

Winter exacts heavy toll on wildlife



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

It is really amusing when people talk about the delicate balance of nature. Mother Nature has no idea what balance is whatsoever. Take, for example, our recent weather trends in the western United States. We have suffered through a drought of biblical proportions, with most of our rivers and reservoirs at lowest levels in history. A balanced nature would be a drought year, followed by a surplus of moisture the following year, thereby balancing everything out. No such luck. If you want an idea about how bad it is, look at Blue Mesa Reservoir. Our drought persisted for almost 20 years in the West, with a couple surplus years in between. Drought is terribly hard on our wildlife, as well as everything else. Deer, elk, and pronghorn were especially hurt during this extended drought. Drought causes a loss of habitat because of the



Populations of pronghorn, deer and elk have all taken a hit from the past winter. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

increased wildfires. There is also a loss of the food source because what wasn't consumed by fire, died off from lack of water. Drought also causes an increase in disease, which causes even more fatalities in wildlife. This last drought brought on an outbreak of epizootic hemorrhagic disease, also known as bluetongue. This is a common viral disease that hits deer, elk, and pronghorn, especially during drought years. Drought causes the disappearance of water holes. The few water holes that remain will be shared by all the animals in an area. When bluetongue hits, it is easily spread throughout the local herd. This disease can also affect domestic sheep, cattle, and goats. While the disease is not always fatal, it sure does

not help an already stressed game animal population. The winter of 2022 to 2023 is one for the books. We were all ready for summer by the time that one was over. Old Ma Nature really tried to pile on the snowpack in the hills, and thankfully so — except for what this did to our wildlife. The numbers are not completely in for Colorado, but the deer, elk, and pronghorn were hit bad in some areas. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is talking about reducing hunting tags in several of the hardest hit areas to help the game populations rebuild. One of my favorite game animals is the pronghorn, and I monitor them closely. There is a migration route in western Wyoming celebrated as the Path of the Pronghorn. This route takes the pronghorn from their winter grounds in the Green

River Basin to the summer ranges in Grand Teton National Park, the National Elk Refuge, and along the Gros Ventre River. An archaeological site along the migration route at Trappers Point holds evidence that humans hunted pronghorn along the path as long as 6,000 years ago. Trappers Point started in 1968 as a location to overlook a newly established National Landmark, the Upper Green River Rendezvous Grounds, where six mountain man rendezvous were held between 1833 and 1840. During construction, an ancient pronghorn kill site was discovered. Investigation determined that pronghorn have used the area for thousands of years and humans were hunting at the site as many as 6,000 years ago. Pronghorn migrate through the Trappers Point

bottleneck to this day. Wyoming Game and Fish has monitored this migration route, and the entire herd of western Wyoming for many years. They keep an accurate count of the number of pronghorn that use the route by several ways, including placing GPS collars on does. Last year, there were 83 collared does in the program. After this harsh winter, with incredible amounts of snow, just 21 of them were still alive, including zero of the Jackson Hole migrants.

The population of collared does fell 75%, and estimates are that the entire herd is down by the same percentage. The same numbers show the Jackson Hole migrants are down 75 % also. Of the collared pronghorn that sojourned the celebrated Path of the Pronghorn in 2022, all of them were dead. The migration route has been lost before. Herds of pronghorn numbered in the thousands in 1900, but the route was lost between 1910 and 1950. Poor management and over hunting decimated the population. Fast forward to the present, and the management of the pronghorn herd is much more deliberate, and science based. Wyoming Game and Fish and the National Park Service survey the Jackson Hole segment annually and keep tabs on the entire herd which spans from Green River to Northern Grand Teton National Park, across

western Wyoming. The population breached 60,000 in the early 2000s, but the latest estimate was 43,000. In the past, pronghorn have rebounded from bad winters. We really don't know how bad this winter was until there is a more thorough census later in the summer and we see how the fawns make out. One thing is for certain, Wyoming, as well as areas in Colorado, will have reduced hunting opportunities for the next few years, at least. In the long run, nature seems to balance itself out. Some of the blame for these droughts and schizophrenic weather must fall in the hands of man and climate change. Mother Nature is a resilient person and always seems to bounce back whenever we give her a kick in the teeth. Either way, the deer, elk, and pronghorn are sure paying the price. *Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org*



The Montrose Water Sports Park located at Riverbottom Park is a popular place to try out river surfing, with nearby businesses like Montrose Surf + Cycle offering lessons on the popular sport.(Courtesy photo/Spencer Graves)

