

Wildlife agencies across the nation have many success stories to share when it comes to restoring wildlife populations.

Sometimes the wildlife get much of the credit.

That's been the case in the Rio Grande Gorge, where a few dozen Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep released in 2006-2007 have multiplied to a population of 280 in 10 years.

"It's phenomenal," said Caitlin Ruhl, bighorn sheep biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. "The success of this Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep population has exceeded expectations."

Bighorn sheep were absent from the gorge until 2006, when the Taos Pueblo released 23 onto the landscape. The Department of Game and Fish followed with the release of 25 additional bighorns in 2007.

No augmentations to the population have taken place since.

Bighorn sheep thrive in areas with steep, rocky terrain, which can be found in abundance in the gorge along with a year-round water source.

"The area provides all the essentials for bighorn sheep to thrive," Ruhl said. "The lower-elevation habitat in the gorge offers shorter and less severe winters, which likely means greater year-round forage availability. Also, the plentiful escape terrain that characterizes canyon habitat minimizes predation pressure.

"Combine these benefits with the sheep adapting quickly and you have a true success story."

The bighorns spend most of their time in the canyon proper and above the canyon on mesa tops. When outside the gorge, they generally stay close enough so they can retreat to the safety of the canyon. Bighorn sheep have exceptional vision and climbing ability.

"This is especially the case in areas with more human traffic," Ruhl said.

The growing bighorn herd is a positive sign in the ongoing efforts to restore the species in New Mexico. The rebounding population provides both hunting and watchable wildlife opportunities.

"Hunting dollars provided the means to restore this population and will continue to support conservation efforts such as this," Ruhl said.

The department issued four licenses for bighorn rams in the gorge this season. Because rams

mate with many ewes, female bighorns, removal of a few males has virtually no impact to the overall population.

And now opportunities exist for those wishing to view and photograph these majestic animals.

While getting photographs of this animal is always exciting, having an opportunity to witness two rams in the rut is a memory that will last a lifetime. The slamming of heads is a violent act as the two animals charge at speeds around 20 mph. The sound of the collision can be heard up to a mile away.



Mating season for low-elevation Rocky Mountain bighorns runs from November to December, meaning the time is approaching to get the camera ready. During this time of year, rams battle for dominance and access to the females.

While there are no guarantees with wildlife, there are a number of areas accessible to people wishing to catch a glimpse of these animals.

Ruhl said bighorn sheep regularly can be observed within the Bureau of Land Management's Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. A good area to view bighorns is the West Rim Trail that extends from the rest area west of the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge on U.S. 64 and runs south along the canyon rim to Route 567 above the Taos Junction Bridge.

Minimizing disturbance and stress on the animals is important. The normal escape route for bighorn sheep is upward, but along the West Rim Trail, most opportunities to watch the animals is from above, so maintain a good distance. If encountered along the canyon rim and a bighorn begins to run, do not pursue.

A pair of binoculars is essential for long-distance viewing. Photographers will get the best shots with a telephoto lens and a tripod.

-- Zen Mocariski

Laws and additional control

measures appear to have been effective in putting feral hog concerns to rest in New Mexico.

At least for the moment.

“I think we’ll always have to stay on top of it,” said Ryan McBee, regional wildlife biologist in Roswell. “They are a prolific-breeding invasive species. I would say there will always be concerns.”

But, McBee believes what could have become a difficult problem to overcome has been thwarted.

Feral hogs are destructive and carry diseases. Once in an ecosystem they are in direct competition with native wildlife for limited available resources. They are known to destroy crops, contaminate water supplies and displace wildlife.

The problem extends to the diet, which can include native frogs, lizards, snakes and birds and their eggs. The vegetation consumed by feral hogs also can also to the spread of invasive weeds.

“It was a big concern,” McBee said. “The feral hogs were beginning to spread quite a bit and they are destructive to crops and the landscape. I’ve seen them root up entire dirt roads looking for food.”

“They’re highly destructive,” said Brian Archuleta, supervisory wildlife biologist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services in southeastern New Mexico. “It was very important to remove them. They can spread diseases and the habitat destruction has been huge.”

Although some feral hogs likely migrated from Texas to New Mexico, biologists believe the biggest influx came from the importation for hunting.

Understanding the potential dangers to wildlife and the farming and ranching communities, New Mexico State Legislature passed House Bill 594 in 2009, which was signed into law by then Gov. Bill Richardson. The law prohibits the “importation, transport within the state, hold for breeding, release or selling of live feral hogs.”

In addition, it is illegal to operate a commercial feral hog hunting enterprise.

Removal of the animals fell on the shoulders of Wildlife Services, whose mission is to provide leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts.

According to the U.S. Department of

Agriculture, feral hogs cause more than \$1.5 billion annually in damage and management costs nationwide.

A five-year lethal removal project in New Mexico started in 2013 and will continue through Sept. 30, 2017.

“It’s been pretty dang effective,” McBee said. “We haven’t had any reports recently of feral hogs. This is great news. Farmers and ranchers are happy they’re gone, too. Wildlife Services gets a lot of credit.”

To date, 1,250 feral hogs have been lethally removed from the New Mexico landscape, which has been a critical aspect because hunters could not manage the problem.

McBee said the pigs are smart and adapt to avoid hunters, but Wildlife Services knew the areas to target. Some of the feral swine were captured and fitted with telemetry collars and released to help find the location of others.

“The limiting factor with feral hogs is water,” he said. “They are limited to areas with water and the majority were on the eastern side of the state.”

Prior to recent removal efforts, McBee said feral hogs had invaded the Pecos River, Black River, Delaware River, the Sacramento River and places along the Rio Grande.

Archuleta said biologists have documented a male feral hog traveling 240 square miles in the Lincoln National Forest and a female east of Roswell traveled between 125 and 200 square miles.

Due to the success of the control measures, McBee said those wishing to hunt feral hogs may need to spend a lot of time in the field.

“They can go to areas were they’ve been in the past, but it’s probably not worth the time,” he said.

“It would be important to get in there so they don’t migrate back out,” Archuleta said.

While the program will end in September 2017, Wildlife Services has requested funding to continue monitoring feral hogs beyond that date.

If the funding is granted, it will be easier to quickly address future problems.

The public can help by contacting Wildlife Services at (575) 623-3310 to report feral pig sightings. There are no removal fees for the landowner or lessee.



