

# Wild Times

A Free Publication of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department

Autumn 2003

## THE HABITAT CONNECTION: WHAT IS HABITAT?



Moose have a hard time surviving when their habitat is burned.

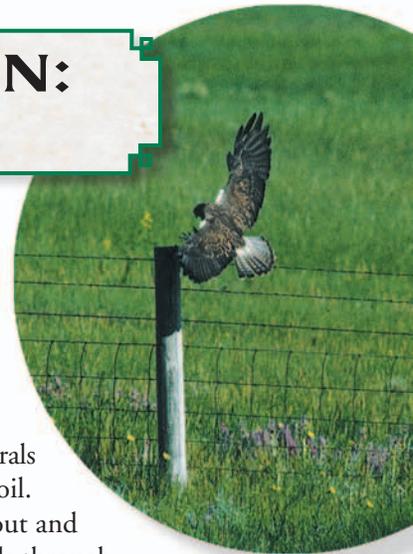
Habitat is where you live. Your town, your home, your yard - these places are your habitat. Wild animals have their own habitats, too. A moose's habitat might be a dense forest with lots of marshes and ponds. A hawk's habitat could be grassy prairies and a canyon or a big, dead tree to build a nest in. Deep pools and riffles in a river might be the habitat of a cutthroat trout. Not all habitats

are big. An insect might spend its whole life in a very small habitat under a rock or in a hollow log.

An animal's habitat can be changed by lots of things. One of the most important things is fire. In Wyoming, most wild-fires are started by lightning. Sometimes the changes made by fire are good. Some-

times they are bad. Fire can destroy many trees and other places where animals live. But it also can get rid of old dead wood, grass and bushes so that new kinds of plants can grow. When trees are burned to ash, minerals in the ash mix with the soil.

New green plants sprout and use the ash minerals through their roots. Many kinds of wild animals like to eat these tender new plants.



A hawk lands on a fencepost.



LuRoy Parker

New growth after a forest fire.

LuRoy Parker

**Habitat is where you live. Your town, your home, your yard - these places are your habitat.**



The fisher is an animal of the deep forest about the size of a house cat.

# FIELD Wildlife Journal

People used to think fire always was a bad thing. They tried to put out every fire that started in the outdoors. Now we know they were wrong, and we should let some fires burn. Steve Kilpatrick is a Wyoming Game and Fish Department habitat biologist who works with fire. "Fire isn't always bad," he says. "It is an important part of nature, just like snow or rain. Even very large fires can often do more good than harm." Steve says fire is often needed to burn up old twigs and fallen tree branches. It also helps get rid of trees that are sick and trees that are full of harmful insects. Steve uses fire as a tool in his work to help make better habitat for all kinds of wildlife. He enjoys his work, but he says using fire is a job for experts because it can be dangerous.

How can you tell if fire will help or hurt wild animals and their habitat? That depends on where the fire happens and if it can be kept from spreading to the wrong places. Each kind

of habitat is different. Some places become better habitat for wild animals after fires, but there are other places that should not be burned. Fire experts like Steve Kilpatrick often are called to start the good kinds of fires. They know which places need to be burned and how to do it. If you think you might enjoy working with fire to make better habitat, think about becoming a habitat biologist.

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**"Fire isn't always bad," a Game and Fish habitat biologist says. "It is an important part of nature, just like snow or rain."**

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Laurie Parker



Laurie Parker

Wildlife habitats make beautiful scenery.

The forest is a refuge for wildlife.



