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the wyoming game & fish department

CASPER REGION newsletter

Hunting Forecast 2015

Pronghorn, Mule Deer, Elk

Throughout the Casper Region, pronghorn herds continue to remain at low levels and below objective following substantial winter losses in 2011 and subsequent poor fawn production and survival. Thankfully, fawn production/survival improved dramatically in 2014 throughout the region, with fawn:doe ratios approaching or breaking all time records in some herds. As a result, pronghorn populations are beginning to rebound in most areas. However, pronghorn numbers remain much lower than desired throughout the region, with the exception of Area 73 northwest of Casper where pronghorn numbers now exceed the objective. As a result, license issuance will remain very conservative in 2015 to continue to provide for population recovery.



In general, mule deer populations have declined over the last 15 years throughout the Casper Region as fawn productivity/survival has been poor. However, there is finally some good news on the mule deer front as well, as mule deer populations experienced record or near record fawn production in 2014 throughout the Casper Region. Although mule deer numbers remain well below objective in nearly all herds in the Casper Region, they have rebounded significantly over the past two years, especially in the Black Hills. While several more years of good fawn production and survival will be necessary to build some populations toward objective and meet public desires, mule deer have increased modestly in much of the Casper Region.

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Despite modest increases in mule deer numbers, proposed 2015 mule deer hunting seasons will remain conservative, for the most part, in the Casper Region. The one notable exception will be in the Black Hills, where two years of excellent fawn production and mild winters have allowed mule deer to increase significantly. In Areas 1-3, the Department has proposed to return to a 30-day general season while increasing the nonresident Region A quota to begin to slow population growth (although this is largely geared toward managing white-tailed deer. Drawing odds in limited quota Areas 34 and 89 will likely again be low given their popularity and low license issuance.

Of note, hunters should be aware of one significant change for 2015. Following a year of gathering public and landowner input, the Department converted Hunt Area 10 from a general license framework to a limited quota area. As a result, nonresident Region B license holders should be aware that they will no longer be able to hunt in Area 10, which has the biggest percentage of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands in northeast Wyoming. For those lucky enough to draw an Area 10 deer license in 2015, hunter densities will be much lower this year, although hunters should not expect to see any significant increases in mule deer in this area.

Elk numbers remain at or above objective levels in all herds in the Casper Region. Elk season recommendations will therefore continue to be extremely liberal in terms of season dates and antlerless license issuance for 2015. In recent years, elk harvest has continued to remain very high in all herds, and approached or exceeded record levels in some herds this last fall. Hunter success continues to be good in most areas in the Casper Region, although high hunter densities on public lands continue to result in mere modest success in some areas. In the Laramie Peak / Muddy Mountain elk herd (Hunt Areas 7 and 19), overall elk harvest continues to be very strong as excellent cooperation with landowners has resulted in good hunter access for cow elk on private lands along with expanding Walk-In-Area and Hunter Management Area opportunities. Elk hunting in the Laramie Range should continue to be good this coming fall. For the first time in 2015, the Department is proposing to extend season dates through January in Area 19 and through mid-December in Area 120 for antlerless elk hunting. Elk hunting in the Black Hills continues to be a mixed bag, as



as hunters with access to elk on private lands have been doing well while public land hunters in Area 116 have had little success as most elk occupy private lands in this area. Given the recent change to general license hunting in Area 116, the Department would like to remind hunters that the conversion to a general license season was primarily an attempt to increase elk harvest on private lands. Elk densities on public lands have always been low during the fall months as hunting pressure and human activity quickly displaces them to private lands. Expectations of harvesting an elk on national forest in Area 116 should therefore be tempered. License quotas for Area 1 will again remain at reduced levels. Although Area 1 elk hunters experienced a modest increase in harvest success in 2014, hunters in this coveted area continued to have a harder time harvesting elk than in years past. Overall, season recommendations for 2015 will continue to maximize female harvest throughout the Casper Region within the constraints of public access. Hunters should continue to enjoy remarkable numbers of elk and good success if effort is expended and weather cooperates.

Watch for a full hunting forecast by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in the summer of 2015.



Behind the Badge

Poached Mule Deer

Troy Achterhof, Newcastle game warden, received a call by someone who had illegally picked up a large mule deer head with 4x4 antlers attached. Achterhof thought he saw a bullet hole in the head and he seized it. He then skinned the neck area and uncovered bullet fragments along the edges of the bullet hole. Because of the advanced stages of decomposition, Warden Achterhof had the head x-rayed at the local vet clinic and was able to clearly see a bullet lodged in the C-3 vertebrae. The case is ongoing.



