



Excellence in Wildlife Stewardship Through Science and Education

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Weeks of Friday, August 30th through September 20th 2013

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<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Wildlife-Society-New-Mexico-Chapter/122478411098284>

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1. Mexican Gray Wolves Gain Protection in Arizona, New Mexico

Posted by News Editor in Latest News, RSS, Wildlife on August 26, 2013 7:16 pm

SILVER CITY, New Mexico, August 26, 2013 (ENS) – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will propose increased recovery territory for Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico and will drop plans to capture wolves entering these two states from Mexico, under two agreements reached today between the agency and the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity.

The agency has agreed to finalize a rule to allow direct release of captive Mexican gray wolves into New Mexico and to allow Mexican wolves to establish territories in an expanded area of the two states.

“These agreements should breathe new life into the struggling Mexican wolf recovery program and expand the wolf’s habitat here,” said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. “The Mexican gray wolf is an icon of the Southwest and I’m thrilled it will have better protection.”

One settlement was reached in a lawsuit challenging a permit the Service granted itself in November 2011 authorizing the trapping and indefinite incarceration of any wolves entering Arizona and New Mexico from Mexico.

The Mexican government has been releasing endangered Mexican gray wolves a several miles south of the border, and these wolves could establish territories in the United States at any time.

Under the agreement reached today, the Fish and Wildlife Service rescinded the permit and agreed that it lacks the authority to issue a permit to capture fully protected endangered gray wolves entering the United States from Mexico.

“Our agreement provides important protection to endangered Mexican gray wolves by stopping this little-known government plan to capture wolves that enter Arizona and New Mexico from Mexico,” said Robinson.

The second agreement concerns a revision to a 1998 rule for managing about 75 wolves that have been reintroduced into a small area in central Arizona and New Mexico called the “Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area.”

After years of delay, the Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to change the rule to allow direct release of wolves into the Gila National Forest in New Mexico, where there is extensive habitat, and to expand the area where wolves are allowed to establish territories to include all of Arizona and New Mexico between Interstate 10 and Interstate 40.

Under the agreement this rule will be finalized by January 12, 2015.

The current rule requires that wolves from the captive pool can only be released in Arizona, and they are captured if they establish territories outside the current recovery area.

Scientists and conservationists are objecting to the fact that the rule will still require capture of wolves that cross I-40 or I-10 from the recovery area.

“We’re glad the Fish and Wildlife Service is finally making much needed changes to the Mexican wolf recovery program but these changes clearly don’t go far enough,” said Robinson.

“The science is clear that if Mexican gray wolves are to have any shot at recovery, they must be allowed to expand and establish population centers beyond what Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed,” he said. “The Grand Canyon, southern Rockies and borderlands all provide habitat where wolves could be restored. We sure hope the Fish and Wildlife Service will allow wolves to move into these areas.”

This summer, members of the Interagency Field Team documented denning behavior in nine Mexican wolf packs in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area. As of early June, at least 19 pups in five packs were documented. As the pups get older, the IFT will attempt to capture pups, administer vaccines, and affix pup size radio collars to monitor survival.

The agency had hoped to have at least 100 Mexican gray wolves in the wild by 2006, but illegal shooting, captures in response to livestock conflicts and restrictions on where wolves can be released from captivity have blocked that goal.

The permit, now rescinded, would have allowed for more captures to respond to wolf-livestock conflicts. Robinson says research shows such conflicts are better dealt with through changes in animal husbandry that reduce the likelihood that wolves and livestock will come into contact.

Gray wolves, a different subspecies, are also still at risk, conservationists argue. They warn that gray wolf recovery in the United States is not complete after hunters and trappers nearly wiped out the species.

By the middle of the 20th century, few wolves existed in the Lower 48 states. Only several hundred gray wolves in Minnesota and an isolated population on Michigan’s Isle Royale remained, with a few red wolves and an occasional Mexican gray wolf reported.

Both the Mexican gray wolf and the red wolf were eventually completely eliminated in the wild, and prior to recent reintroduction efforts, existed only in captivity.

Gray wolves in the Lower 48 states now number about 5,000. Except for the Minnesota population of several thousand, all wolves in the Lower 48 states currently are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

But in June, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to remove Endangered Species Act protection for most gray wolves across the United States, changing the future of gray wolf recovery and conservation.

The Service said, “Four decades of work by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners to protect and recover the gray wolf, *Canis lupus*, have

successfully brought the species back from the brink of extinction in the western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountains.”

The Service will continue federal protection and expand recovery efforts for the Mexican wolf in the Southwest by proposing to designate the Mexican wolf as an endangered subspecies under the Endangered Species Act and to modify existing regulations governing this population.

Outside of that recovery area, management and protection of wolves would be returned to state wildlife management agency professionals, following approved wolf management plans in states where wolves occur or are likely to occur in the future, the Service said.

