

Wildlife Program – Bi-weekly Report

December 1 to 31, 2022

LANDS DIVISION

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Wildlife Committee Review of Simcoe Grazing: Jeff Burnham joined Division Manager Wilkerson at the Fish and Wildlife Commission's (FWC) Habitat Committee meeting in Clarkston. They provided a general report on grazing management in 2022 and submitted a draft grazing permit on the Simcoe Mountains Unit for consideration. The Habitat Committee agreed that the draft permit should be submitted to the full Commission for their review as outlined in WAC 220-500-200. This will occur in January.

Simcoe Mountains Cultural Resource Management: Jeff Burnham attended the latest meeting in Goldendale. The group spent most of the time considering the introductory section which will describe the format of the group's ongoing communication and meetings.

Montesano Crew: Brad Morgan sprayed invasive plants (invasive grasses and Hypochaeris) and mowed Scotch broom at West Rocky Prairie. Morgan planted native grasses and forbs at Scatter Creek South burn area.

Middle Hutchins Forest Restoration Project on the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area: Early in November, an in-field pre-Inter-Disciplinary meeting consisting of the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Ecology, the Yakama habitat biologist along with the Department of Fish and Wildlife forester, archaeologist, and wildlife area manager, met to collaboratively discuss the forest restoration project. Various stops were made within the project area to showcase timber marking strategy, implemented buffers of sensitive areas, and potential road and landing construction areas.

Discussions were had at showcase locations to get input and address concerns. Topics stemmed from required additional wildlife and fish surveys, additional archaeological surveys, buffers on sensitive areas to implement, and habitat considerations. Discussions were preliminary in nature and a final in-field meeting will take place this coming spring to confirm all parties/agencies inputs were implemented. Leave tree marking is 95% complete.



Middle Hutchins pre-thinning

Colockum Wildlife Area Restoration Thin Phase One: Work is continuing Unit One of the Colockum Phase One Restoration Thinning Project. Approximately 20% of the project area has been thinned to date. Early winter weather conditions have been ideal for minimizing soil disturbance and damage to road running surfaces. To further minimize road damage early in the winter, and prevent potential sediment delivery to streams, log hauling was suspended at ten each morning. As the weather got colder, however, the contractor was allowed to deliver logs all day long. The goal is to complete work in Unit One by the end of January. At that time, a decision will be made to continue working or suspend operations for the winter.



Post-thinning on Colockum Unit One on Nov. 19, 2022

Upper Robinson: The thinning phase of the 411-acre Upper Robinson commercial thinning project on the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area was completed in November. Post-haul maintenance has been postponed due to winter conditions and will resume after snow melt occurs in the spring of 2023. Slash piles were burned in early December before the beginning of the winter elk closure that started on Dec. 15.



Post-thinning on upper Robinson Unit One on Nov. 8, 2022

Umptanum Post Fire Restoration Thinning on Wenas Wildlife Area: Field preparation work is 100% completed for the Umptanum project on the Wenas Wildlife Area. An Inter-Disciplinary Team (IDT) meeting was held in the beginning of November. The IDT meeting consisted of the Washington Department of Natural Resources Forest Practices, the Department of Ecology, the Yakama habitat biologist along with Department of Fish and Wildlife’s forester, archaeologist and wildlife area manager. Various stops were made within the project area to showcase timber marking strategy, discussing the alternate plan for riparian areas and road construction. After further discussion with the Yakama stream biologist and archaeologist, the Alternate Plan and Forest Practices Application will move forward.

The Forest Practices Application and State Environmental Policy Act checklist have been submitted for review. Both purchaser and harvester documents have been completed and submitted for advertisement.



Pre-thinning on Uptanum Unit Two on Nov. 21, 2022

North Lake Management District: Dave Heimer attended the North Lake Management District meeting in Federal Way to discuss management issues. The group commented on how the lake treatment in 2022 did not seem to affect *Brasenia*, the target, but instead they notice a dramatic die off of other aquatic vegetation throughout the lake with associated algal masses forming and coating the bottom of the lake.

Wildlife Program School Workshop: Dave Heimer worked on developing a presentation for Wildlife Program School Workshop weed sections and finding suitable presenters for pesticide credits.

Aquatic Noxious Weed National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Report: Dave Heimer completed the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System submission of the 2022 application records from WDFW applicators into Washington Department of Agriculture's system.

Lake Management District Meeting: Dave Heimer met with Thurston County Commissioner Mejia and Tim Wilson (Thurston County Water Resources Manager) for a short meeting to discuss how other Lake Management Districts work.

Ecology Invasive Aquatic Plants Management Funding: Heimer submitted a proposal to Ecology's Freshwater Aquatic Weed Fund with Lauren Kuehne (Omfishient Consulting) and Ben Peterson (King County Noxious Weed Control Board) to look at long-term efficacy of Eurasian Watermilfoil by Procellacor and pre-sample vegetation in lakes to be treated in 2023 with Procellacor with the intent of re-sampling in 2024-2025 to examine changes in aquatic vegetation including Eurasian water milfoil and variable-leaf milfoil (Class A noxious weed).

North American Wetlands Conservation Act Report: David Heimer and Daniel Zimmerman completed the final report for the North American Wetlands Conservation Act contract to do invasive cattail control on 100-acres on the Island Unit of the Skagit Wildlife Area and sent it to C.K. Eidem (Ducks Unlimited).

Conducting Business Operations and Policy

Montesano Crew Office and Training: Holcomb worked on updating Brad Morgan's position description as part of his conversion to full-time and Morgan assisted. Les Holcomb worked on and submitted position descriptions with Heimer for the permanent pest biologist and the non-permanent natural resource technician position with hiring requests.

REGION 1

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Columbia Basin Mule Deer: Biologist Lowe finished up the second week of ground surveys in Lincoln and Whitman counties, running into some fog and widespread early snow this year. The surveys are also conducted in Districts 4, 5, and 7, and are used to estimate post-season herd composition (such as fawn-to-doe and buck-to-doe ratios) for three sub-herds across the Columbia Basin.



Group of mule deer in southwest Whitman County



Young buck spotted with unusual antler growth

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Mentored Pheasant Hunting Clinic: Private Lands Biologist Gaston, alongside many WDFW staff members from the Hunter Education Division, WDFW Enforcement, and WDFW Conflict Section, all partnered with the First Hunt Foundation, Inland Empire Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Inland Northwest Wildlife Council, Spokane Bird Dog Association, and various volunteers to host the annual Mentored Pheasant Hunting Clinic in St. John on Dec. 10, 2022. It was a massive group effort to put on this event with great coordination by Hunter Education Coordinator Garcia and a donation of pheasants to be planted by Pheasant Program Coordinator White. The weather turned a bit sour in the week with heavy snows occurring Wednesday and then a light snowfall Friday night. Rain came in with some strong winds on Saturday to make the conditions a little mushy, but the clinic prevailed. The event hosted 18 hunters, most of whom had never hunted pheasants before. There were around 20 mentors which allowed for a great opportunity for hunters to get one-on-one guidance from a mentor while in the field. The Inland Empire Chapter of Pheasants Forever and the Spokane Bird Dog Association sponsored a hot lunch with chili dogs and refreshments which was much appreciated with the chilly weather. Many connections were made between hunters and mentors with many planning hunts together again later this year. A huge thank you to those who helped with the event as this couldn't have happened without you all!



Two hunters walking next to their mentors while the dog handler works the dog across the field looking for pheasants



Chili dog lunch being provided by members of the Inland Empire Chapter of Pheasants Forever

Access Area Activities: North Region 1 Access Manager Daniel Dziekan checked on a few access areas and cleared space for parking and restroom use, as well as providing a safe path for ice anglers to access lakes.



*(Left) Waitts Lake Access Area parking lot and trail for ice anglers
(Right) Restrooms before and after snow removal*

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

Deer Damage: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Kolb responded to a report of deer damage in Walla Walla County. Mule deer were observed feeding and tracking through freshly planted winter wheat. Abatement strategies were discussed with the producer. The producer also entered into a Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreement.

Wildlife Conflict Specialist Kolb surveyed commercial crop fields with a producer in the Starbuck area to document deer damage. The producer's vehicle that they were riding in was having mechanical problems resulting in constant backfiring. The deafening noise of the vehicle effectively hazed any deer out of the fields. Kolb and the producer got a good chuckle out of the hazing effectiveness of the farm trap wagon. Kolb will return to the fields next week with his Motor Pool vehicle to further document damage issues.