Native wildlife benefits from **Control of feral hogs**



Feral hogs destroy wildlife habitat. Laws now exist that prohibit the importation of feral hogs and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services is in the midst of a five-year project to lethally remove the animals from New Mexico. The effort will end in September 2017, but additional funding has been requested. Photo Courtesy Wildlife Services.

Habitat and birds suffer

As light geese numbers rise

By Zen MocarSKI

Mid-continent populations of light geese are currently at levels never before recorded. They have surpassed critical mass and efforts to stem their growth over the last 20 years has been ineffective.

NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.



“It’s a difficult concept to explain,” said Casey Cardinal, turkey and upland game biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “There’s a threshold, or the number of animals a particular habitat can support called the carrying capacity. Some of the light goose breeding populations have exceeded that point.

“It’s a worrisome development because their numbers are so high, the resultant habitat

Six decades later, in 1975, the population had rebounded and hunting the geese once again was allowed.

The problem

Despite the return of legal hunting of snow geese, more birds continued to enter the population than were being removed and researchers began documenting a steady 5 percent increase in numbers each year. That increase is exponential. At one million

Snow geese have strong, thick bills that work well in grubbing, a feeding practice in which a goose will probe below the surface and turn soil over in search of nutritious plant roots.

“These large populations need a lot of forage, so they end up removing excessive amounts of vegetation,” Cardinal said. “This, in turn, increases the salt content of the surrounding soil, which kills more vegetation.”

With limited breeding areas and a short growing season, the snow geese are devastating important habitat, not just for them, but for other species as well.

And the situation isn’t getting better. Researchers first began documenting habitat degradation in 1996 when a 1,200-mile stretch of coastline was surveyed along west Hudson Bay and James Bay. Those researchers estimated about 35 percent of the original habitat was destroyed, 30 percent severely damaged and 35 percent was overgrazed.

“What we see in New Mexico is a much lesser extreme of what is happening at the breeding grounds,” Cardinal said. “And the fact that 15 years ago researchers were already seeing the potential impacts of overabundant light goose populations is not a good forecast for the future.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began reporting about potential negative impacts to many species in 1999.

“Every animal out there is in competition for food, water, shelter and space,” Cardinal said. “If historically high populations of snow geese are engulfing breeding grounds, it only makes sense that other species would be negatively impacted.”

Cardinal said some impacts can be a loss of nesting habitat or a diminished food supply, two of the key components for the breeding cycle.

In modern times, with many human impacts on the environment, it isn’t often biologists have had to explore the causes for such a population explosion. In just 100 years this bird has gone from nearing extinction to numbers so high they are impacting other species.



degradation is impacting other species.”

It’s both a testament to modern wildlife management practices and the unanticipated role humans can play within the ecosystem, she said.

History lesson

Just a century ago, as market hunting was outlawed and modern wildlife management entered the scene, the snow geese population was imperiled.

The species was on the brink of extinction. Numbers were so low, hunting of snow geese was banned in the eastern United States in 1916.

birds, 50,000 are added to the population; at 5 million birds, it’s a 250,000 increase the following year. A population of 10 million will add a million birds the next year.

Currently, the estimated number of light geese using the Alaskan and Canadian breeding grounds has exceeded six million birds.

These birds fly north to summer nesting areas, especially around Hudson Bay and James Bay in Canada.

“While some may see such an increase as a positive sign, it can be devastating in certain situations,” Cardinal said. “The breeding grounds are blanketed with geese, and to say they are eating themselves out of house and home might be an understatement.”

Why the explosion

Wildlife biologists believe there are several reasons for the continuing upward trend with light geese. Near the top of that list is available food sources during periods of migration.

There was a time when a number of birds would die during a long, difficult migration. However, large farms and an ever-expanding wildlife refuge system has made the journey less hazardous and food more plentiful. As a result, survival rates have increased and lifespans have improved.

In addition, light geese are intelligent. When hunted, they simply adapt and end up in new locations, in areas difficult to access or where hunting is not allowed. They'll also scatter following the first shotgun blast.

While it might seem to be simple with so many birds, when all these factors are combined it makes for a difficult and frustrating hunt. And, each bird killed must then be cleaned and eaten. This means supply far outweighs demand.

Another reason is that the geese are living longer than ever. The lifespan of a goose can range anywhere from 8 to 20 years. They reach breeding age at 3 and, with the average female laying four eggs, it means if one lives to just 8 years old, she'll have produced 24 goslings. If that female lives to 15, that's 48 goslings.

Addressing the problem

While some considered letting nature run its course, biologists believe that could be disastrous.

"It takes years for arctic habitat to recover after being denuded by light geese, and in some cases the damage is permanent," Cardinal said. "That's why this is such a serious problem. We already know large areas of the breeding ground habitat have been decimated. Continuing research will provide valuable information on the impacts the geese are having on other species."

While hunting has been a management tool, it was clear by 1999 that the annual increase in snow geese was outpacing the number removed through traditional hunts.

As a means to encourage additional participation and take, the Fish and Wildlife Service liberalized the rules and allowed states to institute conservation measures aimed at reducing the light geese population.

This action included the ability to adjust hunting regulations to allow for the take of light geese beyond the regular waterfowl season. In New Mexico, when the general waterfowl season ends in both the Central and Pacific Flyways, an extended season for light geese begins.



Also approved during this extended season was the use of electronic calls, unplugged shotguns and shooting until a half hour after sunset, except at Game and Fish Wildlife Management Areas.

"The conservation order has helped to reduce the rate of population growth, but the number of light geese is still increasing," Cardinal said of the 1999 changes. "They are incredibly wary and will quickly adapt to avoid harvest. Hunters that experienced early success found the geese to be a more difficult hunt in the following years.

"And, even with no bag or possession limits during the expanded season, there's only so many geese any particular hunter wants to clean and consume."

Biologists have no doubt that without intervention the ecological damage will continue to worsen.

Hunting is ideal because the birds are legally taken, cleaned and consumed. Other methods, such as trap-and-cull are not viewed as favorably after spending so many years focused on recovery.

The only thing biologists know for sure is that sitting back and watching isn't working. The birds continue to grow in

numbers, destroying one breeding ground and moving on to another.

Opposite: Once imperiled, snow geese are now at population levels never before recorded. The numbers are so high, biologists believe as the birds destroy habitat, they are impacting other wildlife.

Above: While thousands of snow geese may winter in New Mexico, the problem lies at their summer breeding locations in Canada, where millions are sharing a limited amount of habitat.