In the Water

Flushing Flows, Gizzard Shad

Ten cycles of spring flushing flows were negotiated with the Bureau of Reclamation and completed from March 17 through 26 in the North Platte River below Gray Reef Dam. During the early hours of March 17 flow was increased from 500 cubic feet per second to 4,000 cubic feet per second and then gradually decreased back to 500 cubic feet per second. This cycle was repeated each day of the flushing flows. Flushing flows began in 1995 as a method to reduce the amount of fine material (silt and sand) in spawning gravels. Research has found with cleaner spawning gravel (less fine material) trout egg survival is much improved. Matt Hahn, Casper fishery biologist, collected gravel samples from spawning locations pre-flush, after five cycles and post flushing to evaluate spawning habitat conditions as part of an ongoing study. A technique called freeze core was used to collect the gravel samples.



A pipe is pushed into the spawning substrate, then liquid nitrogen is poured down the pipe freezing all material in about an eight-inch diameter around the pipe. The gravel samples will be analyzed in the lab to determine the reduction in fine material following the flushing flows. The gravel analysis is documenting the importance of the flushing flows to maintaining the quality of spawning habitat in the North Platte River below Gray Reef Reservoir. In addition to spawning habitat, the flows also enhance aquatic insect production by reducing fine material in the gravel. The Wyoming Game and Fish would like to thank the Bureau of Reclamation for their continued support of this project.



Fisheries biologist Gordon Edwards put the finishing touches on paperwork for importing gizzard shad from Nebraska for Glendo and Keyhole reservoirs. Gizzard shad are an extremely important forage species for walleye in the reservoirs. The long cold winter of 2013-2014 nearly eradicated the gizzard shad and we hope to import adults to help jump start the population in the reservoirs. The state record gizzard shad was caught in Glendo Reservoir in September 2013.



Of Interest

Least Weasel

Believe it or not, the smallest meat eating predator in the world calls Wyoming home. This feisty little creature is the least weasel, *Mustela nivalis*. The tiniest of three weasel species found in Wyoming, it is also the rarest – at least in the Cowboy State. While its larger cousins, the long-tailed weasel and short-tailed weasel (or ermine) are better known, we are slowly learning more about the distribution of their fierce little relative.

Recently, what may turn out to be another of about a dozen confirmed records of least weasels in Wyoming surfaced as one was found in the Black Hills near Newcastle. To date, all of the known occurrences of Wyoming's least weasels have been from the northeast portion of the state and most have been carcasses found by landowners, usually after a barn cat has killed them. One exception being the first recorded finding in a lumber pile at the Sheridan Regional Game and Fish office years ago.

While the least weasel is very small and its fur is of little commercial value, the species is quite interesting and worth getting to know. Here are some interesting facts about them:

- On average, least weasels are about 7 inches long and weigh around 2 ounces, with males being larger than females.
- Their coat color changes seasonally in northern climates, including Wyoming, but not in the south. In the winter, their coat is pure white and lacks the black tail tip seen on other weasel species. In summer, the fur on their backs turns a chocolate brown, but stays white on their belly.
- They have 34 very sharp teeth!
- While not well known in Wyoming, least weasels are found widely throughout the Northern Hemisphere. They are native to most of North America and Europe, but have also been introduced on some islands such as New Zealand, the Azores, Crete and Malta.
- Throughout their range, least weasels are found in many different habitat types including: prairie grasslands, forests, open tundra, bushy areas and rainforests with a dry season.
- Both males and females are territorial and mark their territories using scent glands.



- Least weasels may mate with multiple partners throughout the year, and on average females have a litter of five young after 35 days of gestation.
- Least weasels do not dig burrows but do use abandoned burrows of other species.
- They often choose dens at the base of trees, but if there are no trees around they will take up residence in brush or log piles and tall grass patches.
- Least weasels, like many other weasel species, are able to kill prey much larger than themselves. They prefer small rodents, but will kill rabbits, birds, frogs, lizards and insects.
- Because they have a very high metabolism, the least weasel needs to eat about 50% of their body weight in food every day to survive – more in the winter, less in summer. Least weasels are known to kill more prey than they can eat and will cache uneaten prey in burrows.
- Because of their high metabolism and active hunting lifestyle, least weasels are short lived, only surviving on average about two years in the wild.

The Wyoming Fish and Game Department requests anyone trapping a least weasel or finding a carcass report it to the Nongame Section so the specimen may be preserved for scientific use.

Information on the least weasel was gathered and borrowed from:

http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Mustela_nivalis/

<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/indiana/journeywithnature/least-weasel.xml>

<http://wyominguntrapped.org/news/least-weasels-rare-wyoming/>



In the News

Habitat Clean-up



Bearlodge High School students and the fifth grade class from Sundance Elementary spent a morning picking up trash at the Sand Creek Access Area in March. Several parents also volunteered to help. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department wants to thank teachers Blake Hunkins and Tom Maupin for organizing the crew. Campers and anglers will have a much more pleasant area to use this spring, and wildlife will enjoy a cleaner habitat.