Elk Depredation: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Samsill responded to an elk depredation report in which a small herd of elk, about 15 to 20, were damaging haystacks and grain at a horse ranch outside of Fruitland. Samsill performed a site visit and deployed electric fencing around the largest haystack. Samsill advised the reporting party to secure other attractants like hay and grain with panels. Samsill also issued the landowner one kill permit for antlerless elk.

Elk Damage: Natural Resource Technicians Barron and Janowski and Wildlife Conflict Specialist Bennett met with a landowner experiencing elk crop damage to discuss enrollment into the Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreement program. Barron, Janowski, and Bennett deployed an electric net kit around a hay shed for another landowner to prevent elk from damaging a haystack.

Cougar Concern: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Kolb responded to a report of a cougar that killed a raccoon while it was eating cat food on the back porch of a Walla Walla County home. The homeowner is an 81-year-old widow who witnessed the incident late at night. Kolb walked the property with the homeowner and made recommendations to reduce the likelihood of wildlife congregating on the back porch.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Conservation District Coordination: Natural Resource Technicians Barron and Janowski and Habitat Biologist Stetson met with the Stevens County Conservation District to discuss upcoming habitat restoration projects and opportunities for collaboration.

REGION 2

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Mule Deer Surveys: Biologists Fitkin and Heinlen and Wildlife Area Manager Troyer conducted annual post-season aerial deer composition surveys. Unlike last year's unprecedented mild conditions, this year's surveys benefited from complete snow cover and below average temperatures. The team classified over 2800 mule deer from the Methow and West Okanogan sub-herds. Analysis of the data generated an estimated buck to doe ratio of 29 to 100 and a fawn to doe ratio of 66 to 100. The buck ratio is above the ten-year average of 23 indicating high hunting season escapement. This may reflect a drop in harvest this year due to mild weather and anecdotal reports of a drop in hunting participation. The fawn ratio fell below the ten-year average of 74. This is not surprising given the fires, disease, and record heat/drought that does dealt with in the summer of 2021. They likely went into that fall breeding season in below average condition. Despite the heavy snow cover, the snow was still soft all the way through, and deer appeared to be navigating it well. Deer was still widespread across the landscape and utilizing winter range from the valley floor to over 4500 in elevation.



Scotch Creek Wildlife Area covered in early season snowfall — Photo by S. Fitkin



Elk in GMU 204 — Photo by S. Fitkin



A bobcat seen incidentally, during aerial deer and sheep surveys — Photo by S. Fitkin



Whitestone Mtn in the Okanogan Valley from an eagle's perspective — Photo by S. Fitkin



Pacific chorus frog— Photo by S. Fitkin

Wildlife Surveys: Assistant Manager Pavelchek helped District Biologist Jeffries conduct counts of the Chelan herd of bighorn sheep by helicopter. Bighorn sheep were observed, along with deer, chukar and coyote. Several upland bird hunters were also seen hunting on the butte. It was a beautiful day to fly and a valuable bird's eye view of the wildlife area.



The Lucas homestead, also known as Brickhouse on the Chelan Butte, as seen from helicopter during bighorn sheep counts — Photo by A. Pavelchek

Wildlife Surveys: Biologists Morris and Cook assisted District 5 Wildlife Biologist Dougherty and Assistant Wildlife Biologist Clements with deer road surveys. Morris also saw plenty of other wildlife while doing the deer surveys including pheasants, chukars, Hungarian partridge,

California quail, coyotes, and porcupines. Cook counted more deer than in his survey the previous year in the same area. This was the first year of survey effort for Morris.



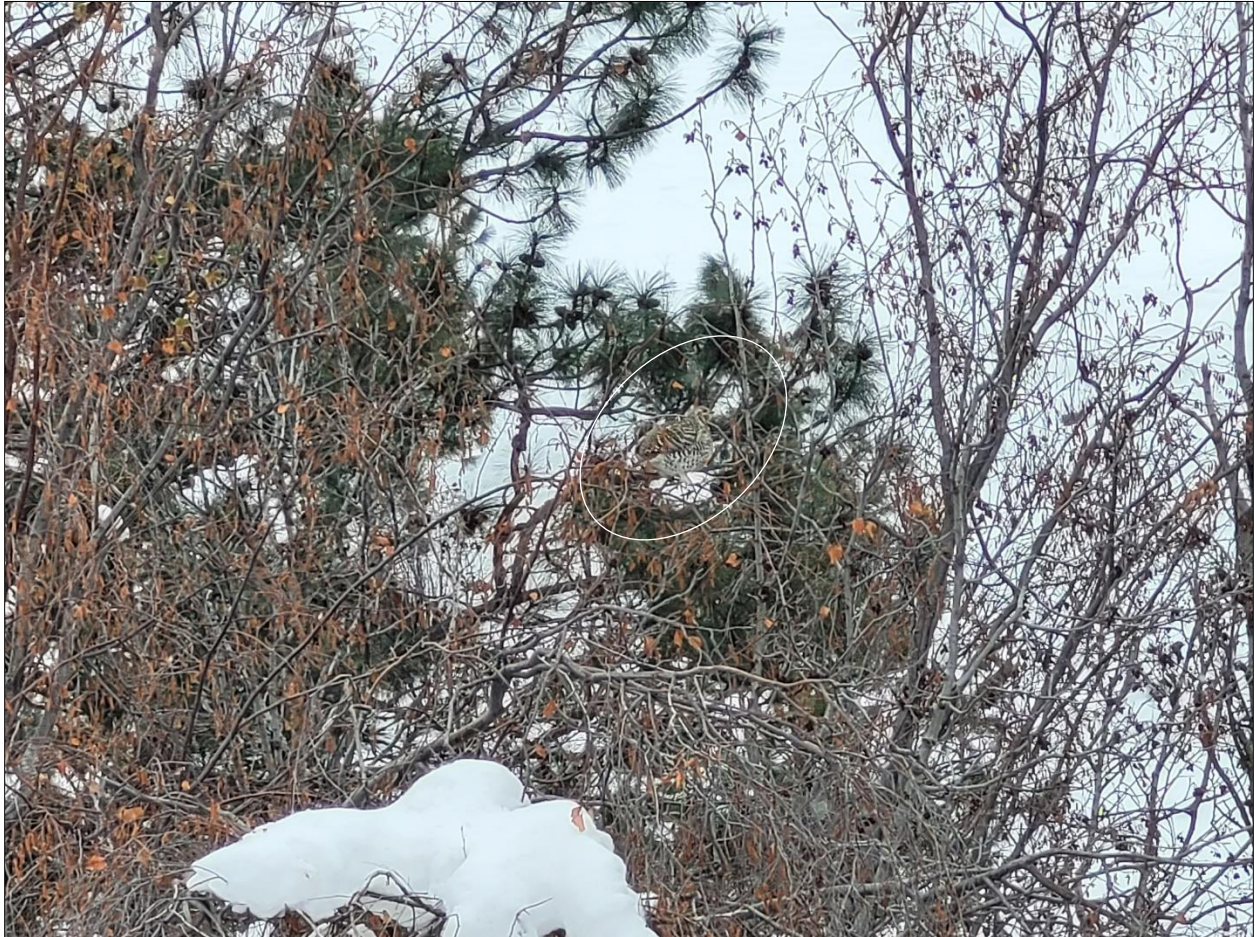
A group of deer graze in wheat stubble at dusk in Grant County — Photo by J. Morris



Deer observed during road survey — Photo by N. Cook

Bighorn Sheep Surveys: Biologists Fitkin and Heinlen and Wildlife Area Manager Troyer conducted a comprehensive aerial survey of the Sinlahekin herd. The effort yielded 28 animals, up from 19 last year, spread over several bands. This is encouraging ahead of next month's planned capture effort. Conversely, no sheep were spotted on Mount Hull and very little sign of their presence despite the snow cover. This is dramatic change from the 50 animals seen on Mount Hull during a survey by Tribal biologists last February. We did see a group of eleven sheep in open country heading to the south not far from the McLoughlin Falls Unit.

Scotch Creek Sharp-tailed Grouse Surveys: Staff members surveyed the riparian areas in Siwash, Tunk Valley, Scotch Creek and along Highway 20 for Sharp-tailed Grouse. Deciduous shrubs and trees within the riparian areas provide a valuable winter food source when snow limits there accessibly to other food sources in the grasslands. Eleven Sharp-tails were observed in Siwash.