NMDGF photos by Dan Williams



It's a Trophy

By Zen MocarSKI

Ask a hunter about the trophy mounted on the wall, sitting on a table or neatly placed in a cabinet, and a story will unfold — of outdoor experiences, an important hunt and deeply held values.

Above: A shoulder-mounted pronghorn antelope. NMDGF photo by Martin Perea.

The term “trophy” generally refers to a large game animal that has been mounted, but any particular mount has a story to tell. It’s a snapshot in time of being in the field and putting food on the table. It’s not always large game, either; many have mounts of smaller animals such as waterfowl, quail, pheasants or squirrels.

But, suggesting only mounted animals are worthy of “trophy” status would be inaccurate. Many consider the hunt itself, whether successful or not, to be the trophy. The experiences and adventures of being outdoors is the real prize.

A hunt can be alone or with family or friends, enjoying time away or just enjoying the sounds only heard when a person ventures into the wild.

The term is not always viewed favorably, but visiting a taxidermist following a hunt doesn’t mean an animal went to waste.

“By law, all hunters are required to take the meat out of the field,” said Elise Goldstein, assistant chief of the wildlife division for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “An elk will feed a family, and some of their friends, with healthy, all-natural food. The scenario of a hunter leaving meat to waste would be a violation and should be reported to the department.”

Filling a freezer with meat following a hunt and having a mount made are two outcomes from a single hunt.

“Even though trophy hunters typically harvest the largest male they can find, and often have the animal mounted, that doesn’t mean the meat is going to waste,” Goldstein said. “Those leaving the meat to waste are not hunters, they’re poachers.”

Many of those large males are older and have the largest antlers or horns, but many are nearing the end of their lives and some might not survive another harsh winter. Hunting also serves as an important management tool, with the number of animals removed based on survey counts.

Whether it be big game or small, and regardless whether the animal is mounted or just the meat removed from the field, a hunt is about connecting with nature and making memories that last a lifetime.

“Hunting large antlered or horned animals has a long, honorable history behind it,” Goldstein said.

That history has paved the way for wildlife agencies to act on behalf of the animals, both game and nongame species.

Wildlife is more abundant today than a century ago, and those dollars paid to hunt are the reason for such diversity. Since the advent of modern wildlife management practices, not a single, regulated big-game species has gone extinct in the United States.

Hunting dollars pay for conservation, which grows increasingly difficult as humans continue to impact the environment.

As a result, conservation efforts, such as bringing elk and bighorn sheep back to New Mexico, is funded heavily by sportsmen and women purchasing a license, firearms, ammunition and archery equipment.

Quoting former President Theodore Roosevelt: “In a civilized and cultivated country, wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen.”

Whether it’s phrased as hunting for meat or trophy hunting, the benefits extend well beyond the boundaries of wildlife conservation and into communities. Hunters often travel long distances for a hunt and the money they spend trickles down and impacts many.

Those “trophy” dollars are invested in true conservation, where biologists and dedicated volunteers get bruised, cut and dirty spending time outdoors for the benefit of wildlife.

Left: Game and Fish biologist Eric Rominger takes elk antler measurements. While it was a large rack, the measurements came up short of the record book minimum

Right: Jared Jaramillo assists Game and Fish biologist Eric Rominger as he prepares to take measurements. A trophy animal generally refers to a large male animal and, minus for a few exceptions, it is a violation of law to waste game meat.

Below: An official measuring tape of the Boone and Crockett Club.

NMDGF photos by Martin Perea.



Hunters take aim at helping feed the hungry

By Zen MocarSKI

ALBUQUERQUE – Fall is a time of year when many people begin to think about charity . . . and hunting.

Now, the two can be combined to benefit those in need.

The New Mexico Hunters Helping the Hungry program started by the Roadrunner Food Bank of New Mexico, with support from the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, will provide an opportunity for hunters to show their generosity.

In September, the program began accepting donations of deer and elk meat that has been properly cared for in the field prior to being delivered to a participating processor.

Those wishing to donate have no financial obligation with the meat processor, but can pay the fees if they wish. Donations from a variety of sources, including individuals and organizations, will pay the processing fee. To get the program off the ground, Game and Fish, along with the New Mexico northern and southern chapters of Safari Club International, provided some initial funding.

Prior to getting the program off the ground, Julie Anderson, the food rescue manager for Roadrunner Food Bank, needed to have the funds to pay processors and the infrastructure needed to be in place, including picking up, care and storage of the meat.

After three years of planning and overcoming obstacles, the food bank is accepting meat donations of legally harvested deer and elk.

“There were a number of roadblocks to overcome,” Anderson said. “There was a need to get all the processors willing to participate certified by the New Mexico Environment Department and we had to line up enough donations to know there would be a sustainable program.

“Of course there are concerns when it comes to proteins, like meats, that had to be examined. Historically we do not receive a lot of dairy and protein donations. This program will provide additional protein, which will be a huge benefit.”

Anderson said there are several certified processors participating in New Mexico and the food bank will look to possibly increase participating processors in the future.

Those wishing to help have a financial incentive.

“We can certainly take personal donations,” Anderson said. “Those donating to the processing fund will get a receipt and that donation can be used as a tax deduction.”

The generosity of receiving financial donations fulfills only part of the needs to maintain the program. Anderson is convinced hunters are going to fulfill the rest.

“Having the money to cover the processing fees means little if we don’t receive meat donations,” Anderson said. “Hunters can donate part or all of an animal. I believe there will be a lot of interest in helping.”

Those donating deer or elk meat can ask the processor for a receipt. It is up to the hunter to estimate the value of the donation, similar to the system used when donating items to Goodwill.

Despite the program entering its first year, Bob Osborn, assistant chief of private land programs for Game and Fish, believes the food bank will receive donations.

“I think it’s a great opportunity for hunters to help the needy and homeless,” Osborn said. “I believe we’ll see strong participation.”

Osborn said Game and Fish personnel have spoken with the New Mexico Council of Outfitters and Guides to make sure word about the program reaches the masses. In addition, a brochure explaining the program will soon be readily available and information is available on the Roadrunner Food Bank website rffb.org/hunters.

The website also offers an option to donate funds to support the program.

Those considering a donation of deer or elk meat will need to answer five yes-or-no questions after harvesting an animal regarding the apparent health of the animal, proper care of the meat and that it was protected from contamination.

This form is in the brochure and on the food bank’s website, rffb.org/hunters.