Chris Madson

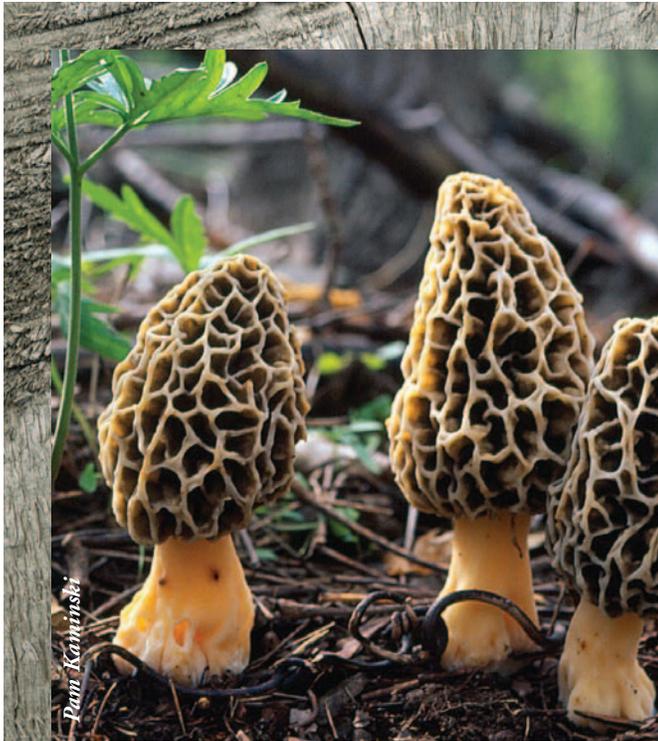
A wildfire fills the air with smoke.

Fire can change the habitat of the black bear.



# WILDLIFE PROFILES

People who were born in Wyoming call themselves natives. Wyoming's wild plants and animals are Wyoming natives, too. They have lived here for a long time—much longer than humans have. During that time, the wild creatures have seen all kinds of weather and other forces of nature. One of the things they have to live with is fire. Fire has always been a part of nature in Wyoming, whether it burns in the forests or on the prairies. Fire is not only a natural thing that happens on wildlife habitat,



# WILDLIFE PROFILES

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it is also a very important thing because it makes habitat change. Cut out the flashcards on this page and use them to learn how fire affects different kinds of wildlife.

## Pine Marten

**SIZE:** About as big as a large squirrel

**HABITAT:** Mountain forests with large, old trees

**FOOD:** Squirrels and other small woodland mammals

### DID YOU KNOW?

The marten is a type of weasel that lives in the forest. It can climb trees and makes its den in a hollow tree. The marten has beautiful, silky fur. Its favorite habitats are forests with lots of very large, old trees. When these forests burn down, some of the marten's habitat is lost for as long as a century until the forests grow back.

## Morel Mushroom

**SIZE:** A few inches long

**HABITAT:** Morels grow where forests have been burned by fires.

**FOOD:** Dead wood

### DID YOU KNOW?

A mushroom is part of a strange plant called a fungus. Most of the fungus lives underground. It looks like tangles of thread and it feeds on old, rotten wood. When rains wet the earth, the fungus sends up a mushroom that pokes out of the soil. One special type of mushroom is the morel. Morels are very good to eat.

## Sage Grouse

**SIZE:** Chicken-sized

**HABITAT:** Sagebrush

**FOOD:** Sagebrush leaves, insects

### DID YOU KNOW?

Wyoming has more sage grouse than any other state. One reason for that is because we have so much sagebrush. Sage grouse live in sagebrush and eat the leaves. But they also need green, damp grassy places where their chicks can catch insects. Small fires in sagebrush can help make more of these places.

## Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

**SIZE:** Can weigh as much as a large man

**HABITAT:** Wyoming's high mountains

**FOOD:** All kinds of plants

### DID YOU KNOW?

Fire can help make better habitat for bighorn sheep. It burns away thick trees so they can see and travel more easily. After a fire in the mountains, tender green plants soon begin to grow in the ash-covered soil. Bighorns like to eat these plants and their lambs need them to grow strong and healthy.

# OUR Wildlife Heritage

Our wild animals have always lived with fire. To wild animals, fires are as natural as blizzards, floods, hail storms and wind. Lightning has been starting wild fires for as long as there have been trees, grass and other things to burn. In our forests, we can still see some of the effects of large fires that burned hundreds of years ago. Fire has helped shape the Wyoming landscape.