One of eleven Sharp Tail Grouse observed in Siwash— Photo by B. Dupont

Methow Wildlife: The early winter has been a welcome site for many, but it has created a few challenges for wildlife. Before Thanksgiving, a distressed adult Sandhill crane was reported along the Methow River. Manager Troyer and retired USFS Biologist Woodruff found the crane and were easily able to walk up and capture it as it was clinging to life along the river's edge, hampered by the snow. This bird was very clearly starving, evident by a protruding keel bone. It's assumed it was a late migrator who landed in the Methow, but found a foodless, snow-covered landscape in early/mid-November. Methow Wildlife Area staff members and several volunteers including Woodruff made extensive efforts to save the state endangered crane, but it was simply too weak to make the long journey to a rehab facility and unfortunately perished.

A day after encountering the crane, Manager Troyer happened upon a yearling mule deer doe who had its hind leg caught in a fence. The deer was hanging upside down but was still very much alive and obviously in distress. Troyer was able to quickly walk up and cut the fence with bolt cutters, which immediately freed the deer. The doe didn't stick around long enough for a head-to-toe health exam, but judging by its ability to flee the scene, it's anticipated that it will recover from the unfortunate fence encounter.



A mature mule deer buck during the peak rut — Photo by B. Troyer



(Left) Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) Crew Member, Jacob, and Crew Leader Emily, drive angle iron into frozen ground (Right) WCC Personnel and Volunteer Carry Fence panels to their destination

Building the Breeding Enclosure: Each year the pygmy rabbit team builds a new breeding enclosure in preparation for kits in the spring. These breeding enclosures house rabbits for approximately three years. In that time, the offspring from the rabbits inside of the breeding enclosure are captured and released into the wild in the hopes that they will form their own population. After three years, the enclosure is taken apart and moved to a new location. This is advantageous because it prevents over-browsing and disease. Building these is no easy task! Enclosures are approximately six acres in size.

Much like Goldilocks, biologists spend a lot of time finding just the right spot to build these. They look for thick sagebrush, deep soil, and available forage. This year, the enclosure was taken down and moved to its new location in Rimrock. A dedicated team of volunteers, Washington Conservation Corps, WDFW staff members, and partners made this possible. Despite windy days, frozen ground, and low temperatures, the whole process took just two weeks. Hopefully all the hard work will pay off and the rabbits will enjoy their new home.



Biologist Gallie performs a perimeter check to make sure there aren't any gaps in which rabbits can get out and predators can get in

Gearing up for Winter Burrow Surveys: Winter burrow surveys are the bread and butter of the pygmy rabbit recovery team. These surveys are used to evaluate our progress in re-establishing wild pygmy rabbit populations. Staff members and volunteers perform extensive transect surveys where we search for active burrow sites. At each burrow site, pellets are collected for genetic sampling. Snowy conditions are our best ally. Snow makes it very easy to see tracks, burrows are more obvious, and pellets are fresher. In preparation for this survey season the team is updating GPS with survey transects, deciding which areas should be surveyed first, and making sure we have all the supplies on hand. The information we gather from these surveys will tell us how many rabbits we have on the landscape, which burrows they use, and who survived from last year.



(Left to Right) A burrow entrance, tracks in the snow, and a latrine site



“Pie in the sky” Biologist Fidorra eating a slice of pumpkin pie while conducting surveys —
Photo by P. Clements

Mule Deer Aerial Surveys: Biologists Jeffreys, Eilers, Dougherty, Clements, and Fidorra worked together to complete aerial surveys of the Douglas County sub-herd, which is part of Washington’s larger Columbia Basin mule deer population. There are three sub-herds within this population, and each sub-herd gets surveyed every three to five years. The last time Douglas County sub-herd was aerially surveyed was in 2018, and the results from this year’s surveys are much anticipated (stay tuned for the annual Game Status and Trends report in summer 2023). The goal of these aerial surveys is to get an abundance estimate for the Douglas sub-herd. Ratio data will also be generated from these aerial observations and compared with those obtained from ground surveys to assess age and sex composition of this mule deer sub-herd.



Aerial mule deer photos. Biologist Fidorra (left) and pilot Dawe (right) — Photo by J. Eilers

Deer Management: The week of Nov. 28 through Dec. 2, District 5 biologists assisted with aerial mule deer surveys in Douglas County. Some of the subunits that were selected for the surveys were burnt over in the 2020 Pearl Hill fire, which resulted in seeing little to no deer in these areas due to the large amount of habitat loss.

In between aerial survey, Biologist Clements and Dougherty with the assistance of Private Lands Biologists Cook and Morris, have been conducting deer road surveys throughout Grant and Adams County. So far, a total of six out of nine survey units have been completed. With the amount of snowfall we have received recently, it has added limited road access in most units. It is anticipated that all nine units will be completed by the end of Dec. 16, weather and visibility permitting.



(Left) A large group of mule deer directly under the sun in snowy Douglas County
(Right) Biologists Dougherty and Clements geared up and ready to take flight — Photo by P. Clements



(Left) 44 helicopter landing for a gas refill from the fuel truck
(Right) Amazing helicopter views — Photo by J. Eilers

Mule Deer Ground Surveys: Biologists across Douglas County completed mule deer ground road surveys. Unlike the aerial surveys, these surveys are not used for population estimates, but instead for more precise sex and age ratios, such as fawn to doe and buck to doe ratios. These ratios help biologists monitor the health and reproductive success of deer populations, and aid in setting hunting regulations.

Wildlife surveys: Biologists Morris and Cook assisted District 5 wildlife staff members with deer road surveys.



Action shot — Photo by J. Eilers



Douglas County was a winter wonderland for 2022 mule deer road surveys — Photo by J. Eilers



Thank goodness for optics! Showing the difference of views from a pair of binoculars versus a scope — Photo by J. Eilers



A group of deer that were observed during road surveys in Grant County, featuring a five by five mule deer buck — Photo by P. Clements

Mule Deer Mortality: Biologist Jeffreys went up Number Two Canyon in Wenatchee in response to a mortality signal from a mule deer doe collared in January 2020 as part of a four-year movement and migration study. Jeffreys conducted a mortality investigation which involved examining the fully intact carcass as well as the surrounding area and detected signs of a cougar kill, which was confirmed by a variety of cougar tracks in the area, likely those of a mother and her kittens. The GPS collar was retrieved and will be refurbished for future deployment on another deer encounter.

Upland Hunting, Trapped, Sick and Injured Wildlife: Biologist Clements responded to a couple reports of dead geese along Moses Lake and Potholes Reservoir. Biologists are expecting to receive and respond to many calls in the near future of dead or sick waterfowl that is likely a result of highly pathogenic avian influenza. They are equipped with the necessary materials to handle sick or dead wildlife and the goal is to get as many off of the landscape as possible.



Geese that were collected on the southern shore of Moses Lake — Photo by P. Clements

Waterfowl: Biologists Clements and Dougherty have been noticing more swans showing up in District 5. They are recording locations of swans reported by citizens of the public as well as swans they see while conducting field work and taking counts of total numbers observed. They are hoping to develop a route soon to conduct swan surveys in the future. Biologist Clements observed a field that had 130 trumpeter swans feeding in northern Adams County. If you see swans in Grant or Adams counties, please send the location to Paula Clements at Paula.Clements@dfw.wa.gov.



Trumpeter swans feeding in an agricultural field — Photo by P. Clements

Scotch Creek Sharp-tailed Grouse Surveys: Staff members surveyed the riparian areas in Siwash, Tunk Valley, Scotch Creek and along highway 20 for sharp-tailed Grouse. Deciduous shrubs and trees within the riparian areas provide a valuable winter food source when snow limits there accessibly to other food sources in the grasslands. Eleven Sharp-tails were observed in Siwash.

Northern Leopard Frogs: Biologist Grabowsky has been coordinating with headquarters staff members and partners regarding the upcoming Competitive State Wildlife Grant (CSWG) report and CSWG 2023 application. This planning has involved reviewing accomplishments and challenges from 2022 and reaching out to partners to help fulfill our obligations for CSWG 2020. One of these obligations is collecting fish fin clips for eDNA assay development. In the long run, this information will help us to determine if predatory fish are present at sites being considered for northern leopard frog reintroduction.

Technician Haines has been conducting gut content analysis on bullfrogs obtained from northern leopard frog reintroduction site. This study should help explain the extent of bullfrog predation on northern leopard frog by comparing stomach contents from bullfrogs collected before and after northern leopard frog releases in August 2022.

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Beebe Springs Trail Flooding: Assistant Manager Pavelchek has been unblocking culverts at Beebe Springs where the resident beaver population continues to block culverts and build more dams. The damming results in flooded trails. While unblocking culverts Pavelchek has been able to talk to members of the public, most of whom turn back at the flooded trails (water can be up to three inches deep) but are friendly and express gratitude at the trail maintenance work done this past fall. Pavelchek is working on a plan for a more long-term solution to the flooding issue while coexisting with the beavers.