“All donations go into an account dedicated to paying the meat processors,” Osborn said. “Those funds can’t be used for anything else. Donations of both money and meat will ultimately drive this program into the future.”

For more information, contact Anderson at (505) 349-8933 or email Julie@rffb.org.

About Roadrunner Food Bank

Roadrunner Food Bank, a Feeding America member, is the largest nonprofit dedicated to solving hunger in New Mexico, helping 70,000 hungry people every week through a statewide hunger-relief network.

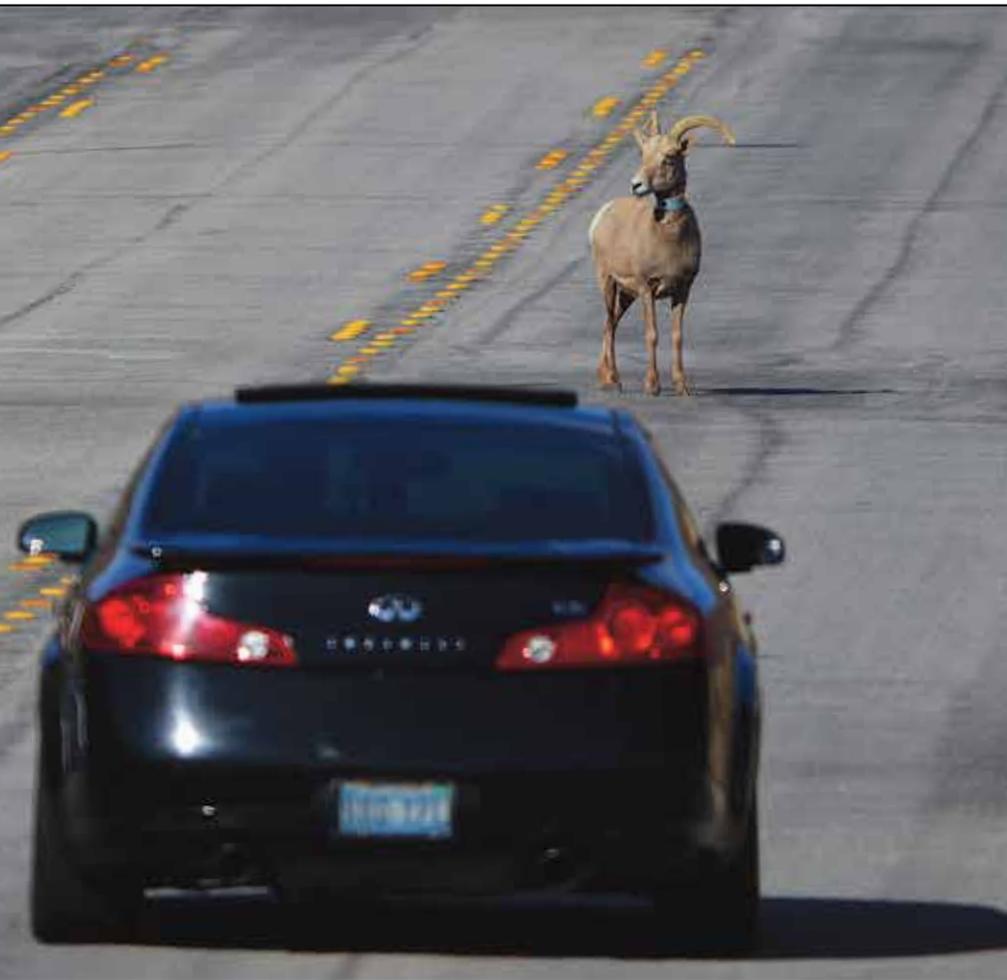
The vision of founder Rev. Titus Scholl, the Roadrunner Food Bank of New Mexico has been serving New Mexico’s hungry since 1980.

Thirty-five years later, the food bank serves as a distribution hub and provides food to hundreds of affiliated partners around the state, including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and regional food banks. Roadrunner also distributes food through its own specialized programs helping children, families and seniors.

In addition to being a part of a statewide network of hunger-relief organizations, the food bank is also the local member of Feeding America, a national hunger organization with 200 food bank members across the nation. Being part of a national network of 200 food banks brings best practices, funding and secures food donations from national food companies bringing food sources to the people in New Mexico.



Common sense driving tips to protect yourself and wildlife



As the colors change and the temperature's drop, hikers and wildlife enthusiasts are spending time outdoors and hunters are getting gear ready for time in the field.

All are signs of fall, which also means the days are getting shorter and more vehicles will be on the road at times when wildlife, including larger mammals, are most active: dusk and dawn.

"Dusk is a difficult time to be driving," said Nicole Quintana, big game program manager for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. "Earlier in the fall the sun may be in your eyes and later in the fall the shadows make it quite difficult to see animals.

"When it comes to wildlife, people need to be diligent during these times. Animals that are easily spotted during daylight are more difficult to detect at dusk and after dark."

There are some simple tips that can help reduce the chances for a potentially dangerous collision.

Quintana said slowing down and looking for movement can help motorists avoid a

potential disaster. Slowing down doesn't just help avoid a collision, it can reduce the impact in the event a large animal is hit.

"And, when the headlights of a car hit an animal's eyes, there's a reflective color, called eyeshine, that's quite visible," Quintana said. "If you think you saw something, slow down.

"It might cost a person 15 seconds, but it can prevent injuries or save the lives of motorists and wildlife. Any other distractions within the car, such as texting, can certainly make it more difficult to avoid such accidents."

Drivers also need to take note that when one herd animal is spotted, such as deer, there may be more in the area. During the fall, male deer and elk will be entering the rut and their behavior can be unpredictable.

"During the rut you just don't know what a buck or bull will do," Quintana said. "They may dart straight out in the road. And, if there's one, there may be more. A motorist shouldn't pass one animal and think 'all's clear' and step on the gas. In fact, that's probably a good reason to slow down."

During times of drought or seasonal green-up some of the best forage will be found alongside roadways, making it particularly attractive to numerous animals. This increases the likelihood of collisions with wildlife.

"Roads cut through wildlife habitat across New Mexico," Quintana said. "Any animals that occur in a particular area can certainly find their way onto a roadway and if a motorist isn't paying attention there can be consequences."

While the fall is certainly a beautiful time of year to be enjoyed by all, wait until the car is parked before allowing your attention to be diverted from the roadway.