But conservationists say wolves still need federal protection and argue that the states are not managing them responsibly. “These wolves face rabid anti-wolf politics, aggressive lethal control, unsustainable hunting, intolerance and other threats across the entire country, and haven’t yet returned to suitable habitat in many parts of their historic range,” says the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife. “By delisting them now, USFWS would be turning their backs on one of the best wildlife conservation stories in U.S. history before it’s finished.”

The two proposed delisting rules were published in the Federal Register on June 13, 2013. The Service welcomes public comment, which will be accepted through 11:59 p.m. on September 11, 2013. Guidance on how to provide comment is provided here. Please visit www.regulations.gov to view all Federal Register notices, and to submit an electronic comment.

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Article link: <http://ens-newswire.com/2013/08/26/mexican-gray-wolves-gain-protection-in-arizona-new-mexico/>

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2. Deadly Diseases Could Strike Bighorn Sheep

Released: 8/28/2013 1:18:09 PM

Contact Information:

U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey
Office of Communications and Publishing
12201 Sunrise Valley Dr, MS 119
Reston, VA 20192

Gail Moede Rogall Phone: 608-270-2438

Marisa Lubeck Phone: 303-202-4765

Declining bighorn sheep populations may be vulnerable to some of the fatal diseases, including chronic wasting disease (CWD), that are found in their western U.S. habitats, according to a new U.S. Geological Survey study.

USGS National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) research showed that bighorn sheep are likely susceptible to the deadly neurological diseases scrapie and CWD, which are occurring in or near natural bighorn sheep environments. These fatal diseases are caused by mysterious proteins called prions, and are known to infect domestic sheep (scrapie) and non-domestic deer, elk, and moose (CWD). The USGS study is published in the journal BMC Veterinary Research, and is available online.

"Bighorn sheep are economically and culturally important to the western U.S.," said Dr. Christopher Johnson, USGS scientist and senior author of the report. "Understanding future risks to the health of bighorn sheep is key to proper management of the species."

USGS laboratory tests found evidence that bighorn sheep could be vulnerable to CWD from either white-tailed deer or elk, and to a domestic sheep prion disease known as scrapie. However, none of a small number of bighorn sheep sampled in the study showed evidence of infection.

"Our results do not mean that bighorns get, or will eventually get, prion diseases," Johnson said. "However, wildlife species like bighorn sheep are increasingly exposed to areas where CWD occurs as the disease expands to new geographical areas and increases in prevalence."

The laboratory test results could be useful to wildlife managers because bighorn sheep habitats overlap with farms and ranches with scrapie-infected sheep and regions where CWD is common in deer, elk, and moose.

Bighorn sheep populations in western North America have declined from habitat loss and, more recently, epidemics of fatal pneumonia thought to be transmitted to them from domestic sheep. Prion diseases are another possible threat to this valuable species.

For more information on prion diseases such as CWD, please visit the USGS NWHC website.

Article link: <http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=3676>

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3. Wildlife biologists investigating mass elk deaths

Posted at: 08/29/2013 10:34 AM | Updated at: 08/29/2013 12:00 PM
By: Elizabeth Reed, KOB.com

LAS VEGAS, N.M. -- The Department of Game and Fish is investigating the deaths of more than 100 elk discovered in northeastern New Mexico.

Department biologists traveled to the area near Las Vegas after hearing reports of the carcasses on Tuesday morning. The biologists found at least 100 dead elk in a half-mile area. Tissue and water samples from the area were taken and delivered to the state veterinary lab for analysis.

"At this time we're looking into all possible causes, including epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD)," said Kerry Mower, the department's wildlife disease specialist. "What we do know from aerial surveys is that the die-off appears to be confined to a relatively small area, and that the elk were not shot by poachers."

EHD is a sometimes fatal virus that affects deer, elk, pronghorn antelope and rarely cattle. The disease has been found throughout the United States and has been known to kill large numbers of animals in short periods of time.

The department advises hunters who hold licenses for Unit 46 to be vigilant for deer, elk or antelope that have unusual behavior or appear sick. Hunters should not harvest those animals, and should report anything unusual to the department's toll-free information line, (888)-248-6866.

Article link: <http://www.kob.com/article/stories/S3143439.shtml?cat=504>

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4. Report: U.S. fish won't survive warmer water

By Spencer Hunt
The Columbus Dispatch Thursday September 5, 2013 8:00 AM

About half of the habitat that supports fish in Ohio and nationwide no longer will do so by the end of the century because of rising water temperatures and more-extreme storms caused by climate change, according to a new report.

The National Wildlife Federation released the report yesterday as part of the advocacy group's push for stronger government action to cut pollutants linked to

climate change and for stronger conservation measures for waterways nationwide.

The report describes a grim future for fish.

In Ohio, species will be unable to live in increasingly warmer streams and in a growing oxygen-depleted dead zone in Lake Erie.

“Climate change is changing habitats,” said Doug Inkley, a National Wildlife Federation senior scientist and a co-author of the report.

What’s at stake? Sport fishing and the revenue tied to it, for one thing. In 2011, people spent \$25.7 billion on fishing in the United States.