Beebe Springs trail flooded out by beavers damming culverts — Photo by A. Pavelchek

Responding to Patterson Lake Improvements: Okanogan Lands Operations Manager Haug fielded several calls and emails regarding the Patterson Lake water access improvement project funded through Recreation and Conservation Office in the Boating Facilities Program category. Concerns were raised regarding the potential of increased higher-speed boating activity because of the improvements. Haug spoke with the Methow Valley News and provided information and specifics on the project and reiterated that a county-enforced eight miles-per-hour speed limit on the lake will limit the use of high-speed watercraft. Construction is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2023.

Sinlahekin Late Season Hunting: Even with the heavy accumulation of snow the late archery hunt has been quite busy and productive in the Sinlahekin Valley. Most of the campgrounds that are accessible have been filled with camps for the last couple of weeks.

Methow Winter Recreation: Since early November, numerous weather patterns have dumped several feet of snow throughout the Methow Valley. With copious amounts of snow comes countless winter recreation opportunities valley wide. The Methow Valley provides some of the most accessible recreation options close to town thanks to several long-standing partnerships and collaborations. For example, one of the only areas a person can cross country ski, snowshoe, or fat bike without the need for any special passes is at the Big Valley Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area. The Big Valley Unit provides over five miles of meticulously groomed trails thanks to a partnership with Methow Trails. One of the other areas you can enjoy groomed winter trails is at the WDFW owned Lloyd Ranch, which is located across from Pearrygin Lake State Park. This area includes miles and miles of groomed fat bike/snowshoeing trails and even a few skier-friendly trails. The winter trails program at the Lloyd Ranch is also a collaborative effort between WDFW, Pearrygin Lake State Park, and several long standing and dedicated volunteers.

Chelan Wildlife Area Feeders: Wildlife area staff members met with the Wenatchee Sportsmen's Association (WSA) to fill upland bird feeders. It is a project the WSA has helped with annually. WSA members braved the cold and threat of snow, bringing their utility terrain vehicles (UTV) and enthusiasm.



Members of the WSA help to bag grain and load their UTVs for filling upland bird feeders —

Photo by A. Pavelchek

WDFW supplies the grain, but WSA personnel did the bulk of filling upland bird feeders, and their help is much appreciated as the feeders are widely dispersed on the landscape. Feeders were filled on the Chelan Butte, Oklahoma gulch, Knowles and Swakane units. The feeders in Entiat and Pateros will be filled later. This year, feeders were filled but will remain closed until the end of upland bird hunting season so as not to act as bait stations.

Frenchman Regulated Access Area: Biologist McPherson and Specialist Walker added more water to the Frenchman Regulated Access Area and manipulated water control structures throughout the project to break ice and open water. By adding velocity and channelizing flow, we can keep water open in portions of the cells even when temperatures dip down into single digits. Currently open water can be found in cells two, four, five, six, and seven.



Ring necks using open water in cell seven of Frenchman Regulated Access Area — Photo by R. Walker



Open water in Cell Two of Frenchman Regulated Access Area — Photo by R. Walker

Hunter Access: Biologist Morris advised a landowner in the Hunter Access Program about what type of access they could provide and the applicable hunting seasons and regulations. Biologist Cook checked more signs for Hunter Access properties specifically in Adams County. Cook also has renewed several Hunter Access contracts. Many properties in Adams County are expiring this next year and will need to be renewed for continued Hunter Access.

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

Lind Coulee, Warden Outfall, North Potholes, and Frenchman Hills Garbage: Biologist McPherson coordinated with the Washington Conversation Corps (WCC) personnel to pick up several large dump sites in Lind Coulee, Warden Outfall, North Potholes, and Frenchman Hills. The WCC personnel continues to do great work on the wildlife area and their efforts are greatly appreciated.



Dump site in the Frenchman Hills — Photo by C. McPherson

Deer In Orchard: Specialist Heilhecker responded to several deer damage complaints to orchard trees in GMU 209. A site visit was conducted and resulted in a damage prevention cooperative agreement, and kill permits were issued. Specialist Bridges issued several agreements and kill permits for antlerless deer due to chronic damage to orchards.

Elk Issues: Specialist Heilhecker responded to several elk damage complaints regarding haystacks and fences in GMU 204. Specialist Heilhecker gave producers several tarps to cover their haystacks. She did not issue any kill permits since the tarps should be a successful nonlethal deterrence measure. Landowners expressed frustration on the growing elk population, lack of population monitoring, and lack of antlerless hunting, specific to GMU 204. However, landowner permits issued for damage are not used to manage the population. Specialist Bridges issued several damage prevention cooperative agreements and kill permits for antlerless elk due to chronic damage in orchards.

Turkey Trouble: Specialist Heilhecker responded to a turkey damage complaint on haystacks. Fall turkey season is still open so she did not issue any permits. Specialist Heilhecker offered the producer tarps for his haystacks. The landowner drove to Omak from Chesaw on a Friday evening to pick up the tarps prior to the weekend snowfall.

Nonlethal Deterrence: Specialist Heilhecker participated in an internal meeting to discuss wolf-livestock nonlethal deterrence measures for a temporary grazing permit on the Methow Wildlife Area.

Landowner Damage Prevention and Depredation Permits: Specialist Heilhecker issued a landowner kill and damage permit for elk in Game Management Unit (GMU) 204. She had issued permits to the landowner in October, but he did not use the permits. Specialist Heilhecker reissued the permits. Specialist Heilhecker responded to two elk complaints in GMU 204. One landowner needed a landowner damage prevention cooperative agreement renewed to receive landowner permits. The other landowner requested two landowner permits be renewed since the permits expired without being used.

Inter-Agency Coordination: Specialist Heilhecker coordinated with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) personnel regarding missing range cattle in the Lookout pack territory. The producer claims to have had several wolf depredations this past grazing season although no depredation investigations were requested. One dead cow was found during search operations. According to original comments from the producer and USFS personnel, the cow died from natural causes and the cause was not carnivore related. There were also no other injured livestock. Specialist Heilhecker coordinated a meeting between USFS and USFWS to discuss the producer's implementation of nonlethal deterrence measures next season.

Hunter Coordination for Bobcat Sealing: Specialist Heilhecker called a hunter who needed a bobcat sealed. The hunter did not want to drive to Omak on that day since he was on his way to hunt waterfowl. He decided to freeze the bobcat and have it sealed sometime before the April 20 deadline.

Turkey Trouble: Specialist Heilhecker issued landowner permits for turkeys. The turkeys are eating cattle feed. The landowner requested 30 permits, but Specialist Heilhecker will not issue that quantity of permits at one time. The landowner also asked if the permits he did not use last year were still valid. Specialist Heilhecker reminded him all permits have an expiration date written on the permit and the permits were no longer valid. Since the landowner did not use all the permits issued last year. This gives additional reasoning as to why 30 permits will not be issued at one time.

Providing Education and Outreach

Sage Grouse Technical Committee Meeting: Private Lands Biologist Braaten attended the quarterly meeting and provided perspective and update on Sage Grouse issues in Douglas County.

Hunter Assistance: Specialist Heilhecker spoke with a hunter looking for private property experiencing deer damage in GMU 204. The hunter has an "any buck" permit. He stated WDFW

Enforcement suggested he check with orchards in the area. Specialist Heilhecker recommended the hunter drive around the area to look for haystack damage and then ask the property owner if he could hunt near the haystack.

Douglas County State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Conservation Reserve Program: Private Lands Biologist Braaten discovered Douglas County Farm Service Agency is currently holding a State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) signup for 23,807 acres that are available for new acres not reenrollments beginning Nov. 1. The timing of these contracts will likely require private land biologists to complete WDFW portion of conservation plans by the end of May 2023. Several meetings are being conducted to discuss a variety of issues regarding CRP and CRP SAFE with Farm Service Agency and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) at state and local levels. Private Lands Biologist Braaten completed 14 plans in September and several of those Farm Service Agency failed to gather required signatures making plans invalid. This example has led to concern from WDFW staff members and landowners. Moving forward WDFW will continue to communicate, and voice concerns we have as well as what we are hearing from private landowners. Federal fiscal year 2024 will have 25,409 acres available for CRP reenrollments on contracts expiring Sep. 30, 2023. Private Lands Biologist Braaten is working with state and local Farm Service Agency offices to make sure outreach to landowners is appropriate, open, and transparent.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Habitat Plots: Biologist Cook and volunteers from two Pheasants Forever chapters planted 175 shrubs intermixed with and next to current irrigated shrub rows. The objective of this planting is to increase shrub species diversity and expand habitat benefits. These shrub rows can improve habitat not only for upland birds, but others such as songbirds, deer, and pollinators. Additional habitat improvements will be added to expand these benefits including native grass, forb, and shrub seedings. Biologist Cook began seeding a circle corner near George to native grasses. Recent snowy weather delayed the seeding possibly until spring. After initial native grass establishment, next fall native forbs will be seeded to increase species diversity and improve habitat.