-- Zen MocarSKI

Above: Wildlife in the roadways can be dangerous for those in a vehicle as well as the animal. Even smaller animals, such as cottontails and jackrabbits, can prove to be hazardous as motorists break or swerve in an effort to avoid a collision. Photo by Zen MocarSKI.

Quail

Those longing to hunt should consider southeast N.M.

By Ross Morgan



They're small, fast, elusive and disappear quickly, but that's part of what makes quail hunting fun and, occasionally, frustrating.

For those who have not been out on a quail hunt recently, it may be time to reconsider. Quail populations are highly dependent on precipitation and, in recent years, New Mexico has seen improved snow and rain accumulations.

While quail populations will dwindle during times of drought, they rebound quickly when precipitation begins to fall during specific times of the year, such as winter and spring for Gambel's quail.

Regardless of their abundance, it's important to spend time in the field and understand the best places to go.

Personally, I like to spend four weekends every year chasing what I affectionately like to call "nitro birds" around some of my favorite spots.

This past season my wife and I only had an opportunity to spend one weekend in the field, and it was near the end of the season. That should be among the top five rules to follow: If possible, avoid the end of the quail hunting season.

Later in the season is just not a good idea. By this time the birds have been educated due to hunting pressure and have no intentions of sticking around to give a hunter a shot. With the first blast the birds fly and the moment they land they're running hard.

In considering conservation, hunters might think twice about shooting at smaller coveys to leave plenty of quail for the following season, a lesson learned from my father growing up in Artesia.

Gambel's quail. NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.

Small coveys weren't the case last season as quail were found in groups ranging anywhere from 15 to 50 birds. Despite the late-season difficulties and only one weekend in the field, hunting was still good and a number of birds were harvested.

"What a great year for hunting quail. It seemed like there was a covey around every corner," said Chris Pruitt, an avid quail hunter from Artesia.

New Mexico has more than one area that is great for hunting these birds, but those wanting to bring home some wholesome quail meat for the table should consider the southeastern part of the state. The best area last season was in the oilfield east of Artesia in an area just south of Carlsbad north to Dexter. The area was loaded with scaled quail.

Not only were there a lot of birds, but the area is also predominately public land owned by the Bureau of Land Management along with State Trust Land.

The far east side of New Mexico, from Jal to Clovis, was average with the exception of the area north and west of Jal up to Maljamar. This area consistently produces a good number of birds. Although there is more private land, plenty of BLM and state land is available to hunt. Another great place that consistently produces a good number of birds is the BLM and state land south of Hope.

However, southeastern New Mexico isn't the only place with good populations and great hunting; the southwestern portion of the state has several species.

The three species found in the southwest are Gambel's, scaled and Montezuma. Everything from Las Cruces west to Lordsburg and north to Hatch produce both Gambel's

and scaled quail. To be a little more specific, the BLM and state land in and around the Las Uvas Mountains Wilderness Study Area.

Other areas to explore includes all of the BLM and state land west of Las Cruces near the Portrillo Mountains and all of the BLM and state land south of and between Deming and Lordsburg.

Although these areas didn't have as many birds as the southeast, there were still plenty for a great hunting experience.

So, dust off the shotgun, get the bird dog ready and practice up on a few clay pigeons. Forecasting quail abundance can be a bit like predicting the weather, but regardless of their numbers, quail hunting provides a wonderful opportunity for families to spend time together in the outdoors.

Quail Forecast Fall 2016

It's been a hot, dry year in New Mexico and quail seem to be taking a hit after a boom in 2015.

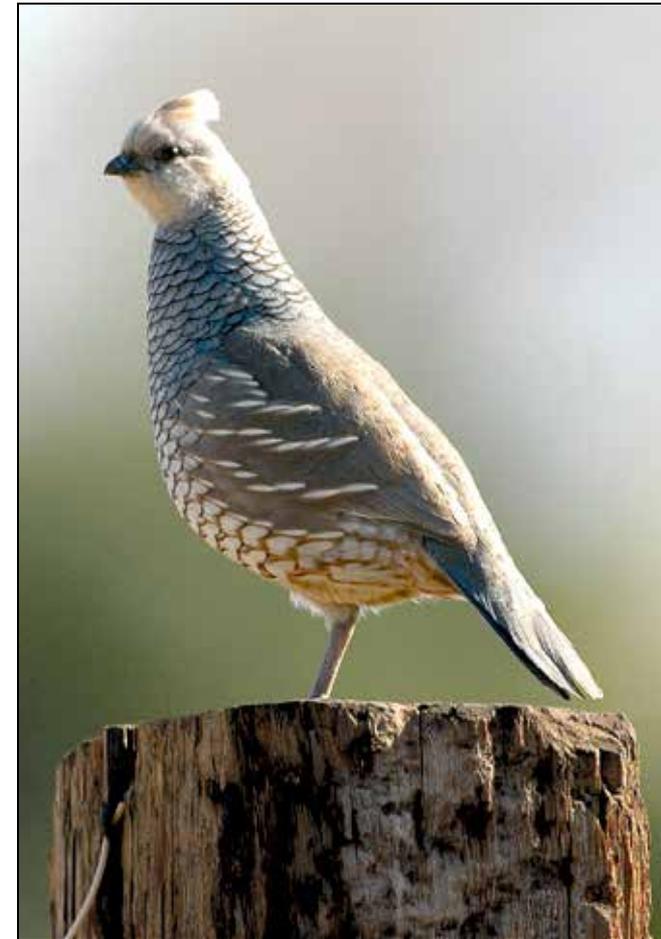
The spring began on a positive note because the majority of quail overwintered fairly well. However, hot temperatures, mixed with below-average spring and summer precipitation, quickly reduced the hopes of another above-average production year.

Reports from the western portion of the state indicate adult quail numbers are down with fewer broods than last year.

It's not all bad news, though.

Anecdotal reports in the southeast suggest above-average numbers of quail. Both bobwhite and scaled quail numbers are up after a high reproduction year in 2015. Additionally, spring reports of Montezuma quail in the Sacramento, Capitan, and San Mateo Mountains were encouraging.

Coming off of an exceptional 2015-16 hunting season, this appears to be more of an average hunting year. There will be good hunting opportunities in pockets across the state, with continued above-average hunting in the southeast corner.



While below average winter and spring precipitation suggest quail numbers will be average following a boom in 2015, expectations for a good hunting season remain high in the southeastern portion of New Mexico. In addition to the southeastern area, New Mexico sports Gambel's, Montezuma, and scaled quail in the southwest and visiting locations from Las Cruces west to Lordsburg and north to Hatch might result in a fulfilling hunt.