The report shows a national fishing economy beset by problems such as shrinking Western mountain snow packs that melt one to four weeks earlier than they did 50 years ago. That alters streams fed by snowmelt and affects fish migration and spawning cycles.

At the same time, severe wildfires in Southwestern states choke streams and fish with ash and sediment, while warmer winters cause later lake freezes, shortening ice-fishing seasons.

In Ohio, an estimated 1.16 million people who fished in 2011 spent more than \$1 billion on the sport, according to the report. Most of that estimate comes from Lake Erie’s charter-boat industry.

Fish species that prefer cold-water habitats face the biggest threat.

Rising water temperatures would undermine stream restorations that are underway. So far, \$6 million in federal funds has been spent to remove toxins from the Black River near Lorain. Steel mills, shuttered years ago, polluted the waterways.

Inkley said 11 of 22 species that live in the restored stream, including yellow perch, white perch and smallmouth bass, could not survive higher temperatures.

Ohio spends \$750,000 a year to stock as many as 30,000 brown trout in three streams — Mad River, the Clear Fork of the Mohican River and Clear Creek. That money also pays for stocking 100,000 rainbow trout each year in 69 lakes across the state.

Mark Bruce, an Ohio Department of Natural Resources spokesman, said the agency keeps track of water temperatures to ensure that they remain good for fish. So far, so good, he said.

“We want to ensure that (fish) are surviving so that they can be caught,” Bruce said.

Inkley and Ohio researchers say climate change is already threatening fish in Lake Erie. The threat comes from more-powerful and frequent storms that wash fertilizers off northwestern Ohio farm fields.

Those fertilizers help grow huge blooms of toxic blue-green algae, which rob the water of oxygen when they decompose.

“It can be a contributing factor that lowers the number of fish that Lake Erie can support and produce,” said Chris Winslow, assistant director of the Ohio Sea Grant program at Ohio State University and the Stone Laboratory on Lake Erie.

The National Wildlife Federation supports measures to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, a key gas linked to climate change, from coal-fired power plants, and it encourages the expansion of wind and solar power.

Inkley said his group also supports programs that set aside and grow trees along stream banks to help shade the water and keep fish cool.

Article link: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/public/2013/09/04/Report-says-climate-change-will-harm-fishing-industry.html>

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5. Lawsuit challenges use of GMO crops and pesticides in U.S. wildlife refuges

By Ron Meador | 09/05/13

The Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District extends over five counties in northwestern Minnesota, and its holdings might be thought of as a series of islands where woods, wetlands and remnants of tallgrass prairie are protected from further losses to agriculture and development.

There's a special focus on maintaining habitat for waterfowl and other bird species native to the region, which has lost an estimated 80 percent of its wetlands and more than 99 percent of its native prairie.

Mammals, reptiles, insects and wildflowers, including the western prairie fringed orchid, are also highlighted in materials about resource management in the district, which is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Now the district itself is highlighted in litigation brought by national environmental groups in a challenge to the planting of genetically engineered crops, and use of new pesticides known as neonicotinoids, on lands within that system.

For decades, some land within the refuges has been cultivated under cooperative arrangements between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and private farmers.

But the shift in recent years to engineered crops and new insecticides has triggered a series of lawsuits, which argue narrowly that FWS has failed to meet legal requirements for reviewing the environmental impact of such practices before permitting them — and, more broadly, that because of their persistence and other special characteristics, they have no place in areas set aside for protection as wildlife habitat.

What's a refuge for?

In a report Tuesday on the Environmental News Service wire, an attorney for the Center for Food Safety put it this way:

“The Fish and Wildlife Service is entrusted with protecting our most vulnerable species. This lawsuit seeks to ensure the agency carries out that mandate and corrects course before irreversible damage is done. Allowing pesticide promoting, genetically engineered crops is antithetical to the basic purpose of our refuge system.”

Other plaintiffs in the case include Beyond Pesticides, the Sierra Club and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Besides the Detroit Lakes WMD, the example refuges — all within the FWS' Midwest Region 3 — are the Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge near Carbondale, Ill.; the Cypress Creek NWR near Ulin, Ill.; the Swan Lake NWR near Sumner, Mo.; and the Iowa WMD, which has holdings in 18 counties in the north-central part of the state.

From the lawsuit:

Region 3 includes 66 refuges and wetland management districts encompassing over 1.2 million acres. The five refuges at issue in this case collectively total over 11,000 acres of the approximate 17,000 farmed acres in Region 3. Row crops are usually cultivated for three to five years on farmland acquired by Region 3 before it is restored to natural habitat. While GE corn and soybeans are among the crops planted during those three to five years, they are typically the only crops planted during the last two years before farmland is restored to natural habitat.

Three to five years? That may leave you wondering, What's the big deal?

A problem of persistence

It's probably fair to say the plaintiff groups never met a genetically engineered crop (or pesticide) they didn't dislike.

But the newer products and practices under challenge in these case are different from those of the past in some key ways, and the plaintiffs' case against them is neither categorical nor fanatical.

