



# Upper Snake Region Annual Habitat Report

## 2011 Activities and Accomplishments

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WMA Webpage

[http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/  
public/wildlife/wma/](http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/wma/)

Upper Snake Region Web-  
page

[http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/  
public/about/offices/?  
getPage=171](http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/about/offices/?getPage=171)

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**Greetings.....**and thanks for your interest in our fifth annual Regional Habitat Report. This is a brief summary of our activities to help folks better understand the habitat resources in the Upper Snake and know what's being done by IDFG to manage them. Habitat management isn't flashy but we have a deep conviction that "habitat is where it's at." As a veteran wildlife biologist once said, "we can't manage wildlife with parking lots and computers." Truly spoken. It takes real habitat, a resource that shrinks a little every day. Access for fishing and hunting is also part of our program. If you find this newsletter interesting, please tell your friends or pass it along. We can most effectively serve the public when you are informed and involved, so if you have questions or want to share your thoughts, please give us a call.

## North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) was passed in 1989 to provide support for the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. NAWCA is an incentive-based, landowner- friendly program that fosters the development of public-private partnerships to protect North America's migratory bird habitat. This act was authorized to provide grants to individuals and organizations who wish to do wetland conservation. It is a federal cost-share program that provides a 1-1 match for every state or private dollar invested. Money is used to protect, manage, and restore wetland habitat for wildlife that depend upon wetlands to survive.

In July of 2008, the Henry's Fork NAWCA II grant had funds available for trumpeter swan enhancement along the Henrys Fork Snake River area. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (Department) was approached by Teton Regional Land Trust (TRLT), the Trumpeter Swan Society, and other stake holders in the grant and asked to spend approximately \$13,000 to enhance trumpeter swan habitat on the Sand Creek Wildlife Management Area (SCWMA). This money was combined with operating budgets at SCWMA, and the work was completed in November 2008. Work included rebuilding nesting islands, resurfacing dam roads, and replacing two culverts and headgates.

After the work in 2008, more infrastruc-

ture on Fish and Game managed lands were inventoried and assessed. Fish and Game worked with TRLT in the Henrys Fork NAWCA III grant to help restore these areas. Sand Creek WMA in Fremont County, as well as Market Lake WMA in Jefferson County, applied for restoration money as part of the new grant. The application was accepted and over \$85,000 has been awarded and both WMAs are in the process of restoring and improving these great wetland complexes.

[NAWCA and Sand Creek  
Wildlife Management Area](#)

Sand Creek WMA boasts some of the best trumpeter swan nesting habitat in Eastern Idaho but it wasn't always so. In the 1950's, water control infrastructure was installed and dams were constructed to assist in converting old agricultural grounds into productive wetlands. These have functioned well for the last 60 years but were in need of major repair.

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## Our Mission

***"Our mission is to protect and improve wildlife habitat at the landscape level for the benefit of current and future generations."***

## Wildlife Management Areas

### Cartier

Cartier WMA is in Madison County next to Beaver Dick Park. It is owned by the Bureau of Reclamation and managed by IDFG for waterfowl and upland habitat.

Cartier WMA offers a lot of diverse habitat for wildlife. Located along the Henrys Fork of the Snake River, this area is prone to frequent spring flooding that may last until July (see photo). This makes normal WMA management activities such as planting grain, difficult. When planting season comes, most of the property is still under water. Weed control is more difficult with the water situation, forcing managers to use unconventional methods. Goat grazing has been one of these methods to control Leafy spurge and has completed its 11th year.

Cartier is one of three WMAs in the Upper Snake Region where game farm pheasant are released. It is also popular with duck hunters and white-tailed deer hunters.



### Sand Creek

This year Sand Creek personnel were busy with a variety of habitat projects both on the Sand Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) as well as throughout Fremont County. The Sand Creek Ponds complex on the WMA was sprayed using a crop duster to help control cattails and other aquatic vegetation. After spraying, the wetlands were burned to thin the standing vegetation. Spraying and burning help to maintain open water and improve wetland productivity. This is the third year of successful burning with an additional 60 acres of wetlands and adjoining uplands treated. The Sand Creek ponds boast a productive trumpeter swan population, and these treatments will help maintain and hopefully increase this amazing resource.

The Chester Wetlands Segment is in its fourth year of management following a major wetland restoration project involving Ducks Unlimited, Teton Regional Land Trust, and a North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant. Prescribed burning and aerial spraying of nearly 100 acres on Chester Wetlands enhanced waterfowl nesting habitat.

Waterfowl use of these wetlands is increasing dramatically making them a great place for sportsmen and women to enjoy wildlife watching and hunting.