Scaled quail. NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.

Those spending time outdoors can
**help catch
poachers**



Whether spending time in the field on a hunt, fishing at a favorite lake or simply recreating outdoors, the eyes and ears of the public can be vital in catching those doing wrong.



Acts such as illegally stocking goldfish or poaching a large buck reflect not only on a single individual, but also on the entire hunting/outdoor community and the State of New Mexico.

“However inaccurate it might be, a number of people still refer to poachers as hunters,” said Capt. Ty Jackson with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “But that’s an unfair assessment. Would you call someone who breaks a mailbox with a bat a professional baseball player?”

In addition to poaching, acts such as the unauthorized stocking of pike in Eagle Nest Lake has cost Game and Fish money that could have been better spent.

For those encountering an illegal act, or something they believe might be illegal, there are important “should” and “should not’s” for the public. Following these recommendations will increase the likelihood of an arrest being made and keeping the witness safe.

“Poachers tend to brag,” Jackson said. “Modern poaching is about ego and/or greed. It is not about feeding a family.”

This need to share information means there are those who know a crime has been committed, but there are important guidelines to follow when reporting a violation.

“There’s no shortage of people who want to help us catch violators,” Jackson said. “However, there are instances when those desires can actually hinder law enforcement efforts.”

Jackson said there are times when those who witness a crime inform the violator they will be calling Operation Game Thief or report a Facebook post. They may also attempt to conduct their own investigation and gather evidence in an attempt to help, but both actions can hinder and complicate an investigation.

“In situations like these the poacher will almost always leave the area before law enforcement can arrive, or delete an incriminating post or photo,” Jackson said. “A better approach is to simply become a good witness. Take notes and, if possible, photos.”

“Simple details like a license plate number and state, or the make, model and color of a vehicle, GPS coordinates and clothing descriptions are all invaluable to responding officers.”

Witnesses should avoid contact if possible and never confront a poacher. Directly confronting suspected violators in the backcountry can be dangerous. Call the OGT hotline or submit

a report through the OGT website as soon as possible with the information.

“Allow trained officers to handle the confrontation,” Jackson said. “People should focus on being a good witness and never put themselves in harm’s way.”

Other potential mistakes include getting too close to the scene, examining a dead animal or waiting too long to contact OGT.

Evidence that has been disturbed or picked up by a witness can result in a poacher skating on what would have otherwise been an open-and-shut case.

“Additional footprints, tire tracks and general disturbance of the area make an investigation difficult, if not impossible,” Jackson said. “If the death of a wild animal appears to be suspicious, people should assume a violation has occurred and contact OGT, the local conservation officer or state police dispatch and provide the location. Do not disturb the area around the site.”

Waiting a day or two to report a wildlife violation is also problematic. With time comes the loss of evidence due to scavengers or poor weather conditions, such as heavy rain.

“Evidence can be lost in a short period of time,” Jackson said. “The quicker we can get an officer to the scene, the more likely it is we’ll be able to identify a suspect, locate evidence, interview additional witnesses and build a case.”

And eyewitness accounts are not always necessary to bring a poacher to justice. Overhearing someone brag about a poaching case in a bar or restaurant, or a posting and photos on social media can certainly help.

“While it may not be an eyewitness account, such reports regularly prove to be valuable in cases,” Jackson said. “When we get enough pieces of information, we can complete the puzzle.”

Those wishing to report a violation are encouraged to contact OGT because they can remain anonymous, which can’t be guaranteed to individuals contacting one of the Game and Fish offices.

“Confidentiality is often critical for those who witness a crime and may be concerned for their safety or reputation, but want to report it,” Jackson said. “We take this trust seriously.”

Anyone witnessing or suspecting a violation should contact the OGT 24-hour toll-free hotline, (800) 432-GAME (4263). Web submissions can be submitted by visiting wildlife.state.nm.us/ogt. Rewards are available for information leading to charges being filed.



Top: Modern poaching is rarely about feeding a family and it should not be confused with hunting. Hunting is a legal activity and poaching is a crime. Wildlife population estimates determine the number of licenses for legal take, which helps manage specific populations. Poachers are stealing from all residents of New Mexico.

Bottom: Two rules in helping conservation officers catch poachers is to report suspected illegal activity quickly so evidence is not lost and to leave the scene undisturbed so evidence can be photographed and/or collected.

Opposite: A bull elk killed by a poacher and left in a field to rot.

NMDGF photos.

It's called hunting



By Zen MocarSKI

Editor, *New Mexico Wildlife*

We've all been there. At least I hope we've all been there and I'm not sitting here alone with the memories of the feeblest hunting experience.

As the saying goes: Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction. This is the category under which my personal hunting exploits would lie.

It was October 2008 and I was on a cow elk hunt. The weather couldn't have been nicer. The mornings were pleasantly cool with the afternoons requiring little more than a sweatshirt.

A friend came along to help navigate through unfamiliar territory.

Heading in, things looked promising as an entire herd of pronghorn walked across the dirt road directly in front of the pickup.

But, of course, I was on an elk hunt and seeing a herd of pronghorn, while nice, wasn't going to put dinner on the table.

While trying to find an area with a bit less hunting pressure, an entire herd of deer walked in front of the pickup. They were kind enough to stop, look back, and virtually pose.

But, of course, I was on an elk hunt.

We searched, glassed, and spoke to other hunters, but came up empty in the early stages of the hunt. Yes, it is enjoyable to see wildlife and, while I am often more focused on photography, I'd payed for an elk hunt, not a photography expedition.

Later in the hunt we found what seemed to be a great location at the top of a plateau to glass for elk. Strange, I thought, that I could see miles without so much as a hint of an elk.

Dusk approached and the day was nearing its end. It was at this time I began to wonder about this odd, nearby, snorting sound.

The sounds grew louder and louder until I finally noticed a number of javelina no more than 10 feet away.

But, of course, I was on an elk hunt.

Frustration began to set in. We had seen nearly every big-game animal the area had to offer, except for elk.

The hunt was nearing its end when we once again set out in the morning and saw nothing.

On the way out it finally happened. A cow and bull in the distance. I positioned myself

for a potential shot. She was in my sights, but I hesitated a moment. It was then the bull moved into a position that made taking a shot risky.