Leaving aside the argument over how toxic the herbicide glyphosate (Roundup) may be to amphibians, insects and people, the case raises more mainstream arguments about the impact of genetically engineered, "Roundup ready" crops on plant communities. More excerpts from the complaint [PDF], lightly compressed:

Studies show that cultivation of herbicide-resistant GE crops such as "Roundup Ready" soybeans and corn dramatically increases herbicide use, particularly glyphosate.

Gene flow from GE crops to conventional and organic crops, or transgenic contamination, is one adverse environmental impact stemming from GE crop cultivation. Gene flow occurs in numerous ways, including when a crop disperses its seeds or pollen to propagate itself.

Gene flow results in transgenic contamination of related conventional or organic cultivars or wild species with potentially hazardous or simply unwanted genetically engineered content. There are over 200 documented episodes of transgenic contamination.

Widespread adoption of "Roundup Ready" technology in corn and soybeans [leads] to glyphosate-resistant "superweeds." These superweeds evolve quickly when "Roundup Ready" crops are grown year after year, without break, on the same fields; like bacteria exposed to antibiotics, some weeds naturally resistant to glyphosate will survive exposure, and will then reproduce and flourish. There are reports of glyphosate-resistant weeds in the states in Region 3.

More bad news for bees

The lawsuit also lays special emphasis on neonicotinoids — the insecticides that are designed to be carried throughout a plant's tissues, and are heavily implicated in "colony collapse disorder" among U.S. honeybees:

Ninety-nine percent of corn seed is treated with neonicotinoids; therefore, it is likely that farmers are planting neonicotinoid-treated corn on Refuges. Despite

the overwhelming adoption of neonicotinoid treated corn seed, neonicotinoids are not represented on the Region 3 PUP Field Approval List [of pesticides cleared for use on refuge lands].

Neonicotinoids have been shown to adversely impact more than just managed honey bees—they also impact native bees and beneficial insects, which are critical to supporting pollination services.

Clothianidin and its parent compound thiamethoxam — the two most widely used neonicotinoids — are highly toxic to other bee species like the common Eastern bumble bee, alfalfa leafcutter bee, and blue orchard bee, all of which are valuable plant pollinators. More than 15 threatened or endangered insects, ranging from beetles to butterflies to grasshoppers and other taxa, are potentially directly affected by the use of clothianidin and thiamethoxam products.

Readers who track the worsening problems of honeybees will no doubt make the connection: Besides exposure to "neonics," perhaps the biggest factor driving the die-offs is the disappearance of undeveloped, uncultivated lands that offer abundant foraging opportunity for nectar-seeking bees.

The kind of land, you want to think, our national wildlife refuges would preserve in large quantities, well buffered from the agricultural lands where neonic use is unlikely to change for at least the next several years.

What are the lawsuit's chances? According to the ENS piece cited above, four earlier and similar cases brought by the Center for Food Safety and PEER have "succeeded in rolling back approvals for genetically engineered crops on 75 national wildlife refuges across 30 states."

Previously, the two groups successfully challenged approval of genetically engineered plantings on two wildlife refuges in Delaware, which forced the Fish and Wildlife Service to end such plantings in its 12-state Northeastern region.

Another suit from the same groups halted cultivation of genetically engineered on 25 refuges across eight states in the Southeast in November 2012. In that case, U.S. District Judge James Boasberg directed the Fish and Wildlife Service to reveal where the GE crops were planted on Southeast refuges, their number, the type of crop and the types of pesticides used, including the dates and amounts of application.

Article link: <http://www.minnpost.com/earth-journal/2013/09/lawsuit-challenges-use-gmo-crops-and-pesticides-us-wildlife-refuges>

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6. Wildlife officials plan to crush 6 tons of illegally trafficked ivory

By Associated PressPublished: Sep 12, 2013 at 11:10 AM PDT

DENVER (AP) — Federal wildlife officials plan to crush more than 6 tons of ivory in Denver as part of a new push by the United States to combat illegal wildlife trafficking worldwide.

The ivory that is being stored in a warehouse near Denver was seized around the country in an effort to block imports of tusks from elephants that have been slaughtered for their ivory.

The seized items include large balls of ivory delicately carved in layers and whole tusks that have been sculpted into pagodas and scenes from daily life.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said publicly crushing the expensive smuggled tusks and carvings is part of an effort to put an end to what has become a \$10 billion illegal industry. Steve Oberholtzer, the agency's Denver-based special agent in charge, is lining up rock-grinders to pulverize the ivory in October.

Governments cooperating with the efforts to stem the slaughter of elephants already have destroyed some of the ivory seized from poachers, U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said Monday at a White House forum where the initiative was launched.

"The U.S. supports these actions, and we want to make sure we are doing the same," Jewell said.

President Barack Obama issued an order July 1 to fight the killing of protected wildlife, stop the trafficking, and reduce demand for illegal rhino horns and ivory. Members of a newly created advisory council sketched a broad approach of enlisting governments, companies and nonprofits worldwide, the Denver Post reported Tuesday (<http://tinyurl.com/pzmcz9g>).