Fire is not just a wild part of nature. It can be made to do useful work. It has been used as a tool by people. When the first humans came to Wyoming, they used fire for cooking food. They also found they could use fire to help them hunt. They started prairie fires when they wanted to make the vast herds of buffalo move from one place to another. But during the 20th century, people started to think all fires were bad. They forgot about how important fires had been for wildlife and people in Wyoming's history. Today, we think about fire differently. Fire is a tool we use to improve forests and wildlife habitat. We are no longer in such a hurry to put fires out unless they are too close to where people live. We want to take care of our land and we know fire is as necessary to today's Wyoming as it was to the Wyoming of the past.



LuRay Parker

Man has changed the mountain lion's habitat.



Chris Macdon

Fire is a tool that we use to improve forest and wildlife habitat.

You can help take care of the land by being careful with fire and using a litter bag.



LuRay Parker

The tassel-eared squirrel shares its forest home with humans.

Wild turkeys often live near Wyoming farms and ranches.



LuRay Parker

# Around Wyoming

Back in 1988, the weather across Wyoming was hot and dry. Some fires started in Yellowstone National Park that summer, and they quickly got out of control. The fires burned millions of trees. Months later, when the fires finally died out, Yellowstone Park looked very strange. Before the fires, everything had been green and pretty. After the fires, large parts of the park were left with nothing but burnt, charred tree stumps. The bears, moose, birds, squirrels, porcupines and other forest animals that had made their homes in and under those trees had to go elsewhere.

Some people worried that the burned areas of Yellowstone were lost forever. They thought nobody would ever want to spend their vacations in Yellowstone again. But things were not as bad as they seemed.

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**Some people worried that burned areas of Yellowstone were lost forever.**

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A fire smolders in the trees.

Soon, young trees, wildflowers and green plants were growing in the ash-covered soil. It will take many years, but the forest will grow back again like it was before the fires.

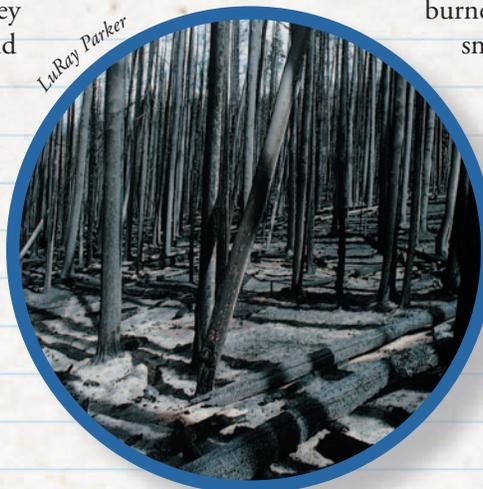
We now know that fire is a natural thing in Yellowstone and in all of our wild lands. Fires have been happening on this land for a long time. Our forests, shrublands and prairies are always changing, and fire is one of the things that changes them. Fire is nature's way of clearing away the old to make room for the new.

You will recall that this past summer was hot with very little rain. It was perfect weather for wildfires and several of them burned in different parts of Wyoming. Did you smell smoke in your part of the state this summer?

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**We now know that fire is a natural thing in Yellowstone and all of our wild lands.**

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A forest blackened by fire.



Green plants grow the next spring after a fire.

*Jeff Vanuga*

# Outdoor Classroom

## FIRES

Were there any fires this summer near your town? If so, take a trip to see the burned area. Visit the "burn" again next summer to see what is growing there. You might be surprised.

## LIFE FROM THE PAST

Have you ever wondered what Wyoming looked like before any humans lived here? The land beneath the town where you live or attend school was once wildlife habitat. What kinds of animals do you think used to roam the ground where your town now stands? Make a list.

## WILDLIFE HOMES

Next time you are out in the country, be sure to notice the different kinds of habitat. Think about what makes them different. What kinds of plants live there? What kinds of animals live there? Are there rocks or hills? Is water nearby? Draw or take photos of different habitats. How would fire change these habitats?

