



November 12, 2004

Wildlife at national antelope refuge doing well according to recent population surveys

By Lee Juillerat

HART MOUNTAIN - Even a short visit outdoors confirms what the numbers on paper indicate - wildlife is thriving at the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge.

Recent surveys indicate populations of pronghorn antelope, California bighorn sheep and sage grouse are healthy and on the rise at the Lake County refuge. More impressively, it's not unusual for visitors to see hundreds of pronghorn grazing or running along refuge lands.

"To me it's an indication that management at Hart Mountain is making a difference," said Mike Dunn, manager for the Hart Mountain-Sheldon National Wildlife Refuges Complex.

Survival rates for pronghorn fawns, which fell to perilously low levels in the late 1990s, have significantly rebounded over the past four years. Based on counts done earlier this year, the refuge has 2,474 pronghorn, with this year's ratio of fawns to does a healthy 58 per 100. A survival rate of 30 to 32 fawns per 100 does is necessary to maintain existing populations.

Combined with the nearby Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and other adjoining lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Land Management, the pronghorn population for the biological unit is estimated at 5,196.

"Coyote numbers are still down so fawns are surviving," Dunn said of the prime factor why pronghorn numbers are increasing.

Likewise, he said bighorn sheep are "holding their own" while sage grouse populations continue to climb.

"Sage grouse numbers are way up, pronghorn numbers are up, and that's important because they're a couple of the indicator species we manage for," Dunn said. "The whole habitat at Hart Mountain is better."

This year marks the 10th anniversary of a management plan that bans livestock grazing from the refuge for 15 years. The plan reversed a decades-long policy that permitted thousands of cattle to graze during the summer months. The 1994 management plan, which was bitterly contested by ranchers and Lake County government agencies, established a 15-year ban on grazing. A determination on whether or not to again allow grazing will be made in 2009, or whenever the plan is updated.

Nunn believes the removal of livestock is a major factor, but says the removal of fences, a stepped-up fire management program, the ending of a drought and other factors have contributed to increased wildlife numbers.

"If you look at it purely biologically I think it's better," Nunn said of habitat conditions. "But what I can't say is. Was livestock is the most important thing, was fire management the most important thing, was removing fences the most important thing? What I can say is overall it's better."

When the management plan was implemented, the refuge and much of southeastern Oregon was mired in a years-long drought. Ironically, the drought ended almost immediately after the plan was implemented.

In the past decade, volunteers have removed 188 of the 208 miles of fences that were used to control cattle. Fences, however, hinder pronghorn movement.

"If you're going to graze, you have to fence to manage," Nunn explained.

Prescribed burns done to improve wildlife habitat have also increased, going from 211 acres in 1993 to 2,861 in 1994. Since then, more than a thousand acres has been burned in seven other years.

Nunn doesn't expect that livestock grazing, at least on a large-scale basis, will again be permitted at Hart Mountain.

"I'm sure that's going to be the main topic of discussion in the next planning session," Nunn said. "Even at Hart Mountain there are meadows that would be better if grazed, but it's so small-scale economically I can't see anybody doing that."

While he said pronghorn are benefiting from several factors, Nunn admitted refuge biologists are evaluating and experimenting with methods of improving sage grouse habitat.

"We're trying to get it back to a more natural system where we have sagebrush, forbs and grasses intermixed. I personally think sage grouse are doing better on the refuge than on surrounding lands," Nunn said.

He and refuge biologist Rachelle Huddleston-Lorton said surveys at sage grouse leks - areas where males gather each spring to attract females for mating - indicate strong increases in grouse numbers. They credit the increases, in part, to the increased use of refuge staff and volunteers at the 49 leks, with each lek visited at least three times.

"By all accounts it seems like sage grouse counts are up," she said, noting the Hart Mountain population is estimated at about 4,178 with the number of males up from 1,038 in 2003 to 1,671 this year.

Huddleston-Lorton said a bighorn sheep census last summer resulted in a population estimate of 353. The numbers are high enough that the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife plans to collect and relocate 20 bighorns to other areas in early December.