U.S. officials said they will also give \$10 million to help fight poaching in Africa and will try to persuade Asian governments to outlaw trinkets and other products made from elephant ivory.

Tactics being considered include using technology to monitor elephants, a social media campaign in China to stigmatize the industry, and cooperation with companies such as eBay to curb commerce.

The National Wildlife Property Repository at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado holds smuggled wildlife parts seized at seaports, border crossings and airports nationwide. Other items seized include leopard and tiger heads, bear claws and crocodile boots.

Much of the ivory no longer fits on shelves. Piles of tusks and boxes full of bracelets and decorations clutter the floor. Forklifts are used to clear pathways between heavy pallets of the plunder.

Some tusks are from young elephants, representing generations lost because elephants cannot reproduce until age 25, and poachers usually kill elephants before sawing off their tusks.

U.S. authorities are prohibited from selling seized items but have debated whether destroying them is the best approach. Ivory selloffs in 2008 and 2010 supported by the 178-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna proved controversial.

Even if U.S. officials could sell seized ivory, some say it would not make a dent in illegal market demand.

Grinding up all ivory in October "will make more room in our warehouse," repository supervisor Bernadette Atencio said, but she fears it will fill again soon.

Federal authorities plan to save some of the pieces of crushed ivory to use in a memorial for the tens of thousands of elephants that have been killed.

Information from: The Denver Post

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Article link: <http://www.katu.com/news/national/6-tons-of-seized-ivory-to-be-crushed-in-Denver-223499421.html>

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7. ENMU Student Wildlife Society hosts second annual Beast Feast

By Kelly Brooks kbrooks@ruidosonews.com

Posted: 09/12/2013 05:12:44 PM MDT

Roasted swine, elk chili and outdoor fun on tap

The spits will be turning and the pigs will be roasting Saturday at the second annual ENMU-Ruidoso Beast Feast.

The feast, an annual event created to help support the ENMU-Ruidoso student chapter of the Wildlife Society, helps fund endeavors like hands-on opportunities for students to work with local wildlife professionals, including biologists from ENMU-Ruidoso, the Lincoln National Forest, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The ENMU-Ruidoso Student Chapter is an active affiliate of The Wildlife Society that is dedicated to promoting management and conservation strategies for wildlife resources," said wildlife biologist and ENMU-Ruidoso Professor Quentin Hayes.

The Wildlife Society was founded in 1937 and celebrated its 75th anniversary last year, Hayes said.

"We formed the student chapter here at the college in 2012," he said. "There are a lot of conservation groups out there but this one is tailored toward resource professionals. Two years ago we worked to found a student chapter. One of my students, Briana All, was important to the formation. We got it off the ground. As we are one of the only two-year colleges that offer a natural resource program in the state, the student chapter of the Wildlife Society provides an opportunity for students to learn from biologists and other professionals. It creates a learning community where students have that shared interest and can spend time together and learn together and have greater success in their academic studies as well."

Hayes said the student chapter came up with idea to have a fundraiser hoping to build on that experience.

"It's educational for folks, community building for students and just a fun time." he said. "The money we raise goes back into the chapter so members can engage in learning activities, leadership workshops, wildlife training workshops. This is the sort of thing that is really important -- to grow these learning communities."

Hays said chapter members also are active community participants and have volunteered during Recycling Week and assisted with the Ruidoso Kite Festival and the Cowboy Symposium. Membership is open to students and all professionals interested in wildlife research, management and education.

The Beast Feast will be held at Cedar Creek Campground No. 3 from 4 to 8 p.m. on Saturday and features two smoked and roasted pigs with sides and drinks, elk chili, a scavenger hunt, horseshoes and raffles, including a guided Barbary sheep hunt.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Mescalero Apache Fisheries Department will have booths and will be making presentations throughout the event.

In addition, the Wildlife Society ENMU-Ruidoso chapter is holding a silent auction that began on Sept. 3 at the ENMU-Ruidoso campus. Organizers have extended the auction end until Friday, Sept. 20. Items include framed photography, antlers, a skeet shooting package, gift certificates and more.

Hayes said organizers are hoping to beat last year's attendance.

"We had between 50 and 60 people show up and we had a great time," he said. "We're definitely hoping the event will continue to grow. This is a way to raise funds and have fun."

Tickets can be purchased from the cashier's office at the ENMU-Ruidoso Campus for \$15 and include an entry into a raffle. Tickets for children 12 and younger are free. All proceeds benefit The Wildlife Society of ENMU-Ruidoso.

Reporter Kelly Brooks can be reached at 575-257-4001 ext. 4114.

Article link: http://www.ruidosonews.com/ruidoso-milestones/ci_24082470/enmu-student-wildlife-society-hosts-second-annual-beast

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8. A quest to save the snow leopard

By Kevin Sieff Published: 21:30 September 12, 2013

In Afghanistan, an environmental group is attempting to better understand one of the most vulnerable species in the world

Two decades after he first aimed his rifle at one of the world's rarest mammals, Karmal was again on the hunt for the elusive snow leopard.