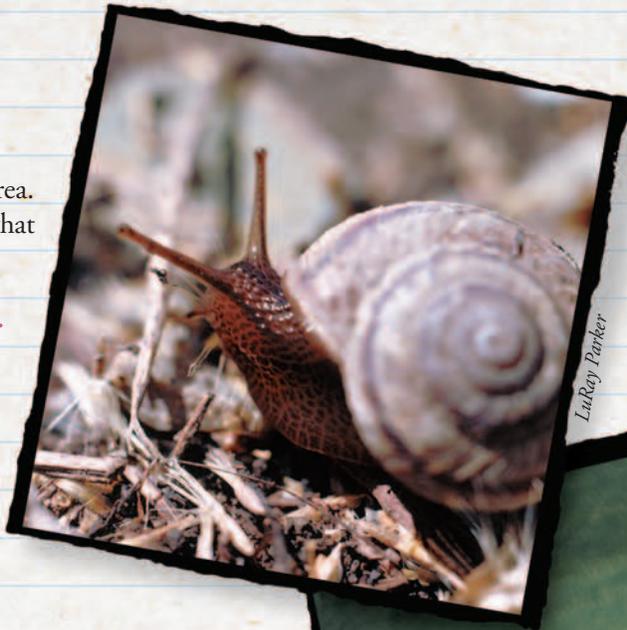
## BIG AND LITTLE

In a big habitat, such as a forest, there are many small habitats - rotted logs, hollow trees, piles of leaves or branches and puddles of water. How many kinds of small habitats can you find? What lives in them? Can you find places where one kind of habitat ends and another begins? One easy place to see this is on the shore of a lake; another is at the edge of a forest.

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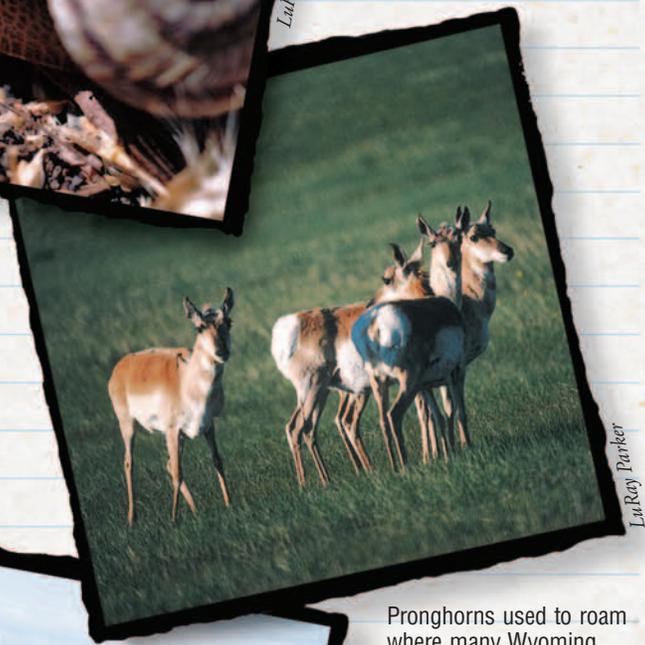
**Were there any fires this summer near your town? If so, take a trip to see the burned area.**