Scotch Creek Riparian Enhancement: Staff members ordered two bundles of poles to be used in the construction of the Beaver Dam Analogs within the project area. Each bundle has 77 untreated, ten-foot-long poles. The bundles will be picked up from the vendor as weather allows travel to Idaho.

Sinlahekin Winter Management: Winter has hit the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area and its associated units. The Sinlahekin valley was hit hard with approximately 24 inches of snow at the start of November, which closed the valley down for a few days until Okanogan County Road crews could get the road open. Along with the road being snowed in for a few days, power lines were also down to the Headquarters for a week, but luckily a newly installed generator at the headquarters kept power going to help maintain heat to the buildings keeping pipes from freezing. Staff members have spent much of their time clearing and moving snow at the headquarters, along with preparing for the next snow fall and cold weather that has started.

Scotch Creek Staff Training: Staff members member Dupont attended the Okanogan County pesticide recertification class for six credits. Staff Members Peterson and White studied for the Public Pesticide License test. All Scotch Creek staff members participated in a discussion on chainsaw safety and maintenance.

End of Season Grazing Evaluations: Biologist McPherson conducted end of season evaluations on the six grazing leases within the wildlife area. Evaluations focus on landscape appearance, grazing objectives, growing season conditions, habitat trends, recommendations, and observations. All leases are meeting objectives to best benefit wildlife and habitat.

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement - Conservation Reserve Program: A landowner in Grant County contacted Biologist Morris about potential habitat alteration on their property enrolled in CRP and a Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbian Basin pygmy rabbit. The CRP contract will be expiring soon, and Biologist Morris spoke to the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to ensure that habitat alterations would not be required in areas with pygmy rabbits or potential habitat for pygmy rabbits. Cooperation between landowners, federal agencies like FSA and NRCS, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is critical to ensuring the survival of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits, which often occupy private lands enrolled in CRP.



Snow blankets potential pygmy rabbit habitat — Photo by J. Morris



Nice buck seen on grazing evaluation — Photo by C. McPherson



Mule deer on rocky terrain in Grant County — Photo by J. Morris



Rolling hills covered in snow in Grant County — Photo by J. Morris

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement - Conservation Reserve Program: Private Land Biologist Braaten has been working on fiscal year 2023 SAFE sign ups. As of Dec. 15, 2022, 27 contracts have been received for about 4,000 acres. In addition, Braaten meets regularly with Olympia staff members regarding upcoming workload challenge and work priorities.

Conducting Business Operations and Policy

New Tractor: Private Lands Biologist Braaten worked with Wildlife Program and Olympia staff members to get a new tractor order approved to replace older tractor. New tractor paperwork was turned into the state contract vendor to be ordered. Hope to see it in spring of 2023!

Williamson Lease Renewal: Biologist McPherson worked on getting this grazing lease packet ready for renewal. The packet was reviewed by Specialist Burnham and is now up for regional review.

First Foods: Lands Operations Manager Finger, Wildlife Area Manager Eidson, and Archaeologist Major participated in a meeting with Wanapum staff members to discuss issues and opportunities around managing for First Foods and accessibility of those resources. This virtual meeting was mostly about getting to know each other and we will soon begin having more specific dialogue to better understand how we can support the Wanapum's needs.

Permitting: Lands Operations Manager Finger and Assistant District Wildlife Biologist Clements discussed permitting needs with Jim Cook, Deputy Director of Grant County Development Services. Discussion included in-water mowing with a Marsh Master across a large swath of the

wildlife area, water access site maintenance and Russian olive removal within county shoreline, and prescribed burning and fire line construction within or adjacent to wetland habitats.

New Tractor: Private Lands Biologist Braaten worked with Wildlife Program staff members to secure funding for a new trailer to pull the recently approved tractor for Region 2 private lands. Expect to receive the trailer in spring of 2023!

Damage Permit Database Development: Specialist Heilhecker participated in an internal meeting regarding a new database for issuing landowner kill and damage permits. The current database is outdated by Information Technology security standards. Several wildlife conflict specialists are working with headquarters staff members to create a new online permitting system.

Post Grazing Season Review: Specialist Heilhecker attended a meeting to discuss range riding this past grazing season. Specialist Heilhecker did not have any issues with range riders or processing payment paperwork

Other

Meetings: Biologist Cook attended The Wildlife Society's Annual Conference and was able to attend scientific talks on many topics including wildlife habitat, wildlife populations around renewable energy facilities and wildlife disease. Cook was able to find a poster and speak with the professor around a survey about the costs of private land hunter access in Georgia.





Swakane shop with a newly insulated ceiling, making conditions in the shop much more bearable — Photo by A. Pavelchek

Maintenance: Staff members on the wildlife area completed insulating the roof of the Swakane shop, previously temperatures inside the shop were only several degrees warmer than outdoor temperatures. Winter maintenance work inside the shop will now be much more enjoyable.



Photo by B. Troyer

In this photo you can clearly see two fawns running from a testing coyote, but mom was having none of it. A split second after this photo, the coyote found itself under the does hooves as she aggressively defended her young.

This scenario is rarely considered when recreating on wild lands, but it's a great example of the benefits of keeping your pets leashed, particularly when recreating in winter mule deer range. Every winter, we receive reports of domestic dogs being "attacked" by deer. Deer view domestic dogs the same as they view a coyote and it's not abnormal for a mature deer to stand its ground and defend itself.



Due to their seclusive nature, it's not often you get the privilege of seeing a mature white-tailed buck long enough to take a picture, but this buck's attention was keenly zeroed in on a particular doe in the vicinity — B. Troyer



Sun and power lines break through the fog in Douglas County — Photo by J. Morris



Volunteers helping staff members member White release pheasants Nov. 18 on the Chiliwist Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area — Photo by C. White



A porcupine forages among deer beds and trails in Grant County — Photo by J. Morris



Wintry conditions dominated the past two weeks in Grant and Douglas counties – Photo by J. Morris



Deep snow near Connors Lake on the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area — Photo by J. Haug



Cold, snowy sunrise east of Tonasket — Photo by J. Haug

REGION 3

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

L.T. Murray Elk Feeding: Elk numbers have been a bit low and steady the past several weeks despite bitter cold temperatures and deep snow. There was a significant amount of successful late season tribal hunting at both Watt and Robinson sites just before the wildlife area closed on Dec. 15, which may have driven some back up to higher elevations.

DATE	SITE	COW/CALF	BRANCHED BULL	SPIKE BULL	Mortality	TOTAL
12/20/22	Watt	378	8	11	1	397
12/20/22	Robinson	234		1	1	236
12/29/22	Watt	432	5	10	1	447
12/29/22	Robinson	244		9		259

As a result of a major snowstorm last January which prevented the elk feeding crew from plowing and getting to the feed sites. Natural Resource Specialist Nass developed a contract with a local hay grower and exporter who is better equipped to handle on-call snow removal during this feed season. We are hopeful a snow blower will be more effective at removing snow than a truck plow.



A John Deere 6430 with large snowblower on call for emergency snow removal for elk feeding in the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area

Robinson Canyon Snow Removal: Natural Resource Specialist Nass plowed at Robinson Canyon feed and access site to remove accumulated slush and snow during the melting period after Christmas, despite consistent efforts at keeping roads clear. Confined roads prevent snow removal by traditional plowing methods in many areas since there is no place to go with it, making removal and site access a constant challenge.



Nass plowing snow and slush to keep elk feeding access clear on the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area

Bighorn Sheep Sampling: District 8 staff members continued to monitor the bighorn sheep corral captures at Clemans Mountain. The goal is to sample and collar 40 sheep as part of the Tri-state study investigating Test and Remove methodology for the management of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (Movi). The trap is mostly tarps, which seems simple. However, wind and snow cause problems. The tarps need to be rolled up in wind and dropped so sheep get used to feeding in a confined area. Due to lack of staff members during the holidays, personnel darted and collared a few animals rather than running the trap. Corral trapping will likely take place in early January and helicopter net gunning in mid-January.