Stalking through the mountains of northeastern Afghanistan, he was getting closer. There were paw prints in the sand and scratch marks on the limestone boulders, signs that the leopard was marking its territory. Karmal knew it could be anywhere, peering down at him from an unseen bluff. He moved quietly.

But this time, Karmal wasn't carrying a gun. He held a metal snare that he would use to trap the animal. After Karmal caught the animal, it would be tagged with a GPS collar and tracked as it traversed Afghanistan's hinterlands.

When the Taliban was toppled nearly 12 years ago and US forces surged into Afghanistan, a small number of biologists saw an opportunity on the margins of the war effort. The country's far reaches had barely been examined and were thought to contain some of the world's least understood species. But studying them would require complex, and sometimes tense, negotiations with some of the world's most isolated people.

"It was like a black box," said biologist Christopher Shank, who worked in Afghanistan in the 1970s and returned after the fall of the Taliban.

When they arrived in the Wakhan corridor, scientists learned that local hunters had targeted snow leopard, ibex and Marco Polo sheep populations. The foreign experts met men like Karmal, who killed the animals for their pelts, for food or simply for sport.

But when the scientists set up motion-sensor cameras to gauge what kinds of animals remained, they were shocked. Persian leopards still lurked in the mountains of central Afghanistan, a fact no biologist had surmised. Snow leopards had endured in the Wakhan, possibly becoming one of world's most vital populations of the species.

The biologists received funding from the US government to set up small camps in the remote corridor and to hire wildlife rangers who would help monitor and protect the species of the Wakhan. That's how Karmal ended up hunting snow leopards with a GPS collar instead of a gun.

"It still feels strange sometimes," said Karmal, who uses one name, like many Afghans. "But it's my job, and I like it."

With fighting still heated a year before US forces are due to withdraw from Afghanistan, wildlife conservation is no doubt a peripheral concern to most American and Afghan officials. But in addition to its scientific importance, the effort is at the forefront of concerns here in the Wakhan, where the Taliban is nonexistent. The preservation campaign is a source of jobs, pride and occasionally, conflict.

If the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the only source of Western funds in much of the Wakhan, loses financial support as the war winds down, dozens of wildlife rangers will lose their jobs. If hunters again prevail over conservationists, the trickle of foreign tourists could abruptly dry up.

With Congress due to determine its financial pledge to Afghanistan this autumn, the future of the wildlife effort remains uncertain. Karmal knows that this summer could be his last time hunting snow leopards without a gun.

He says he won't return to shooting the animals — that the notion of conservation resonates with him. But other residents of the Wakhan don't share his commitment. Environmental protection, they say, often feels like an imposition on a traditional way of life.

Last year, a snow leopard leapt into Hassan Beg's corral and slaughtered 12 of his sheep — a massive blow to his family's livelihood in a place that measures wealth in livestock. He wanted to shoot the animal, to save his sheep. Fifteen years ago, that's what he would have done.

"But now, I knew I'd be arrested. I knew the conservation people wouldn't allow it," Beg said.

He isn't the only one conflicted about the rare animals. In the village of Qal-a-Panja, many residents complain about snow leopard attacks. Jama Gul lost six sheep and four goats. Faizal lost three sheep and a goat.

The men say they value the corridor's snow leopards, but in a place where survival can be difficult, they're entitled to do what's necessary to keep their animals alive. Residents sometimes clash with the newly initiated Afghan conservationists, as they did in a recent meeting.

"Wildlife Conservation Society is helping the snow leopards survive, but they're very dangerous. They're killing our animals," Faizal said.

"They are killing your animals because for decades you hunted all of their prey. They have nothing else to eat," responded Hafizullah Noori, a research assistant with the conservation society.

The split between the two groups exists in some form wherever the WCS has worked in Afghanistan. But the biologists say it's typically not a big problem.

"We see a bit of this, but really, looking across the six years I've been in Wakhan, it's insignificant and on the whole there's very good support for conservation," said Anthony Simms, a technical adviser for the conservation society. "This can be demonstrated by the fact, for example, that there's virtually no hunting these days."

WCS has done research showing that snow leopard attacks account for less than 0.1 per cent of yearly livestock losses in Wakhan.

The organisation has helped create some of Afghanistan's first "protected areas" — places of particular biological importance, where the environment remains pristine. In Bamiyan province, one of them now draws thousands of domestic tourists every year. In the Wakhan, biologists say, hundreds of square miles of nearly unpopulated grassland present another opportunity to preserve something wholly unique in Afghanistan. Already, one protected area there has been formalised.

"Wakhan is well worth protecting for the sake of Afghanistan's natural and cultural heritage," Simms said.

The last time conservation was discussed in the Wakhan was in the 1970s, when King Zahir Shah opened a luxury hunting lodge for Western visitors. Now, posters of Afghanistan plastered in embassies abroad bear the photos of the new parks, unspoiled wilderness that the country is eager to promote.

Zahir Shah's grandson, Mustafa Zahir, is now the head of the country's nascent National Environmental Protection Agency, overseeing conservation efforts.

