January

Waterfowl Hunting

A much needed cold snap finally descended into the Casper Region during the last part of December and early January. Duck and goose numbers improved during the cold snap. However, the snap also froze portions of the river congregating ducks and geese on the remaining open water. While some hunters have reported success, others hope for additional cold and snow along the Yellowstone River in Montana to help push more birds into the area.

As always, scouting this time of year is very important for a successful hunt. Many geese are using agricultural fields to meet their caloric needs this time of the year. Obtaining access from private landowners is key for these birds. Ducks tend to group up around the best food sources. To be successful try, varying your decoy spread. Mixing in goldeneyes to your decoy spread or floating Canada goose decoys can help with attracting birds that have "seen it all" this late in the season. Also, placing large decoy spreads can help to attract the otherwise decoy-shy ducks. Lastly, for ducks and geese focus on hiding well with cover both in front of the blind and above you.

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Ice Fishing

Anglers in the Casper Region should expect good ice fishing opportunities this winter as long as the ice remains safe. “Don’t fish alone, common sense and caution are still the best defenses when ice fishing,” said Janet Milek, information specialist for the Casper Game and Fish office.

Anglers are urged to use caution when trekking out onto ice. Ice conditions can vary on a daily basis due to temperature changes and wind. “If there is any question as to ice safety, it is best to avoid a situation that could result in an accident,” Milek said. Be sure to check the thickness of any ice before venturing onto it, and continue checking it every 100 to 150 feet. Four inches of clear ice is usually safe for fishing. Clear ice is stronger than cloudy or white ice, which has frozen, thawed and refrozen and is not always stable. For white ice, double the recommended thickness.

Ice fishermen should never go out on the ice alone. “It can make all the difference, having somebody there to throw a rope if you do fall through,” Milek said. Low water temperatures can be life-threatening this time of year and hypothermia is a serious risk for anyone who does fall through the ice. Ice fishermen should learn to recognize and treat hypothermia.

If the weather and the ice cooperate, anglers should expect good fishing at Glendo Reservoir. There are a lot of walleye that are in the 14 to 16-inch range as well as good numbers of 20 to 23-inch walleye. Anglers are reminded of the 15-inch minimum size limit on walleye at Glendo. The channel catfish population is strong with most fish ranging between 12 to 18-inches. The crappie population (both white and black) is the highest we have seen in many years right now with most fish being in the 9 to 11-inch range currently. The ice at Glendo is notoriously unpredictable, so use caution and check thickness before venturing out.

Trout fishing should be good to excellent at Alcova Reservoir this ice fishing season. We have been stocking rainbow, Snake River cutthroat, Bonneville cutthroat and kokanee for several years now. Anglers should expect rainbow and cutthroat trout to average 15 inches through the ice with some fish to 20 inches. While open water anglers have been successfully targeting kokanee, we have heard of very little success on this species by ice anglers.

Seminoe Reservoir holds good numbers of walleye, which average 15 inches. Some 30-inch (14-pound) walleye lurk in Seminoe as well, although they can be difficult to catch through the ice. There are also plenty of 16 to 18-inch rainbows which typically provide fast action for ice anglers willing to brave the wind that never seems to stop at this lake.

Pathfinder Reservoir should provide excellent walleye fishing this winter with the majority of fish ranging from 13 to 18 inches. Pathfinder also harbors a lot of larger walleye with fish over 30-inches present. Pathfinder is also known for growing better-than-average size rainbows. Many of the rainbows range from 18 to 21-inches. Trout numbers are currently down right now, so trout fishing has declined somewhat from what anglers have been used to.
Anglers should be aware of the special winter ice fishing provisions and also be aware of regulations concerning fishing with live minnows. Live baitfish shall not be transported out of the designated use area as listed by the WGFD on the live baitfish receipt. More information about the use of live baitfish and the special winter ice fishing provisions can be found in the 2018 Wyoming Fishing Regulations and online at wgfd.wyo.gov.

If you live in or around the Casper area the North Platte Walleye's Unlimited would like to help you learn to ice fish. The group has assembled all the equipment needed to teach you to ice fish. Interested in learning? Contact Jay at 307.267.0287 or npwalleyes@gmail.com for more information.

On the Ground
Mule Deer Classifications, Elk Mountain Bighorn Sheep

Recently, wildlife biologists and game wardens worked from helicopters and the ground to conduct mule deer classifications across the Casper Region. Game and Fish biologists use the information collected during helicopter surveys and apply it in computer models that simulate changes in population size and demographics. The following are results for some of the herds.
In the Black Hills and Cheyenne River Herd Units, after hitting a 30 plus year low in deer numbers in 2013, things have improved significantly in the past three years, and the number of mule deer classified in both herds was the highest in many years. Plus, both buck numbers and buck quality were the best in well over a decade, maybe two.

In the Black Hills, pine tree cover can make aerial classifications difficult, but sample sizes were better than hoped this year and extra effort on the ground enabled Game and Fish to reach classification objectives. Nearly 2,700 mule deer were classified this year, the most in well over two decades. The total number of deer classified was slightly above values observed in 2003 and 2008 when this herd last hit transient population peaks.