Another large habitat project is being initiated on the mule deer winter range known as the Juniper Mountains in Fremont County. Idaho Department of Fish and Game personnel are working with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and a private landowner to enhance over 800 acres of prime mule deer and elk winter range as well as sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

### Tex Creek

Tex Creek Wildlife Management Area, located approximately 20 miles southeast of Idaho Falls, provides critical winter range for big game (mule deer, elk, and moose) and high quality year-round habitat for upland birds. Encompassing over 34,000 acres of canyons, benches, and timbered ridges, the WMA also provides outstanding hunting and recreational opportunities to the residents of eastern Idaho.

Tex Creek managers implement a wide variety of management practices to improve wildlife habitat on the WMA. These include native shrub plantings, farming, alfalfa management, grassland restoration, and noxious weed control.

In 2011, 50,000 bitterbrush seedlings were planted on the WMA in old burns and historic agricultural fields. Bitterbrush is an important winter browse species, particularly for mule deer. Late summer monitoring of these plantings indicated excellent survival of the seedlings, likely a result of the tremendous spring moisture in 2011.

Additionally, Tex Creek staff planted 210 acres of winter annuals to provide high quality winter and spring forage for deer and elk. Two new species were planted on the WMA this year. Triticale, a wheat-rye hybrid was planted in several decadent alfalfa fields on the southeast portion of the WMA. Triticale provides a high-protein food source to migrating and wintering deer and elk while also serving as an excellent green manure crop.

Additionally, canola was planted in a small test plot on the WMA. Canola is very attractive forage species to elk in winter and may be used in future years to help hold elk on the WMA. A final highlight of the 2011 field season was the initiation of a grassland enhancement study. Over the next two to three years several treatments will be compared to determine the most effective method for converting monocultures of exotic grasses to a diverse native grass/forb mix.

Tex Creek's large land area and close proximity to Idaho Falls create an ideal opportunity for local sportsmen and citizens to actively participate in conservation through volunteer projects.

Possibilities for projects in the spring/summer of 2012 include lek searches, native brush planting, removal of old interior fencing, and vegetation monitoring. If you want to help on a Tex Creek project, please contact the Upper Snake Region's Volunteer Coordinator James Brower (james.brower@idfg.idaho.gov, 208-525-7290).

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## Deer Parks

Each year Deer Park WMU manages up to 460 acres of grain and hay through a sharecrop agreement. The sharecropper leaves grain and corn for wintering wildlife. This year, almost 100 acres of grain are drawing in thousands of ducks, hundreds of geese, and almost 1000 trumpeter swans. Twenty-five acres of standing corn attracted dozens of white-tailed deer, moose, and hundreds of black birds. The black birds in turn, attract numerous small raptors. Prairie falcons, Goshawks, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks take advantage of the abundant prey.

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## Mud Lake

Moose management on the Mud Lake WMA has always been a tricky proposition. The Department desires to maintain a population that is robust enough to maintain some hunting opportunity and satisfy wildlife viewing interests, but not have an unmanageable level of nuisance and depredation issues. Over the years, this has been a difficult balance to maintain and can vary widely depending on winter conditions and haystack locations.

In the mid 2000's moose densities and nuisance concerns were extremely high in the Mud Lake area. Human safety concerns were almost daily occurrences for Department staff during these winters. Over time, the Department tranquilized and relocated over thirty moose from the Mud Lake area. With these removals, in combination with legally and illegally harvested moose in the area, the moose population had been reduced to a level that concerned the Department. In response, the Department closed Unit 63 to all moose hunting after the 2008 season with the promise to sportsmen that when populations returned to harvestable levels, hunting opportunity would follow.

Over the years WMA staff also learned that through habitat management changes in the North Agricultural Fields portion of the WMA, more wintering moose could be held in this area. With these habitat manipulations, wintering moose could find the forage resources they wanted and not have to wander off of the WMA in search of groceries.

Through closing hunting seasons, habitat manipulations, and a few moose brought to the WMA from other locations

the Mud Lake moose herd is thriving once again.

The Department will be proposing to implement a moose hunt in unit 63 in the 2013 season setting process, fulfilling the promise made to sportsmen in 2009.

There will always be some moose/human conflicts in the Mud Lake area. Through proper moose management and the tolerance of residents in this area, these concerns need not be problematic.

So grab your camera and binoculars and start thinking about filling out that controlled hunt application, because moose are back!

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## Market Lake

State Wildlife Management Areas, like Market Lake, were established to protect wildlife habitat. They are available for hunting, fishing and other types of public enjoyment for wildlife. In July of 2011, we initiated a yearlong user survey on the Market Lake WMA. The purpose of this survey was to give the manager insight on whom and why people were visiting the WMA and to help direct management objectives.

To date, we have conducted 162 surveys on 18 different days. Questions asked include where visitors are from, if the WMA was their primary destination, what is their purpose for visiting the WMA, if they have ever visited the WMA before, and so on. The results below only represent six months' worth of data, and we recently finished the hunting season.