"There's no place in the world like this," he said on a recent visit to the Wakhan.

But the future of Afghanistan's protected areas is as uncertain as the country's fragile political or security situation, and the work of conservationists is still incomplete. Snow leopard pelts can still be easily purchased in downtown Kabul. Last year, a border police commander stole a wild Marco Polo sheep from the Wakhan and tied him to a tree in his front yard.

Karmal knows all about the challenges facing his own job and the cause he's come to champion. But he's still proud of what he's done, tracing the footsteps of the species he knows well.

"It's important work," he said. "This is a population that matters to us, and to everyone."

—Washington Post

Article link: <http://gulfnews.com/about-gulf-news/al-nisr-portfolio/weekend-review/a-quest-to-save-the-snow-leopard-1.1230216>

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9. How Is Colorado Flooding Affecting Birds and Other Wildlife?

By Alisa Opar Published: 09/19/2013

Humans fared far worse than avian species from the unprecedented weather.

From his mountain cabin on Middle St. Vrain Creek in Colorado, Steve Bouricius watched as the stream flow swelled from 12 cubic feet per second to more than 1,000 cubic feet per second last week. Standing by the river, which drains out of the foothills north of Boulder, he heard and felt boulders crashing into rocks as they rolled downstream, and saw water eroding soil and uprooting trees. The torrent tore an American dipper nest box, its post sunk in a concrete base in the channel, out of the ground and swept it downstream.

An aquatic songbird, the American dipper catches insects and small fish by diving and swimming in swiftly moving streams (it dips its head under water up to 60 times a minute while foraging, hence its name). It might be the avian species hit hardest by the unprecedented rains and flooding in Colorado.

"During flood events the violent rush of water forces dippers to seek food in side channels and areas flooded beyond the normal stream bank," said Bouricius, who has installed dipper nest boxes in streams throughout the state.

Bouricius saw the birds avoiding the violent waters, spending more time catching flies and foraging for spiders in the streamside foliage. The conditions could hurt juveniles and adults that are molting, he said. In the longer-term, the flooding might render some of their territories uninhabitable.

It'll take time to gauge how dippers and other animals fared during and after storm, but by and large, wildlife seems to have largely escaped the devastation that the extreme weather wreaked on humans.

Six people have been confirmed dead, 201 are missing, and more than 18,000 were forced to leave their homes, according to the Colorado Office of Emergency Management. Sewage treatment plants have overflowed, damaged oil and gas pipelines are leaking, and at least 50 bridges and 200 miles of roads were damaged, the Denver Post reports.

Near Denver there was "minimal impact to wildlife at the refuges," said Fish and Wildlife Service press officer Steve Segin. Earlier this week, a spokesperson for the Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife said that employees were focusing on helping humans and wildlife reports hadn't started coming in. Biologists aren't

anticipating big fish kills, but fishermen may see new species in some spots since usually separated waterbodies came into contact.

"For many of the birds in the general region, the heavy rains will have been no more than an inconvenience," said Kenn Kaufman, avian expert and Audubon field editor.

Because this flooding came after the nesting season, there weren't a lot of vulnerable nestlings and fledglings, said Kaufman. And birds can easily fly away from the flash floods that ripped out bridges and swept away homes--so long as the rapidly rising water came during the daytime. As for migrants, many of those that would've stopped along the affected riparian habitats likely shifted to other areas. "Migrants tend to be pretty flexible in their choices of where to stop while migrating," said Kaufman.

Some, however, were trapped. Ted Floyd, editor of *Birding*, the magazine of the American Birding Association, kept a keen eye out for avian activity in Boulder County. "Practically everything has been grounded," he said on Monday. "There's really no movement of birds to speak of. You go outside and hear Wilson's warblers chittering away in the bushes."

Another migrant was more daring. "Barn swallows are everywhere, flying low to ground," said Floyd. "They're harrassing other birds to try to flush insects. At a marsh by my house I saw them chasing a pied-billed grebe, trying to knock off insects."

While some of the birds might not survive, Floyd doesn't expect that the wet spell will hurt their populations in the long run. "Deforestation in Canada or use of insecticides in North America has a much more harmful effect on barn swallows or Wilson's warblers than a nasty storm in the Rockies," he says.

Most avian mortality comes after a flood. "Birds survive the initial displacement, but then they're at a disadvantage because they're on unfamiliar ground, more vulnerable to predators, perhaps unable to find food readily," said Kaufman.

"We aren't worried that one population is going to blink out," said Alison Holloran, director of science for Audubon Rockies. "We'll certainly lose a few individual birds, of that I am sure. But nature is incredibly resilient."

Many of the areas affected are in the flood plains of the South Platte and the Poudre rivers, but they haven't experienced flooding in decades or more because of dams and other water diversions. Historically, flooding would have created seasonal wetlands and scoured large areas, creating a diversity of habitat in riparian stretches important for migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, and neotropical birds. "This event gives us a chance to reflect on what do we need to do to restore and protect our habitats around rivers," says Holloran.