They disappeared over a ridge and I followed, but both were gone and the hunt was over.

So, there it is, the story of my failed cow elk hunt.

Maybe a camera would have been a better choice than a firearm after all. At least then I'd have returned with something to show for the days in the field and the mud on my face.

Who knows, maybe one day I'll work up the nerve to share the story of my quail hunt.

Spoiler alert: I returned home on crutches without a quail in the bag.

Above: Seeing wildlife is always an exciting experience, but it can become frustrating when the animal a person is looking for can't be found. While on a cow elk hunt, with the camera left behind, javelina, deer, and pronghorn antelope were all happy to make an appearance, but the elk remained elusive. NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.



Bear population study used best methods available

Finding a needle in a haystack might sound like a difficult, painstaking process, but it pales in comparison to estimating the number of bears on the landscape.

Wildlife agencies across the nation face a notoriously difficult challenge trying to estimate bear populations, but new methods offer the ability to more accurately estimate bear numbers than ever before.

“You can’t do a helicopter survey like you would with deer or elk. It would be ineffective,” said Rick Winslow, bear and cougar biologist for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “They occur in fairly low densities and they’re spread out over the available habitat.”

The last study occurred over 15 years ago, but novel methods provide the means to estimate an accurate, reliable, scientifically-based minimum head count for bears.

But it was far from simple. The non-invasive research included hair traps, bear rubs and putting a good pair of hiking boots to the test.

Hair traps were set with a single strand of barbed wire wrapped around three or more trees at about knee height with a lure pile. The smells from the lure piles attracted the bears, which would go under or over the strand to investigate, snagging hairs from the animal.

The team also took advantage of a bear’s natural behavior of rubbing on objects. After identifying rubbing sites, a strand of barbed wire was wrapped around the item – such as a tree, telephone pole, or sign post – to collect hair.

The hairs were sent to Wildlife Genetics International in British Columbia for DNA analysis. By collecting DNA, individual bears roaming a specific territory could be identified. Samples degraded by ultraviolet radiation likely reduced the number of individual and recaptured bears identified in the study.

“The attractants used with the hair traps involved materials that provided no caloric value, such as skunk essence, to avoid getting bears habituated to human foods,” Winslow said.

“There was no chance to injure bears,” said Matt Gould, Ph.D. student with the New Mexico State University Department of Biology. “They regularly cross barbed-wire fences. These traps have been used for years.”

Gould and other New Mexico State University personnel were contracted by Game and Fish to conduct the study.

“Not at all easy,” Gould said of the work. “It involved a lot of hiking because each trap was roughly three miles apart.”

The study took three years and involved primary bear habitat in five study areas in three mountain ranges; the northern and southern Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the Sandia Mountains, and the northern and southern Sacramento Mountains.

“All the areas studied were identified as primary bear habitat,” Winslow said.

There are three levels of bear habitat: primary, secondary and edge.

“Only the primary is studied because the others generally only provide supplementary resources,” Winslow said. “They mostly use those areas to forage on specific foods, such as piñon nuts or juniper berries or for travel from place-to-place.”

In all, the team of researchers monitored 554 hair traps, documented 117 bear rubs and collected 4,083 hair samples.

Following all the hiking and DNA testing, turns out the decade-old density study was comparable with the most recent findings.

“Bears are at similar or higher densities than what New Mexico has been managing for based on previous studies,” Gould said. “Our study was specific to density and I’m confident we produced results similar to the rest of the United States.”

Bear density provides the means to estimate an overall population by applying density to the total area of primary, occupied habitat. Using a combination of density information from the new and older studies, Winslow concluded New Mexico’s black bear population is 8,000-9,000.

“We have a high level of confidence the bear population is reliably estimated at this time,” Winslow said. “The study covered about half of the primary bear habitat in the state. This is the best we can do as an agency to come up with the best possible bear population estimate.

“It was an extensive study. The whole study lasted three seasons, one season in each mountain range, except the Sandia range, where a second effort was conducted using volunteers to collect data.”

The proximity to Albuquerque was the reason for a closer look at the Sandia Mountains.

“There’s a lot of public and media curiosity for that area,” Winslow said.

The scientific study will allow Game and Fish to better manage bear populations throughout New Mexico.

“Having a report like this provides the means to scientifically manage New Mexico’s bear populations using the best information available,” Winslow said. “Our ultimate goal is to maintain long-term viable wildlife populations with sustainable harvest.”

-- Zen MocarSKI

Top: Determining an accurate minimum population of bears has been difficult, but understanding bear behavior and using modern technology make it possible. NMDGF photo by Dan Williams.



Open Gate Stamp funds provide opportunities for hunters and anglers

By Zen MocarSKI

As the autumn wind begins to blow, it becomes clear hunting season is near.

Those gearing up to hunt begin preparing their equipment and open a map to formulate a plan.

For even the most dedicated sportsmen and women, this is where it can get a little complicated.

“Exactly where do I hunt?” is a question commonly posed to New Mexico Department of Game and Fish personnel.

“Those hunting public land need to consider not only the good hunting spots, but also whether or not they can legally access those areas, given the mix of public and private lands,” said Ryan Darr, lands program manager for the department.

Hunters often see or hear of great places to hunt, only to find a lack of quality public land. They also commonly run into the issue of public land being landlocked by private land and therefore inaccessible.

In a scenario such as this, Darr encourages hunters to visit the Open Gate program’s web page, wildlife.state.nm.us/open-gate. Users will find private lands leased through the program to afford the public with additional hunting and fishing opportunities. In addition, access routes to enter landlocked public lands are also leased and developed.

Funded using a portion of the revenues from the Habitat Management and Access Validation stamp purchased by hunters and anglers, Open Gate provides multiple access routes across New Mexico as well as fishing opportunities in ponds, lakes and streams. There are also opportunities for public hunting access on private property for almost all game birds and a variety of big game.

“The goal is not only to improve access, but also to enhance the hunting, angling or trapping experience,” Darr said. “Sportsmen and women are more likely to get outdoors and have an enjoyable experience when access to quality hunting and fishing areas is available.”

Open Gate is responsible for access to thousands of acres of land. Each property is screened by Game and Fish personnel to ensure the habitat supports sufficient game populations for public hunting before leasing access.

Those heading to an area with potential access issues can review the property locator link on the website for Open Gate access opportunities. The link provides an interactive map with links to information on permitted activities, property photos, property rules, a printable map of the property and electronic driving directions to the gate. Visitors to a property can rate their experience at the website to help assure stamp dollars are being put to good use.