This year’s observed fawn to doe ratio in the Black Hills was identical to last year at 68 fawns per 100 does, which is just a little below the long-term average of about 72 fawns per 100 does. However, the number of bucks observed per 100 does in the Black Hills decreased a bit to 31 bucks per 100 does from the two-decade high of 36 bucks per 100 does last year. What is exciting though, is that for the first time in recent memory mature bucks were observed, with 22% of the mature bucks (14% of the total bucks) being class II or III deer. Typically this herd exhibits buck to doe ratios that are low by Wyoming standards. However, this trend has been “bucked” since 2012 - thanks to reduced hunting pressure and good fawn production and survival.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Yearling Bucks</th>
<th>Class I</th>
<th>Class II</th>
<th>Class III</th>
<th>Total Bucks Classified</th>
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<td>52%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td>35%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>258</td>
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<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>397</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moving south into the Cheyenne River Herd Unit, personnel classified just over 3,700 mule deer. Needed sample sizes for accurate population assessments were easily met, and the total number of deer counted was very close to the peak numbers observed in 2000 and 2005, and the most deer counted in over a decade.

Observed fawn ratios across the Cheyenne River herd were a bit lower than that in the Black Hills at 64 fawns per 100 does overall, with some hunt areas as low as 38 to 52 fawns per 100 does. It appears survival and recruitment here was better than the Black Hills, as the observed yearling buck ratio was 15 per 100 does versus 11 per 100 does in the Hills. But, the drier summer conditions were likely tougher on fawns. Quite a few more coyotes were observed in Thunder Basin versus the Black Hills as well. At any rate, in northeast Wyoming mule deer productivity and survival since 2014 have been good, and these herds are projected to continue to maintain themselves or increase a bit – baring a severe winter.

Another bright spot in the Cheyenne River herd is the observed buck to doe ratio, which is hovering around 45 bucks to 100. This is up significantly from the 33 bucks per 100 does found in 2010, and the 2017 value is about 33% above the long-term average for this herd - something that can be seen in changes in the antler classification data. Again, this has been a result of reduced harvest pressure and increased fawn production and survival since 2014.
Mule deer surveys were conducted via helicopter and from the ground for the Bates Hole/Hat Six mule deer herd as well. Weather conditions were good, and field personnel were able to count enough deer (1,200) to achieve their sample goal in most hunt areas around Casper. Some very nice buck deer were observed. Buck ratios in most hunt areas around Casper remain above average. As long as the weather in early 2018 isn’t too harsh, good hunting opportunity should continue for the 2018 deer season. In the Bates Hole/Hat Six area the fawn to doe ratio of 60 fawns per every 100 does, and a buck ratio of 31 bucks per every 100 does was observed. This information along with harvest data helps biologists predict trends in the population, which is used in turn to help set appropriate hunting seasons.

The following map shows general locations of deer from the December 2017 survey for the Bates Hole/Hat Six mule deer unit.

**Elk Mountain Bighorn Sheep (Hunt Area 20 – Kouba Canyon):** Game and Fish assisted South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks in conducting annual ground surveys of bighorn sheep in Wyoming and South Dakota on Elk Mountain, southeast of Newcastle. Several different techniques were used to estimate the herd’s number from these efforts. All indications are that the herd grew slightly last year, and is probably numbering around 140 to 150 head, with a strong number of mature rams showing excellent horn growth. After conducting the surveys and data analysis, the two states met to discuss this herd. Based on the data available, a couple more licenses will be offered for this herd in 2018 with three being issued by South Dakota for their side, and three by Wyoming Game and Fish valid on the Wyoming side.
Of Interest
Collared Mule Deer

In late December, a satellite collared mule deer from the Area 66 mule deer study was killed. In this case, the collared adult doe was killed by a mountain lion in the Beaver Creek drainage. Because these collars link with Globalstar satellites, their last recorded position is readily available on a webserver. However, due to cold weather, the batteries in the GPS were not working properly, so Game and Fish could not directly navigate to the last known location. Thankfully, a persistent magpie led us to the carcass that was successfully cached under a large juniper tree. When retracing the lion tracks in the snow, the actual kill site was found approximately 100 yards away. The lion, which was likely an adult female, drug the carcass up a steep hill to bury it under one lone juniper on the hillside.

The New Year rang in with a rare visitor to the City of Casper. A local resident called to report an injured hawk that had been in his yard over New Year’s Eve. The bird turned out to be a Northern Goshawk – a stealthy and secretive species of hawk that is normally found in thick conifer forest. Wildlife Biologist Heather O’Brien wasn’t certain what brought him into town, but the bird was unable to fly and was in need of medical care. The male goshawk was captured and transported to a rehabilitator in Cody, who found him to be malnourished with a dislocated shoulder. This unique bird is now eating well and putting on weight before undergoing a procedure to repair his injured shoulder.