Current findings show that 94 percent of the visitors are from Idaho. When asked what their purpose was for visiting the WMA, 50 percent of those surveyed said they were either fishing, hunting, or trapping. However, when asked if they had a hunting, fishing or trapping license, 118 people said they did. Of those without a license, eight said they planned to purchase one that year.

So although only 50 percent were actively hunting, fishing, or trapping on the WMA, 78 percent of visitors were in possession of or planned to purchase a license. These numbers will likely change as spring approaches. Market Lake is a key stopover for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds during their annual migration in the spring.

With the easy access to the marsh complex, Market Lake visitor use increases during this time to view this annual event. As the survey continues through to July of 2012, it will be interesting to see the types of users who visit the WMA. If you have not taken this survey specifically for Market Lake and you would like to, please contact Josh Rydalch or the front office. They will be happy to provide one for you to fill out.

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Metal culverts were rusted out, wave action had eroded areas along the dams, concrete head gates were deteriorating and drain ditches, feeder ditches, and even the ponds were silted in.

Henry's Fork NAWCA III is helping to restore 122 acres of wetlands. This includes installing new water control structures as well as dike and dam resurfacing. The project is approximately 60% complete and is expected to be completed in fall of 2012.

#### NAWCA and Market Lake Wildlife Management Area

There are several springs that feed the water complexes found on Market Lake WMA. Working with local contractors, the Department restored these springs by removing soil and vegetation that had filled in the water ways. This allows water to flow freely again. In addition, the NAWCA grant is assisting with removal and replacement of old culverts, head gates, and other failing water structures. Replacement structures were strategically placed to allow the manager to more effectively and efficiently manage the water to enhance, improve, and restore wetlands for wildlife using the area. The project is expected to be completed in late fall 2012.



## Mule Deer Initiative

The Mule Deer Initiative continues to be a priority for the Department and the region. Mule deer habitat has been declining for many years as winter ranges succumb to housing developments, aspens are replaced by conifers, and riparian areas are impacted by livestock. This summer, habitat staff completed a project on Idaho Department of Lands property on Grays Lake Outlet to fence livestock off a small portion of the Outlet. We expect to see riparian habitat increase in quantity and quality in the next few years. We hope this small demonstration project will encourage other landowners and livestock operators will see the benefits of this project to both wildlife and livestock and will want to work with us on their properties as well.

Several habitat biologists continue to be very involved with the local Aspen Working Group (AWG) in an effort to maintain and restore aspens in eastern Idaho. Aspen is recognized as a keystone species, one that provides benefits to a large array of plant and wildlife species. The AWG has been involved in finding ways to improve aspen in many areas. Recovery of aspen is likely strongly tied to long-term recovery of mule deer so this will continue to be a priority.

## *Movin' and Shakin'*

Like 2011, 2012 has already proven to be a year of change for the habitat section. Two biologists have switched positions. Josh Rydalch is now the biologist in the Market Lake District and Eric Anderson is the biologist in the Sand Creek District. In addition, Duston Cureton was promoted to Regional Landowner/Sportsman Coordinator. Congratulations to Duston!

## Volunteers

The Idaho Master Naturalists, a dedicated group of volunteers sponsored by Idaho Department of Fish and Game, has chapters in Idaho Falls and in Island Park. Once again this year, they completed thousands of hours of work to benefit wildlife. They conducted surveys, banded ducks, planted thousands of shrubs, inventoried aspen stands, and even conducted a scientific study on the potential impacts of lead shot on wildlife at Market Lake WMA.

If you would like to volunteer to help fish and wildlife or to become a Master Naturalist, please call James Brower at 208-525-7290.

## Farm Bill Program

The *Farm Bill* and many of its programs were developed to enhance agricultural productivity and natural resource conservation on private land. Through these programs we have been successful at improving overall agricultural practices, reducing soil and wind erosion, and improving water quality. We have also been successful at providing safe and secure nesting habitat for many of our grassland birds.

Some of the programs that are established to help landowners create, preserve and enhance habitat for wildlife on private lands include:

- ◆ Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). There will be a general sign-up again this year from March 6-April 12, 2012.
- ◆ Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) which can be applied for at any time.
- ◆ Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) is another program that can be applied for any time.
- ◆ Sage-grouse Initiative (SGI) is a program designed to help preserve and restore sage-grouse habitat.
- ◆ State Acres For Wildlife (SAFE) is a program to promote conservation for sharp-tailed grouse.
- ◆ Wetland Restoration Program (WRP) is a program designed to restore degraded wetlands.

All of these programs can be and are used within the Upper Snake Region to enhance wildlife habitat each year on thousands of acres of private ground.