Recent events exacerbated the flooding, which were triggered by widespread torrential rains. In all, at least five inches of rain pounded down on 17 counties in just a few days. The storm brought Boulder's annual precipitation up to more than 30 inches--more than half falling since September 9--eclipsing the previous record of 29.93 inches set in 1995. Much of the state has been plagued with persistent drought, and the dry conditions, coupled with recent forest fires, made it harder for the ground to absorb the water.

That's something that a new partnership aims to address. In July, the federal government announced a pilot project in the Upper Colorado Headwaters and Big Thompson watershed in Northern Colorado that will reduce the risks of wildfire to the water supply by restoring forest and watershed health.

"Doing nothing brings peril not only to the habitat we have left and the wildlife that depend on it, but to humans as well," says Holloran. "We have to restore and protect our watersheds."

Article link: <http://www.audubonmagazine.org/articles/nature/how-colorado-flooding-affecting-birds-and-other-wildlife>

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10. Fungal Faces of Death

by Justine E. Hausheer @justinehausheer • September 19, 2013

First frogs. Then bats and bees. Now a fungus is after snakes, too.

Fungi are giving wildlife a real beating these days. Chytrid is walloping frog and salamander species worldwide, and here in the United States, white-nose syndrome, caused by an invasive European fungus, has killed millions of bats on the East Coast and is spreading west. Also worth mentioning is the nosema fungus, which may play in colony collapse disorder, a phenomenon devastating bees, and potentially the crops they pollinate, across the globe.

Now a fungal pathogen could be after our snakes, too. And it's not pretty.

Snake fungal disease, or SFD, is a little-known illness leaving snakes with gruesome, often-fatal skin lesions. First documented in 2008 on a rat snake in Georgia, the fungus has since infected at least seven snake species in 11 states, and scientists think it could spread. Within affected regions—mostly in the Northeast and Midwest—researchers are quickly assessing their snake populations and looking for signs of illness. These range from small bumps to severe blisters on the skin, cloudy eyes, lesions along the snake's body, and facial deformities around the eyes and nose. (Illinois' massasauga rattlesnakes

seem especially vulnerable to the disease, suffering from grotesque facial disfigurement and near-certain death.)

“It’s got everyone worked up and worried about what the heck is going on,” says Doug Blodgett, a wildlife biologist for Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. So far biologists there have discovered the fungus only on the state’s endangered timber rattlesnakes, but they think more species are at risk.

Without the timber rattler, the Northeast would lose its only rattlesnake, an important player in the region’s forests (see “Tick, Rattle, and Roll”). The snake’s numbers plummeted in the 20th century thanks to bounty programs that put a price on its skin. Making matters worse, development has isolated populations of the species from each other, and low genetic diversity within those groups has put the species as a whole in a precarious position. “We are already in trouble,” says Blodgett, “and I’m concerned this might be a tipping point.”

The main suspect behind the serpent sickness is the fungus *Ophidiomyces ophiodiicola*, but scientists have yet to positively identify the killer. *O. ophiodiicola* has been found on infected animals, but researchers need to prove that it’s the true culprit, because wild snakes are typically covered with many different types of fungi. So Jeff Lorch, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and his colleagues at the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison are testing both healthy and sick snakes from different parts of the country to see if *O. ophiodiicola* consistently comes along with the disease’s characteristic lesions and deformities. They are also developing a DNA probe—a genetic marker for the fungus—that they will use to detect if the fungus is, in fact, penetrating the reptile’s skin on a microscopic level.

Another mystery is why this fungus is striking now. Could it be teaming up with another pathogen to deliver a one-two punch to the reptiles, much as some scientists think the noseema fungus might work together with viruses and pesticides to kill honeybees? Tom French, an assistant director at Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife, says a virus could be weakening the immune system of snakes, allowing the fungus to take hold. Because the snakes often emerge from hibernation in spring with more severe infections, he says, it’s possible that the animals carrying a virus might be more vulnerable to types of fungi that thrive in the cool, damp dens where snakes spend the winter.

Meanwhile, Lorch and his colleagues are trying to determine whether or not the pathogen is invasive to North America, or if it’s a native fungus that has suddenly become more virulent—and if so, why? “If *O. ophiodiicola* and SFD are native to North America,” he says, “then it’s possible that environmental events such as climate change could be exacerbating the disease.” Either way, Lorch notes, the environment always plays a role in disease ecology. But at least for now, the reason behind the epidemic has slithered from our grasp.

Article link: <http://www.onearth.org/articles/2013/09/what-the-fungi-not-our-snakes-too>

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11. Volunteers wanted to serve on Habitat Stamp Program Citizens Advisory Committee – applications due October 5th

There are five committees, each made up of seven people and each serving 3-year staggered terms. The committees meet once a year in April-May and attend field trips. The State Game Commission will make the appointments at its November meeting.

For more information or to obtain an application, please see the following New Mexico Department of Game and Fish website:

http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/conservation/habitat_stamp_program/index.htm

To apply, fill out the application found at the above website and submit to Dale Hall (dale.hall@state.nm.us) by October 5th.