Wyoming Game and Fish Department

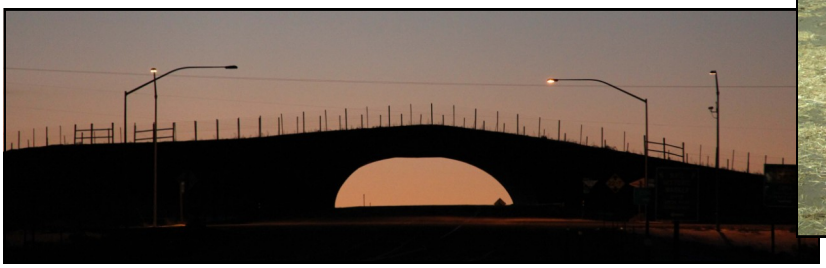
Pinedale Region

April 2016 Newsletter

Trapper's Point Interpretive Site Celebration

Pinedale Wildlife Biologist Dean Clause and Public Information Specialist Mark Gocke recently joined several other partners, members of the public and local media in celebrating the completion of a new interpretive site for the Trapper's Point pronghorn migration project. In 2012, a 9.7 million dollar state-of-the-art highway project was completed that involved 13 miles of fencing, two overpasses and six under passes to provide the safe passage of pronghorn, mule deer and other wildlife across highway 191 west of Pinedale. The project has been huge success reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions in the area by over 81 percent. The interpretive site was installed to not only celebrate the amazing annual big game migration corridor, but also explain to travelers the purpose of the large overpasses they are passing under, the first of their kind in Wyoming. Also part of the interpretive project is web camera mounted on top of the overpass for live viewing of animals as they make the crossing. The live web camera can be accessed at: www.trapperspoint.com. Pronghorn are currently still using the overpass as part of their spring migration.

Photos: (Above) The final installation and recent ribbon-cutting celebration. (Below) A view of the Trapper's Point wildlife overpass over highway 191 at sunset. (Right) A herd of pronghorn crossing the overpass captured by remote monitoring cameras installed by West, Inc wildlife consultants.



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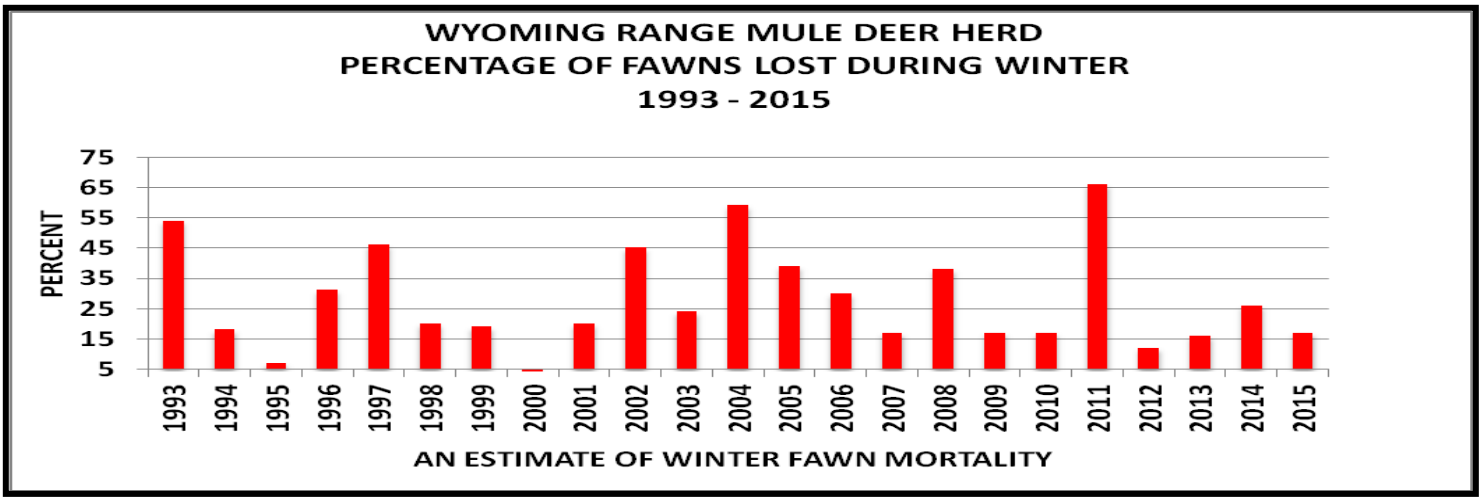
Mule Deer Winter Survival

Game wardens and wildlife biologists in the Pinedale region spent considerable time monitoring deer and other big game on winter ranges. Each year, wardens and biologists count the number of mule deer fawns they see in relation to adult does, both at the beginning of winter and again at the end, to determine the percentage loss. Fawns are counted because they are typically the age class that is hit hardest by winter. There is always a portion of fawns that is lost over winter, but it does vary quite a lot from one year to the next. Tracking fawn mortality gives managers an idea of what to expect for herd growth in the coming years. This year, winter mortality was about average for all age classes across the board. The table below shows the over-winter fawn loss in the Wyoming Range deer herd.



Percent change-in-ratio (minimum fawn loss) for the winters of 1992-93 through 2015-16 in the Wyoming Range deer herd.

Mule Deer Research Continues

At right, Game & Fish Commissioner Charles Price helps wildlife researchers haul a doe deer to the handling station for processing. Several Pindeale Region personnel assisted with the ongoing WY Range deer study. The collared deer were recaptured in early March to monitor fetal rates, body condition, and replace GPS collars.