Clemans sheep entering a partially closed trap

Oak Creek Elk Feeding: Due to early winter weather conditions, elk feeding began Dec. 16 at the Oak Creek feed site, immediately after winter closures went into effect. Feeding continues on the Cowiche feed site as numbers steadily increase each day.



Bull elk at Cowiche feed site



Elk feeding at the Cowiche feed site

Waterfowl Monitoring: The cameras in the Snipes Reserve on the Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area have generally operated well when fog isn't present. To date, documented waterfowl use has been low. A small flock of geese was seen for short periods of time on a few days, but that has been the extent of use. There have been ten days since the cameras were deployed Dec. 8, where fog has been an issue for at least part of the day or night.



Geese arriving around 2 PM



Geese leaving around 4 PM



The common December fog in the Yakima Valley

Avian Influenza Response: Wildlife Biologist Fidorra worked with WDFW Epidemiologist Haman, Outreach Specialist Lehman, and Benton-Franklin Health Departments to provide public information related to the ongoing Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak affecting Snow Geese in Benton County. Fidorra monitored shorelines for carcasses, and it appeared that fewer carcasses are being found compared to early December. Samples were sent to confirm AI.

Snow Goose Mortality Event on Columbia River: Wildlife Biologist Fidorra received many calls from the public and partners regarding dead snow geese in the Columbia River in southern Benton County. Avian Influenza has been confirmed at a mortality event in late November at Cold Springs, Oregon, and this is almost certainly the cause of mortality here in the vicinity of McNary Dam, but Fidorra collected samples for lab confirmation. Several thousand snow geese carcasses have been reported in the area, where a growing population now around 200,000 snow geese have been wintering.

Douglas Deer Survey Flights: Wildlife Biologist Fidorra assisted Biologists with aerial mule deer surveys. Deep snowfall reduced numbers in the inland sample areas as deer moved to the river breaks in large groups. WDFW Columbia Basin Deer surveys rotate around different wintering concentration areas each year and provide a post-hunt population estimate and buck and fawn ratios.



Fidorra in helicopter snacking enroute to Mule Deer survey units

Kahlotus Late Muzzleloader Deer Season and Surveys: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Hand patrolled the last weekend of the late muzzleloader season in GMU 381. Several hunter contacts were made, with most hunters reporting seeing good numbers of deer and even some legal bucks, but none were harvested. Wildlife Program staff members completed the annual winter deer roadside surveys in Franklin County. A very high number of fawns were seen, which is good news following poor reproduction from last year's spring drought. There were low numbers of yearling buck seen which is also a direct result of last year's low fawn production

Waterfowl Monitoring: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Technician Wascisin and District Biologist Bernatowicz set up cell cameras in corn stubble in the Snipes Reserve. The goal is to measure use of the reserve and fields. The cameras are set to take pictures on movement and periodically during a 24-hour day. No waterfowl use detected to date.



Cell camera in the Snipes Reserve



Frosty the Misfit snow deer in the Snipes Reserve

Bighorn Sheep Trapping: District 8 staff members have begun preparing for bighorn sheep corral captures at Clemans Mountain as part of the Tri-state study investigating Test and Remove methodology for the management of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (Movi). The initial blast of snow and cold made trapping seem likely. However, a relatively warm wind melted off south slopes and blew tarps around, scaring off the sheep. Personnel availability will be limited during the holidays, so any trapping will now occur in early January.



District 8 staff members constructing the Corral Trap at Clemans Mountain



Clemans sheep waiting for brunch

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area: The wetlands remain mostly frozen, but more available water is slowly opening with the recent warmer temperatures. Wildlife area staff members have been monitoring water levels and adjusting flows where possible to provide open water for migratory waterfowl.

Sunnyside Windmill Unit: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Manager Kaelber cleared a frozen outflow structure at the Phase One wetland, west of Powerline Lake to get water flowing again.

Sunnyside Headquarters Unit: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Ferguson worked to restore water flow at the Snipes pump and Giffen Lake pump. The cold temperatures caused belt failures. The pumps running will provide additional water that will help open water up within the Rice paddies wetland complex.

Oak Creek Elk Feeding Station: After two years with no tours, elk feeding tours at the Oak Creek elk feeding station have started again. Tours are held daily by WDFW volunteers between 10 AM and 3 PM depending on public interest. Volunteers take reservations by phone or in person at the Oak Creek Visitor Center.

L.T. Murray Elk Feeding: Elk are beginning to move onto the Murray feed sites with around 400 at Joe Watt and 200 at Robinson.



Unique elk color at Joe Watt feed site

Wenas Target Shooting Area Clean-Ups: Wenas Recreation Specialist Frame picked up truckloads of trash and debris from multiple designated and non-designated shooting areas within the wildlife area. Sheep Company Road Target Shooting area was cleared of large trash items in both the 25-yard range and 100-yard range as well as the non-designated shooting areas to the north on Sheep Company Road (Cottonwood Creek) and Lower Roza Creek Road. Specialist Frame also picked up large trash items from non-designated shootings areas on the northern portion of Durr Road. Habitat Specialist Miller also spent an afternoon assisting with the Durr Road clean ups. Notable items were a small couch, TV, desktop computer, 50-gallon steel drum, and a microwave.

Wenas Manastash Ridge Trail Coalition Meeting: Wildlife Area Manager Hughes and Specialist Frame prepared for and hosted a reoccurring meeting with the Manastash Ridge Trails (MRT) Coalition Committee. The topic of this meeting was to discuss future signage for the MRT. Signs for trail descriptions, trail yielding, etiquette, decommissioned trails, and interpretive signs were the main focus. Implementing signs will take place over the course of the next year. Increasing signage at the trails has been a high priority for the Wenas Wildlife Area throughout this past year and has come with some challenges with keeping the signs posted. Specialist Frame replaced enforceable signage at main trail entrances in the MRT. These signs displayed “No New Trail Construction”. These signs are subject to vandalism and are replaced often. Habitat Specialist Miller and Specialist Frame replaced these signs again two weeks later.

Sunnyside Waterfowl Hunting: Waterfowl hunting opportunities have been challenging due to the shifts in mild weather to extreme cold. Most wetlands within the Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area are now frozen. Some hunters have found success hunting the agricultural fields in the afternoons. As the weather changes, hunters should continue to look for open water to find waterfowl hunting opportunities.



The west end of the Johnson wetland near the Sunnyside Mabton Bridge

Johnson Wetlands Water Delivery: Snake River Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Ferguson and Natural Resource Technician Wascisin have been maintaining water delivery to the rice paddies and Johnson Wetlands for waterfowl hunting opportunities. Johnson is filled to capacity and though most of the wetland is frozen, a half-acre area on the western side where the water flows in is open and usually holding ducks. The northern half of the Johnson Wetland that was mowed this fall for the first time in many years is now filled with water. As floating debris settles to the bottom it will bring greatly expanded habitat for waterfowl as well as waterfowl hunting opportunities in the area.



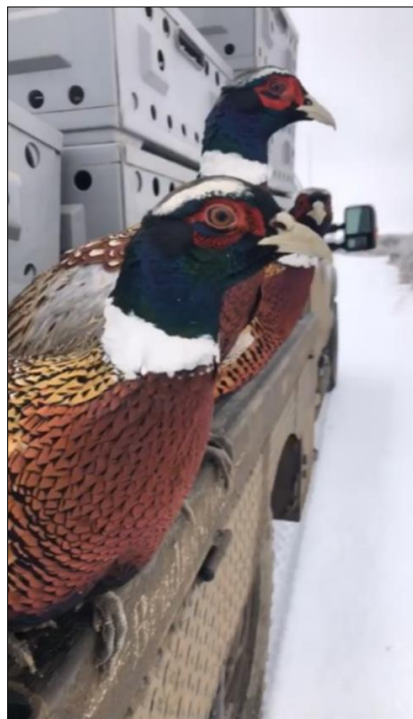
Dec. 1, 2022, northern half of Johnson Wetland mowed for the first time in many years. The floating material will become waterlogged and sink to the bottom, opening water for waterfowl access. After successive mowings the vegetation will thin out as well

Green Valley Road Pump Repair: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Ferguson and Natural Resource Technician Wascisin have completed repairs to the Green Valley Road pump that provides water to Haystack and Bounds Pond in Snipes Reserve. The pump is currently running at full capacity and filling the Haystack Pond system.



Western portion of the Haystack pond in Snipe's Reserve showing full water capacity for the first time in four years. The downstream ponds are successively filling as well

Final Pheasant Release: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area staff members completed their final pheasant release for the season on Dec. 16 and experienced good hunter turnout over the weekend despite frigid temperatures. Hunters reported some success with pheasant and waterfowl hunting, including one snow goose that was harvested at the Sunnyside Unit.



