

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining sustainable fish and wildlife populations in the face of complex and competing demands is one of the fundamental challenges facing the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission (WGFC) and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). Biologists, conservationists, land managers and private landowners have long recognized that habitat is the key to answering the challenge. However, except for ownership and management of WGFC-held lands, the WGFC has no statutory authority for protecting, restoring or enhancing wildlife habitat. Since the management of wildlife is inseparable from the habitat that sustains it, we recognize that we must work in concert with private landowners and public land managers, conservation organizations, local, state, and federal governmental agencies and the public. These partnerships are key to maintaining abundant wildlife now and into the future.

The list of habitat-related issues that influence Wyoming's wildlife populations seems to grow every year. Maintaining functional, productive and connected habitats on a landscape scale in the face of energy development, drought, traditional agricultural uses and human development has been an ongoing theme. Add climate-induced changes to vegetative communities and cascading changes in suitability for resident and new species and the importance of achieving habitat gains or even maintaining functional conditions becomes ever more apparent.

The Department has positioned itself to address habitat issues by assigning habitat-related duties to personnel in multiple Divisions and regions and developing, in 2001, its first Strategic Habitat Plan (SHP). Then again in 2009, the Department re-affirmed its habitat role and priorities by producing a revised strategic habitat plan focusing on the mission to "Promote and maintain the availability of high quality habitat to sustain and enhance wildlife populations in the future." This plan focuses on a range of landscape scales with an emphasis on the processes that underlie high quality habitat. By this perspective, it promotes approaches and priorities that conserve and enhance all wildlife species and is consistent with the parallel planning effort encompassed by the State Wildlife Action Plan (see inside front cover).

Our goals can be simply and generally summarized as: maintaining high quality existing habitats (goal 1), addressing issues on degraded habitats (goal 2), remembering the value of local enhancements for fish and wildlife populations (goal 3), communicating effectively with the public on habitat issues (goal 4) and working effectively with myriad partners (goal 5). An important component of this SHP and Department habitat efforts is the recognition of wildlife habitats that are "crucial" for wildlife under goal 1 and those habitats that have been degraded and have potential for "enhancement" under goal 2. Crucial priority areas for maintaining habitat values and enhancement priority areas for addressing habitat issues were identified when the SHP was revised in 2009.

This annual report to the commission, public and our conservation partners is the seventh report since the first SHP in 2001. The purpose of this annual report is to highlight the 2009 activities and SHP accomplishments of the Terrestrial Habitat, Aquatic Habitat, and Habitat and Access Maintenance programs of the WGFD as well as associated portions of the Lands Administration, Water Management, Information, and Education and Publications, Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) and other habitat related programs. This report is structured to reflect accomplishments and work activities as they relate to achieving SHP goals. In that vein, SHP goals are referenced in project titles throughout the report.

The entire 2009 SHP along with priority areas and objectives can be viewed on the WGFD website at <http://gf.state.wy.us/habitat/StrategicPlan/index.asp>. This will guide our efforts and direct funds over the next several years. For additional information please contact any of the personnel listed above. Also, feel free to share this report with anyone who may be interested in the Department and Commission's habitat efforts.