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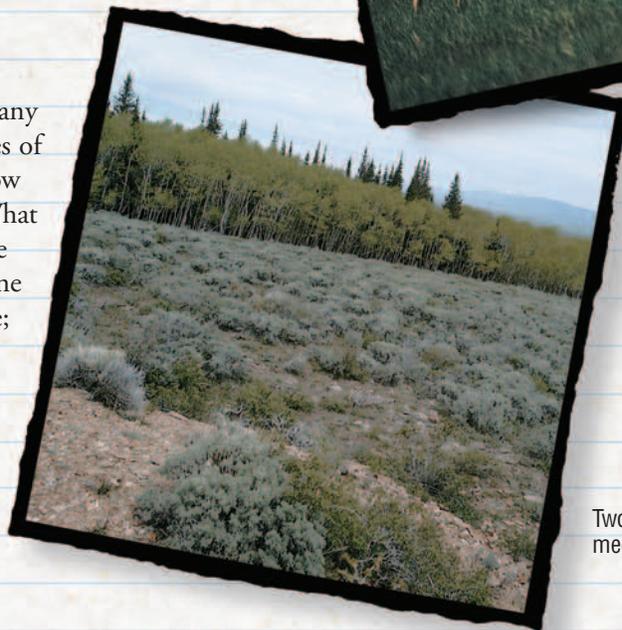
Snails have very small habitats.

Laurie Parker



Pronghorns used to roam where many Wyoming towns now stand.

Laurie Parker



Two habitats, where sagebrush meets the forest

# ▶ TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE ◀

## NEW WORDS

### Charred

Charred means "burned black." Make up a sentence using the word "charred."

## FIRE STARTERS

1. Which one of these things causes most Wyoming wildfires?
  - a. campfires
  - b. cigarettes
  - c. lightning
  - d. firecrackers



(Answer: c - lightning)

## TRUE OR FALSE?

Suppose someone said to you, "All fires in the outdoors are bad." Is this true or false? Why?



(Answer: It is false. Some fires are needed to make better wildlife habitat and to prevent bigger fires.)

## FAMOUS WORDS

"Where there's smoke, there's fire." This is an old saying that people use all the time. Do you think this saying can mean more than one thing? What else could it mean?



# ▶ LEARNING LINKS ◀

## BOOKS

*Firestorm* by Jean Craighead George

## WEB SITES

For games, puzzles and lots of things to learn about forests and fire, check out [www.smokeybear.com](http://www.smokeybear.com)

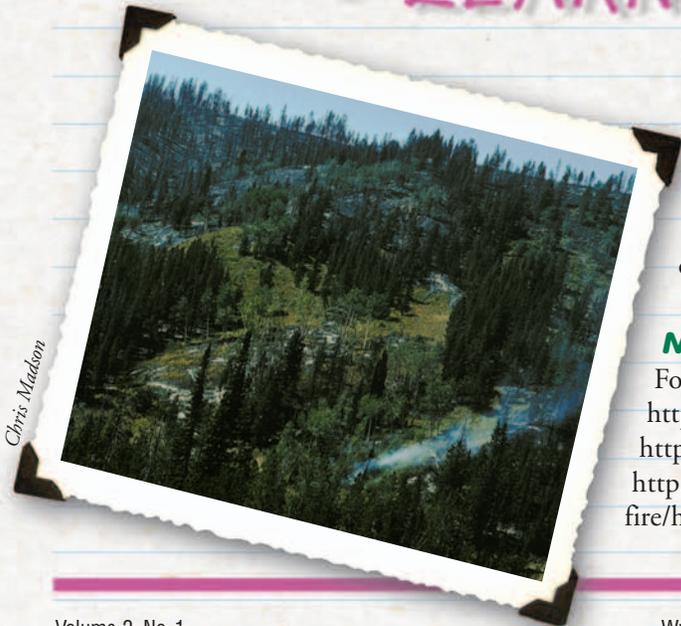
## MORE INFORMATION

For more information on fires, try these sites:

<http://www.nifc.gov/>

<http://www.nps.gov/yell/technical/fire/index.htm>

<http://www.blm.gov/education/LearningLandscapes/explorers/lifetime/fire/html>



Chris Mason

Volume 2, No. 1

Autumn 2003

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Education Support: Patty Stevens, Janet Milek

Graphic Design: Black Dog Design

Wyoming Wildlife's Wild Times is published four times during the school year (October, December, February and April). Please direct inquiries and changes of address to Wild Times, Education Branch, 5400 Bishop Blvd., Cheyenne, WY 82006; (307) 777-4538.

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