SUPs

FROM PAGE A1

“People do lower Gunnison (River) a lot,” said Brake, noting specifically the route from Gunnison’s Pleasure Park down to the Colorado 65 bridge. “It’s not private property so you can do that safely, and I won’t get anybody in trouble,” he joked, and Montrose Surf + Cycle has maps of those lower Gunnison areas for anyone interested. “The river, I mean it can be dangerous, but it can also be really fun for families and different levels of abilities. There’s just some awareness that you wanna have,” said Brake, stressing safety when diving into water activities while the river levels are so high. One main tip from the river surfer is that ankle leashes are meant for trips onto flatwater, such as ponds or lakes. In rivers and moving water, it is important to have a retractable leash that clips to your PFD (personal flotation device) or belt, which can be easily disconnected if need be.

Lombino speaks highly of SOL’s relationship with Brake, and values his read on the river: “He has his hand on the pulse. He’s an instructor for surfing. He’s a wealth of knowledge.” In fact, Brake helped SOL design a few of its boards. A few years ago, explained Brake, the board maker wanted to create a few river surfing-specific boards. “I was shaping boards and worked with one of their employees, and we came up with a couple of different designs.” At Montrose Surf +Cycle, Brake sells and rents boards, and also offers some repair services. Starting in July and running until August, the local shop also plans to offer free surf nights on Wednesdays at the water sports park, where they will provide rental gear and instructors to help teach river safety. The Montrose shop also offers river surfing and SUP lessons. “We offer lessons for a lot of this stuff at a pretty affordable price,” said Brake. “You can kinda get

to a higher level in the sport really quick if you get taught something from somebody else versus just kinda going out and trying to figure it out.” The shop’s surf-van can be found at Riverbottom Park on Friday through Sunday afternoons. **More popular spots for paddleboards** Brake and Lombino both pointed to Ridgway Reservoir as a popular place to go SUPing. Ridgway State Park recently received a grant for reaching out to youth groups in order to “give them the opportunity to recreate and try out the sport (paddleboarding),” said park manager John Freeborn. This grant from the Colorado Parks Foundation allowed the state park to buy some new gear, including 17 new paddleboards, which boosts their fleet to a solid 28. Last year the park purchased floating wheelchairs to increase its outreach. While these boards are reserved for school field trips and educational purposes, RIGS Fly Shop

& Guide Service out of Ridgway — independent of the park — rents out paddleboards for those looking to try the sport out on the reservoir. This year, the fly shop will begin offering these services June 10. Freeborn shares that they typically set up down at the Dallas Creek section of the park and at the swim beach at Dutch Charlie, which are popular spots for paddleboarding. The park manager also noted that the Fourth of July unsurprisingly kicks off their busiest SUPing season, with holidays and weekends being the most crowded. “Anytime is good,” said Freeborn on the best time of year for SUPing. “If you’re looking to get out and enjoy the day and you’re pretty novice ... I would say right around the first part of July.” While the reservoir promises beautiful mountain views, paddlers can also head north for a fun experience on the water. Daniel Roman, owner of Western Slope SUP in Hotchkiss, recommended



Humans aren’t the only ones who can enjoy paddle boarding at Crawford State Park. (Courtesy photo/Western Slope SUP)

Delta County’s Crawford State Park. “That’s our favorite place to paddle,” he said, and the park’s location near the North Rim of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park means people can spend half a day paddling, then explore some of the canyon. His company, which can be found at westernslope-sup.com, even offers full-moon paddles at the state park, including one tonight at 7:30 p.m. Roman also said there are a handful of lakes on the Grand Mesa — the most famous of which is Island Lake — which paddlers can find by driving on Highway 65 until they see one they like. If you plan on exploring the local lakes on a board, however, there are a few important things to note. Aside from a PFD, a sound-producing device, such as a whistle, is required on your board as well, stated Freeborn. “You have to have your name and address written on your vessel,” he advised,

“someplace permanently.” “SUPing I think is a little easier to get into and maybe a little less intimidating ‘cause you can just go to a pond or a lake and, like, try it out. It’s not a real high-skilled entry,” said Brake. “There’s still some safety stuff to pay attention to, but for the most part flatwater is pretty safe.” “People can still have a lot of fun right now when choosing the right paddle places for the time of year,” emphasized Lombino, who says you can always reach SOL at 970-728-1417 or email him directly at johnny@solpaddle.com for advice and information. Brake said that Montrose Surf + Cycle, located at 245 West Main St., is also always available to help you plan your future trips out on the water. “We try to be really helpful and give people information when they need it and it’s not a spot where, like, you have to buy something to figure out where to go to float. We wanna help people out and get people out in nature having fun.”