Darr would like to see additional participation in the program and those interested, or wanting more information, can contact the department at (888) 248-6866 or email ispa@state.nm.us.

Top: The Open Gate program improves access and enhances hunting, angling and trapping opportunities around New Mexico. The program is funded using a portion of the Habitat Management and Access Validation stamp revenue.

Bottom: Ryan Darr, the Game and Fish lands program manager, examines an area now accessible to sportsmen and women as a result of the Open Gate program.

NMDGF photos by Martin Perea.



Share with Wildlife

Helping youth develop passion for outdoors

To help students develop a respect for nature, one northern New Mexico program is trying to close the gap between classroom education and outdoor engagement.

The New Mexico Wildlife Center in Española is hoping hands-on science activities will develop a generation of youths with a desire to protect the state's natural resources the way a sow protects her cubs.

The River Classroom Program, developed and managed by the center, started small, but continues to expand and provide a number of programs designed for students ranging from fourth to ninth grade.

“Each program is slightly different and designed to meet the needs of the students and the teachers,” said Christy Wall, the center's director of science and education. “We aren't taking field trips. We are practicing science in the field.”

It was enough to garner the attention of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Share with Wildlife program. The New Mexico Wildlife Center has submitted proposals and received funding for wildlife education or rehabilitation activities in at least eight of the last 10 years.

“Educational programs like this are an important component of securing the



future of New Mexico's natural resources,” said Ginny Seamster, Share with Wildlife program coordinator.

But, with limited staffing and funding, the center's programs are focused more on quality than quantity.

In mid-May, Wall and Katherine Eagleson, executive director at the center, were out with 12 students involved in the Española Gifted and Talented Education Program along the Rio Chama.

The students initially were split into groups, some studying water quality by checking turbidity, pH, temperature and dissolved oxygen levels, while others put on waders to venture into calmer areas of the river where they used a net to capture macroinvertebrates from the river bottom. The insects are important indicators of water quality.

Later, groups ventured out to look for signs of wildlife and identified both native and non-native vegetation in the area.

After each session, students and educators spoke about their observations and examined potential cause-and-effect relationships to account for the data obtained, such as recent rains causing higher turbidity in the river and the higher spring flows accounting for low water temperatures.

“Our goal is to offer a quality science program,” Wall said. “We are not trying to give 10,000 kids field trips to habitats. We are trying to educate maybe 300 youths per year with a solid, science curriculum based on well-researched methodology.”

Wall said the hope would be to help usher in a new generation of stewards that will continue to care for the state's valuable resources.

“Being able to gauge the relative health of local ecosystems is critical to maintaining these habitats for both humans and wildlife,” she said. “Today's students are tomorrow's decision-makers, wildlife managers, foresters, researchers and scientists. We want to get them ready to take it on.”

-- Zen MocarSKI

Above: (right to left) Christy Wall with the New Mexico Wildlife Center works with Cruz Sandoval and Loren Vigil to test water samples pulled from the Rio Chama. The students were asked later what might influence water turbidity, temperature and pH levels. NMDGF photo by Zen MocarSKI.

Raccoons

Did you know...

Sly, adaptable and cunning, the common raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) likely ranks among the most recognizable animals in the United States.



Probably the most distinctive feature is the black mask around a raccoon's eyes, earning it the nickname "bandit." This unique characteristic is believed to serve a purpose.

"Much like an athlete wearing eye-black below the eyes, the mask may cut down on glare for better night vision," said Jim Stuart, non-game mammal biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

The raccoon, a protected furbearer in New Mexico, was found only in North America

until the 1950-60s when a number of "pet" raccoons – which are illegal in New Mexico – were released in Germany and Japan, where their numbers quickly increased. They were also introduced onto the Russian landscape as a furbearing species.

Part of the reason people released these "pets" was likely the burden associated with caring for them.

"Providing a proper diet is not simple and adult raccoons can become destructive and can carry a number of diseases that can be passed to humans," said Rick Winslow, bear and cougar biologist for Game and Fish.

The largest in the Procyonidae family (ring-tails and coati also occur in New Mexico), raccoons generally reach lengths between 1 ½ to over 2 feet and weigh 8 to 20 pounds. Such a diverse weight range is because how big a raccoon gets is directly proportional to available food.

The largest raccoon ever recorded – and there isn't a close second – weighed in at a beefy 62.6 pounds and was well over 4 feet long.

While encountering a raccoon that size is unlikely, they are known for their eating habits. As an omnivore, the raccoon's food intake is quite varied, and some consider it to be the quintessential omnivore, consuming fairly equal amounts of invertebrates, plant food and vertebrates. And, it certainly won't pass up a free meal, such as road kill.

Admittedly, road kill wasn't readily available over 100 years ago, but that just goes to show the impact humans can have on wildlife; negatively and positively. Human modifications to the landscape have altered the raccoon's habitat.

"At one point in history this animal was closely tied to riparian areas with climbable trees," Winslow said. "Agriculture and urban development with its landscaping played an integral role in raccoons being

able to expand their range, which now includes developed areas. Structures such as barns and stables, abandoned buildings and old sheds provide adequate shelter from inclement weather and safe havens during long journeys."

Raccoon population densities are believed to be 20 times higher in rural areas, possibly due to the availability of human garbage. However, the raccoon's keen sense of touch means being near water remains the best location to find them.

"Their front paws are quite sensitive, which is enhanced when wet," Stuart said. "Research has determined raccoons are capable of unlacing a shoe, unlatching many different types of cage latches and picking up thin objects. They can also stand on their hind legs, leaving the front paws free to perform tasks."

Maybe these behaviors led to the Algonquin word "arakun," which translates to "one who scratches with his hands." And its scientific name, "Procyon lotor," means "washer dog," which is a bit odd considering this animal is more closely related to a bear than a dog.

Nothing new?

In the 1830s, the raccoon became the emblem of the long-defunct political Whig Party. Whigs. The name seems a bit ironic considering the iconic coonskin cap made famous by Davy Crockett.

The presence of the coonskin cap on television in the 1950s created a demand for raccoon pelts, but this choice of hat is more Hollywood than fact: There is no evidence Davy Crockett ever wore one.

Raccoons are extremely adept climbers and have the ability to climb back down headfirst by rotating the hind feet so they point backwards. This cunning raccoon navigates a tree in search of food. NMDGF photo.