Pheasants on last release of season, Dec. 16, 2022

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

Wenas Winter Feeding: Wenas Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Taylor has been leading all operations for the elk feeding program on the Wenas. The latest count was around 800 head in the Mellotte Feed Site. Recently, Habitat Specialist Miller assisted Assistant Manager Taylor in clearing snow from tarped hay. Snow that builds up prevents the removal of tarps to access hay for elk feeding operations. Habitat Specialist Miller and Manager Hughes also helped Assistant Manager Taylor in feeding operations at the feed site. Elk feeding is essential in the Wenas Valley. It is a preventative measure for conflict by providing enough feed for wintering herds to keep them out of private property and causing damage.



Elk in the Mellotte Feed Site on the Wenas Wildlife Area

Wenas Elk Fence Repair: Assistant Manager Taylor, Specialist Frame, and Habitat Specialist Miller repaired a 30-foot section of elk fence that had been jumped and trampled by elk. T-posts were hammered in along the section and the old fence was re-stretched and attached to the new posts. In addition, two holes were patched along the stream bank of the same section of fence. Repairs in elk fence are essential to conflict prevention by keeping wintering elk from entering private property and potentially causing unwanted damage to private lands.

Pasco Deer Damage: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Hand received and responded to a new deer damage complaint from a large tree fruit and wine grape farm north of Pasco along the Columbia River. Several deer have been residing in the crop areas and some damage has occurred to new plantings. Non-lethal hazing has been implemented with minimal results, so a Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreement was developed, and a couple of damage permits were issued.

Kahlotus Deer Monitoring: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Hand checked on deer activity and damage in several winter wheat fields near Kahlotus. Increasing numbers of deer continue to be observed and hazed away in winter wheat fields near Lower Monumental Dam along the Snake River.

Wenas Winter Feeding: In light of the recent snowfall, Assistant Manager Taylor and Technician Stoltenow began preparing the equipment used to feed elk in the winter. As the snow continues to fall, elk are beginning to make their way down to the feeding area and feeding will begin. Technician Stoltenow will report to the Oak Creek Wildlife Area for the remainder of the feeding season and will assist with feeding operations there.

Wenas Fall Elk Fence Repair: Habitat Specialist Miller and Technician Stoltenow hiked in to repair a portion of the elk fence that had been cut and driven through. Using a wire stretcher, new wire was stretched and spliced to the existing wire to ensure that elk are not able to leave the wildlife area and cause any conflict in the neighboring properties.

Rattlesnake Mountain Elk: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Hand continued to monitor elk damage near irrigated crops near Benton City. A few elk continue to make nightly raids in orchards and winter wheat crops. Additional Damage Prevention Permits were issued to one constituent.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Grant Wenas Wildlife Area: Wenas Wildlife Area Manager Hughes completed an annual report for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Grant the Wenas Wildlife Area received in 2021. The report included an update on plug planting that was focused on fire recovery throughout the Wenas Wildlife Area. 6,300 live plugs including sagebrush, bitterbrush, woods rose, blue elderberry, common chokecherry, golden current, common snowberry, and serviceberry were planted within burned areas on the wildlife area. These areas are still recovering from the Evans Canyon Fire. Approximately 12,000 shrubs will be planted fall of 2023 to complete the project outlined in the grant. The Wenas Wildlife Area holds valuable wintering elk habitat for the Yakima Elk Herd. Areas are recovering well from recent fires but need a significant amount of time for species to be able to fully develop.

Sunnyside and Ducks Unlimited Meeting: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Manager Kaelber and Assistant Manager Rodgers had meetings with Ducks Unlimited staff members to cover several upcoming wetland restoration projects for the Windmill, Mesa, and Sunnyside Headquarter Units.

L.T. Murray Forest Thinning: L.T. Murray staff members worked with WDFW Foresters to burn slash piles from the 2022 Robinson Canyon forest thinning project. In spite the snow, the piles burned great.



WDFW Foresters burning slash piles under 14 inches of snow

Vantage Highway Fire Restoration: Assistant Manager Winegeart hand seeded two acres of ground near Whiskey Dick Bay that burned in this year's Vantage Highway Fire. The locally adapted sandy site seed mix was spread over three inches of new snow on relatively flat ground at 600-foot elevation. The lack of crust on the snow along with light sleet that fell throughout the day will allow the seed to sink into the snow and then the sandy soil.



Hand seeding in the 2022 Vantage Hwy Fire footprint

Wenas Fence Removal: The Region 3 fencing personnel came to the Wenas Wildlife Area to help with the removal of fenced enclosures used in previous study on the effects of elk in the area. The enclosures have been damaged by various fires and their removal will result in less risk of injury to wildlife and recreationists moving through the area. There were two enclosures located near the bottom of Sheep Company Road and one along Hessler Flats Road.

Wenas Herbicide Reporting: Habitat Specialist Miller completed the annual Herbicide Use Form for submission to Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). The Herbicide Use Forms provide BPA with information on types of herbicides used and application locations on BPA funded lands within the Wenas Wildlife Area. The area receives a significant amount of funding from BPA for habitat work.

Wenas Umtanum Crown and Log Barb Placement: Manager Hughes was issued a Hydraulic Project Approval (HPA) under the Fish Habitat and Enhancement Process. The permit gives approval for tree crowns to be placed directly into Umtanum Creek and one of its tributaries for sediment stabilization. A log barb and light channel incision/excavation will occur to redirect flow from a tributary back into the main channel for water to flow under an established culvert. Currently, the county road gets flooded every spring with run off from snow melt. The main goal of this project is to address this issue and stop excess sediment from the county road being washed back into the creek each spring. This project will take place this winter in conjunction with a thinning throughout the area. Coordination with local habitat biologists, archeologists, Yakama Nations biologists, Kittitas County and other stakeholders was done to develop this project.

Sunnyside Culvert Maintenance: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Ferguson and Natural Resource Technician Wascisin cleared a blocked culvert at the Byron Unit that been persistently dammed by beavers for several months now. The staff members installed a small fence to block access from the roadside where the beaver had been throwing material down into the culvert entrance and repaired broken wire on the side panels of the current beaver deceiver. Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District employees onsite also reported trapping two beavers in the area recently.



Assistant Manager Ferguson installing new fencing on beaver deceiver at Byron Unit. So far, the beavers have not dammed up the culvert again

Providing Education and Outreach

Richland Rod and Gun Club Presentation: Wildlife Biologist Fidorra assisted the team of WDFW biologists and Director Livingston with a presentation for the Richland Rod and Gun Club on wolves and ungulates at their monthly evening membership meeting.

Conducting Business Operations and Policy

New Regional Lands Operations Manager: L.T. Murray Wildlife Area Manager Bates, started her new role as Regional Lands Operations Manager on Dec. 16.

Sunnyside Safety Meetings: Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area staff members and Region 3 access staff members participated in a monthly safety meeting at the Sunnyside Headquarters.

Wildlife Conflict Damage Permit Team: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Hand met with other team members to review current damage permit formats and language for revision and incorporation into a new permit issuance and data system.

Other

Wenas Snow Removal: Technician Stoltenow and Habitat Specialist Miller assisted Assistant Manager Taylor in attaching the snowplow to the truck used for plowing. Assistant Manager Taylor has been plowing with each accumulation of new snow and will continue to do so as the need arises throughout the winter. The areas around the Wenas and Melotte offices and the road leading to the feeding site have all been plowed.

Oak Creek Elk Darting: Assistant Manager Charlet and Technician Stoltenow assisted Conflict Specialist Wetzel in darting an injured cow on the Cowiche feed site. Conflict Specialist Wetzel removed an arrow from the cow's neck that was presumably shot during late archery season.



Conflict Specialist Wetzel and technician Stoltenow monitor respiratory rate of darted cow



Conflict Specialist Wetzal removes arrow from cow's neck

REGION 4

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Avian Influenza Outbreak: WDFW biologists have been responding to a large outbreak of avian influenza, primarily in snow geese, in Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties. Biologists have removed almost 1,400 dead birds, with most birds retrieved from Wiser Lake in Whatcom County and the Fir Island area, including Skagit Bay, in Skagit County. Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) was confirmed in birds at Wiser Lake and at Fir Island. HPAI has been documented in other species besides snow geese, including great blue heron, short-eared owl, and dunlin.