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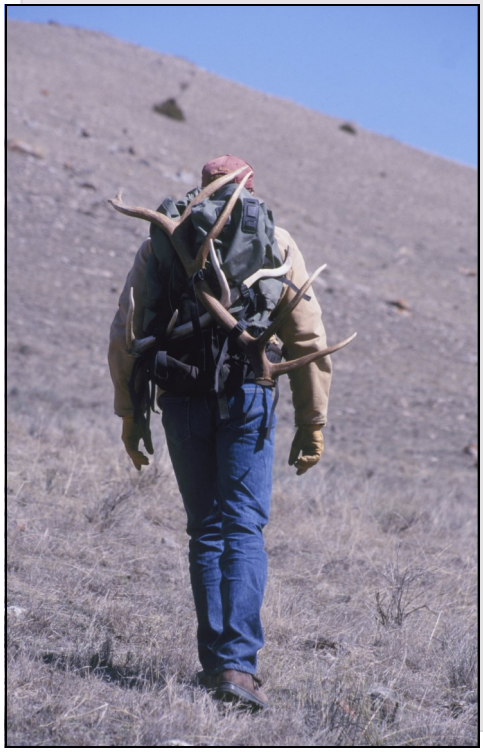

Antler Hunters Cited

All three Pinedale region game wardens have spent a considerable amount of time patrolling big game winter ranges and educating the public about the shed antler hunting regulation currently in place. Wardens have received several complaints and calls of potential antler hunting violations. Fortunately, most reports of suspicious activity were determined legal and not associated with antler hunting. However, two notable violations were detected on big game winter ranges.

There were two separate incidents of individuals illegally accessing elk feedgrounds during the seasonal winter closure in search of antlers. One was at the Fall Creek Wildlife Habitat Management Area (WHMA) and the other at the Soda Lake WHMA. Both individuals were apprehended and cited for violating the shed antler collection regulation and the big game seasonal closure.

South Pinedale Game Warden Jordan Kraft also assisted the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with violations of the crucial big game winter range vehicle closure on the Pinedale Mesa and successfully apprehended an individual who was four-wheeling in the wildlife closure area. The case was referred to the BLM Ranger for appropriate enforcement action.

An Old Bull Checks Out

South Pinedale Game Warden Jordan Kraft investigated the carcass of a dead bull elk near Farson. Kraft determined that the mortality was not associated with tumbleweed shield lichen poisoning as possibly suspected, but rather due to the fact that the bull was simply very old and in very poor condition. The bull elk had extensive tooth wear to the incisors and was suffering from a high parasite load.

Keeping Tabs on Trappers

Warden Kraft also monitored trappers through the end of the bobcat trapping season and discovered one trap that was not removed after the close of the season. The trapper was contacted and had inadvertently left a trap set in the field for several months without being checked. The trapper was cited for failing to check traps within the required time period and received a warning for trapping during a closed season. The individual was encouraged to use a GPS or a trap log to prevent traps from being inadvertently left in the field in the future.

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Snow Goose Waste Case

Big Piney Game Warden Adam Hymas investigated a case involving Utah hunters who had traveled to Torrington, WY, to hunt snow geese and then while on a snowmobiling trip north of Big Piney the following week, they decided to dump the snow geese they had shot in the trailhead parking lot. No meat had been taken and all had been wasted. Warden Hymas expressed thanks to a local resident who picked up the geese and a snowmobile helmet that had been left behind. Without the individual's help, the case may have never have been made.

Sage Grouse Strut

It's that thrilling time of year when sage grouse are gathering to perform their annual spring mating ritual on area strutting grounds, called leks, and Pinedale Game & Fish personnel have been busy counting the birds. Despite a long term population decline, the number of birds on leks was up last spring and managers are expecting the same strong numbers this year.

Each fall, hunters deposit wings from harvested birds in "wing barrels" for biologists to analyze and determine a chick:hen ratio. In 2015, this data showed a ratio of 1.6 chicks per hen, which was the highest recorded for this area in recent years. This level of productivity is typically associated with a stable to increasing population. These numbers were consistent with the statewide 2015 lek data, which indicated a 66% increase in the average numbers of males on leks. Hopefully, numbers continue on this trend.

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Elk Feeding Ends Early

The Brucellosis-Feedgrounds-Habitat crew spent time in the field monitoring elk distributions near feedgrounds in an effort to end feeding where possible. With the relatively mild winter, managers were able to end feeding in February at several Pinedale area feedgrounds including Bench Corral, Soda Lake, Fall Creek, and Scab Creek feedgrounds. Additionally, feeding ended in March at Green River Lakes and Muddy Creek feedgrounds.

Brucellosis is transmitted primarily through infected aborted fetuses, which is also the characteristic symptom of the disease. Research by the WGFD has found that the rate of elk abortion due to brucellosis on feedgrounds peaks in March, April and May, so the earlier in spring that managers can encourage elk to free range, the less the chance for elk to become exposed to the disease on a crowded feedground. However, to end feeding as early as possible, there must be sufficient native forage available for the elk so they remain in good health and the risk of elk causing damage to stored crops or co-mingling with cattle must be very low.

In additional research, the brucellosis crew finished deploying pig fetuses and pork shoulder chunks on several feedgrounds to assist the United States Geological Survey (USGS) with a pilot project of fetal scavenging rates in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and assess whether porcine parts can be substituted for elk fetuses. If scavenging rates are similar for each, the USGS will conduct a broader-scale assessment of fetal scavenging rates throughout the GYE to determine if fetal persistence might provide some explanation for the recent increases in brucellosis prevalence trend among elk utilizing native winter ranges in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

A remote camera captured this photo of a golden eagle grabbing a chunk of pork shoulder put out as part of a fetal scavenging rate study at the Black Butte elk feedground.