A large flock of snow geese in a field adjacent to the Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters' Unit

— Photo by Robert Waddell



One of nine trumpeter swans reported to WDFW that were on a local wildlife management unit retrieved by Biologist Anderson. Biologist Smith retrieving a male hooded merganser in Juanita Bay, Lake Washington — Photos by C. Anderson

Reports of other suspect HPAI are occurring southward in Region 4 as well (e.g. King and Snohomish counties). Luckily not in the larger numbers that are unfortunately occurring farther to the north, as reported above. District 12 biologists have been contacting local jurisdictions and other public land managers, such as non-governmental organizations and the University of Washington, that have had sick and dead bird reports. These communications provide direction on how outside entities can work with WDFW regarding suspected AI situations.

Annual Upper Puget Lowlands Swan Survey: Biologist Moore has started planning and coordinating the annual swan survey which covers lowland and often agricultural areas in Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, Island, San Juan, and King counties. This survey takes place in mid-January and involves numerous volunteers and WDFW staff members to complete. The survey yields important data for generating estimates used for monitoring the Pacific Flyway Trumpeter swan population.

Long-term Acoustic Monitoring for Bats: Biologist Anderson provided a new sealed battery and relocated a bat unit at the west end of the Chester Morse Reservoir. Access issues and weather were not cooperative and had been stalling this effort. We are very glad things came together before the end of year.

Furbearer Harvest Check-ins: Furbearer check-ins have increased slightly at Region 4 offices this month. Bobcat harvests from five hunters and trappers were tagged and reported between the La Conner and Mill Creek offices.



A large tom opportunistically harvested during a deer hunt in Snohomish County — Photo by Kurt Licence

Island Marble Butterfly Management Meetings: Biologist Licence participated in an Island Marble Butterfly (IMB) monitoring technical team meeting with Diversity Division personnel, USFWS managers, and a University of Washington researcher. Discussions involved many monitoring priorities for the species but centered on the development of an IMB rapid habitat assessment tool. Additionally, Licence led two meetings with IMB Candidate Conservation Agreement with partners and stakeholders. The group covered some exciting developments including the expansion of IMB host plant habitat on a San Juan County Land Bank property that was recently occupied by IMB.

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Forest Grouse Barrels Removal: Biologist Smith provided for retention of this season's ground barrels from the district. We have wings!

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

King County Department of Natural Resources and Park: Wildlife Conflict Specialist O'Connor spent a lunch hour with King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks staff members to provide natural history, management techniques, what to do when large carnivores are encountered on park property. It was very well received and great for networking in any future efforts to assist area King County Parks and their staff members with bear or cougar management needs and concerns.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Oregon Spotted Frog Egg Mass Survey Application Discussion: Biologist Moore attended an internal discussion to discuss and learn more about the new application WDFW biologists will be using during egg mass surveys starting in February 2023.

Providing Education and Outreach

Washington Waterfowl Association Meeting Presentations: Biologist Moore presented at the Whatcom and Northwest Chapters. Moore created a presentation about the ongoing waterfowl monitoring projects going on in Region 4. She also fielded questions that members had surrounding hunting regulations in Washington.

Wildlife Trees: Biologist Anderson provided a presentation regarding wildlife trees (snags) – they are a one stop wildlife shop for many species of animals. They are not a concern for safety and managing a tree as a snag or wildlife tree often saves money. It is not necessary to take the entire tree out or lessen height where needed and let it be. A group of about 50 or so scouts and parents attended the presentation with lots of questions and interest. The various owls and other wildlife specimens that were displayed were a big hit with the kids. You can learn more about [wildlife tree snags and their benefits](#).



A Pileated Woodpecker nestling is fed at nest by the male of the adult, territorial pair. The breeding pair were rapidly providing food to two nestlings that were about to fledge — Photo by C. Anderson

Amphibians of Washington: Biologist Anderson participated in annual site survey selections and goals for any “WDFW chosen” sites. WDFW is part of a broader site selection committee in pre-survey planning with Woodland Park Zoo. This helps support their efforts to document common stillwater amphibian species by gathering baseline data to help support local understanding of occurrences and keep common species common. WDFW helps in planning for sites where suspected [Species of Greatest Conservation Need](#) (SCGN) may occur or have been reported to WDFW but with no ground confirmation. This collaboration provides for a more structured follow-up utilizing [iNaturalist](#) curation efforts to support citizen observed occurrences and retain this data for any given observation. Constituents can also [participate as a surveyor](#). Also, anecdotal observations not captured in any survey (e.g., have picture of western toad randomly observed while out hiking) can be submitted to [WDFW “Report Wildlife Observations.”](#)



Red-legged frog egg mass up on Tradition Plateau in Issaquah. Anecdotally, as clearing and development increases to a certain threshold, Red-legged frog is one pond breeding amphibian that appears to become more localized and less numerous. Not as drastic as seen in western toad – but second to toad dropout from local pond breeding amphibians. Efforts such as this can help provide observational data, through structured and non-invasive survey methods, on sites over space and time. Further, it involves the public and engages them in local amphibian conservation, gaining knowledge of their haunts and habits — Photo by C. Anderson

Other

Whatcom County Health Department Wisner Lake Study: Biologists Waddell and Moore are researching and providing guidance to Whatcom County Health Department on how to create and plan accurate bird surveys on Wisner Lake as part of a larger water quality monitoring project.

REGION 6

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Western Pond Turtle Habitat Management: The water access team, Wildlife Area Manager Laushman, and Biologist Butler removed invasive species from the edges of the Western Pond Turtle habitat at the South Puget Sound Wildlife Area. A new fence was installed, and during the installation the group worked to cut back overgrown trees and mow blackberries in areas inaccessible when fenced.



The group consulting at the edge of the turtle habitat fencing

Construction for the fencing project at the Pierce County western pond turtle site began in early December. The site had an old, dilapidated fence that was beyond repair. The first phase of the project began with fence removal along the northern and western edges. Once the old fence was removed, Biologist Butler and Wildlife Area Manager Laushman received last minute assistance from the Region 6 Water Access Team to help clear and remove patches of invasive blackberries. This work was essential to ensure the new fence can be properly maintained for years to come. Construction on the fence will continue into January. Biologist Butler and all the turtle monitors would like to thank the Region 6 Water Access Team and Wildlife Area Manager Laushman for the tremendous amount of work they provided with only one day of notice!



Before and after fence construction progress photos December 2022

Western Pond Turtles Health and Husbandry: Biologist Butler attended Western Pond Turtle Health and husbandry meetings this past week. The Western Pond Turtle Health Team was founded after the discovery of an ulcerative shell disease affecting western pond turtles in Washington. This disease creates lesions that eat away at the turtle's shell causing a Swiss cheese appearance in very severe cases. The health team is led by WDFW's Veterinarian Dr. Haman, and members include state biologists, managers, zoo veterinarians, various researchers, and students from across the country. This health team meeting focused on upcoming priorities for the 2023 field season and beyond with possible sampling to occur this field season. The husbandry team met to discuss better methods to communicate and document husbandry changes within the zoo facilities.

Dusky Canada Goose: Biologists Novack, Sundstrom, and Cent completed December's two rounds of dusky goose surveys.

Grouse: Biologist Cent completed the last check of the season, which yielded two final grouse wings, before closing the stations and collecting the barrels.

Snowy plover: Biologist Cent worked on the annual snowy plover report to be submitted early 2023.

Miscellaneous: Biologist Sundstrom accompanied Biologist Cent to various winter survey locations for swans, dusky goose, snowy plovers, and brant so Cent could familiarize herself with upcoming surveys in January.

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Cougar and Bobcat Inspections: Biologist Butler met with a successful cougar hunter this past week. Hunters are required to present their cougar for inspection to collect important harvest data and to also collect a tooth and genetic sample. Biologist Novack sealed two bobcats.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Davis Creek Unit: Biologist Cent continued with the removal of barbed wired fencing in upland areas on the newly acquired acres of the Davis Creek Unit.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act Grant Proposals: Biologist Novack worked on identifying restoration and acquisition projects for a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant proposal.

Providing Education and Outreach

Hunter Phone Survey: Biologist Novack and Cent contacted hunters for a brief phone survey about their experience hunting this season and their opinions on current hunting regulations and potential changes to the regulations.

Conducting Business Operations and Policy

Six-Month Performance and Development Plan: Biologist Novack completed an interim six-month Performance and Development Plan for Biologist Cent. She's an avid learner and is progressing rapidly in her knowledge and aptitude for the job duties.

Other

Employee Career Development: Wildlife Area Manager Laushman and Environmental Planner Belson, along with other WDFW staff members, attended a weeklong Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow Workshop in Mansfield, Georgia. The training focused on teaching natural resource professionals the values and roles of hunting in conservation through classes, discussions, and hands-on trainings.