## Access Management

### Trail Creek Pond Makeover

Trail Creek Pond, also known as Connie's Pond to the locals, is a popular, high traffic fishing access area in Teton Valley. The pond, located three miles east of Victor on State Highway 33, was purchased by Idaho Department of Fish and Game in 1994. Prior to that time, the area was the site of a gravel mining operation. Remnants of the gravel mining are still noticeable today. The existing infrastructure was constructed in 1998 and has provided public access with a handicap accessible restroom and fishing pier for 12 years.

In the Fishing Access five year plan, a new restroom and handicap parking pad were scheduled for Trail Creek Pond in 2011. The Upper Snake Access Management Program decided to repair a few other items while we were there. The handrails on the fishing pier had deteriorated to the point they had become a safety concern. The handicap parking pad next to the fishing pier needed upgrading and a portion of the parking area had eroded away into the pond which had increased the chances of vehicles or their contents ending up in the pond.



The pine decking and handrails on the handicap accessible fishing pier were replaced with redwood. The pier's current condition with new redwood decking and handrails will improve public safety for the foreseeable future.

The parking area next to the pond was modified to facilitate drainage away from the fishery, and the new parking pad for the fishing pier access now surpasses ADA specifications.

A drainage cut moves water to a culvert allowing water accumulation to pass under the east parking lot access road and into a seepage basin. The existing wood frame outhouse building was replaced with a new concrete structure. The new privy, designed by Fish and Game engineers, meets or surpasses current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards. We also upgraded the handicap parking pad adjacent to the restroom to the current Fish and Game standard.



### Mackay Flood Damage

On June 24, 2011, a flash flood on Upper Cedar Creek severely damaged The Mackay Dam Access Site. The site had been completely renovated nine months prior to the flood and much of that work had to be removed and started over again.

In late August 2011 the Access Team was able to repair the damage.



### South Fork Fee Project

Do you ever wonder where your money goes when you pay a fee to launch your craft on the South Fork of the Snake River? That money goes to an interagency group and pays for maintenance and renovation work within the project area. This year, the project paid for renovations at the Fish and Game Palisades Creek Access Area providing a new privy and a new handicap accessible fishing dock. Since the existing privy was in better condition than the one at the Fox Creek West Access Area in Teton Valley, it was moved to that site, creating an extra bonus to the program.



### *Did you know?*

*More than 300,000 sportsmen and women use Fish and Game managed access areas in the Upper Snake Region each year. With the exception of the South Fork Fee Area, there is no charge to use these facilities.*

## Wildlife Management Areas and Access Areas

The Upper Snake Region is known for its passionate anglers and hunters, volunteers, active conservation groups and non-governmental organizations. In addition, we are fortunate to have an outstanding group of scientists in our partner agencies and Universities that help IDFG to accomplish its mission. We are proud of our efforts and accomplishments over the past year, but we know full well that we could accomplish very little without the cooperation and support from the many groups and individuals who help us. In addition to the countless anglers and hunters who've simply expressed support for what we do, we'd like to thank our partners:

*Idaho Master Naturalists*  
*Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation*  
*Pheasants Forever*  
*Teton Regional Land Trust*  
*IDFG Volunteers*  
*Private Landowners*  
*Ducks Unlimited*  
*Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation*  
*Mule Deer Foundation*  
*The Nature Conservancy*  
*Bureau of Reclamation*  
*U.S. Forest Service*  
*Bureau of Land Management*  
*Fish and Wildlife Service*  
*Brigham Young University-Idaho*  
*Idaho State University*  
*Trumpeter Swan Society*

Idaho Fish and Game manages over 86,000 acres in the Upper Snake Region. These properties provide valuable wildlife habitat, protect that habitat from development and provide public access. However, that management always comes at a cost. Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and access areas are busy places as we strive to maintain and restore wildlife habitat, maintain facilities, and provide safe and effective public access.

Here are some of the projects we work on to provide benefits to wildlife and you.

In a given year, we maintain about 148 miles of fence to keep neighboring livestock off property dedicated to wildlife. We may build or rebuild up to 10 miles of fence, improve fence for wildlife crossing and remove 5 to 10 miles of unnecessary fence.

We maintain almost 40 miles of roads, 5-20 miles of trails, and 75 or more parking areas. We maintain at least a dozen campsites, 50 boat ramps and countless restrooms and information kiosks.

Irrigation is a big deal on several of our WMAs and we annually maintain 10 miles of irrigation ditches and 22 miles of dikes, replace 10-20 headgates and maintain hundreds more. We operate and maintain 5 irrigation pivots and several wheel lines and associated wells and pumps.

Much of each field season is dedicated to farming for wildlife. Most of our WMAs have sharecrop contracts that staff members administer. Part of each crop is left standing. But we also do a lot of our own farming, preparing up to 350 acres of food plots, and maintaining productivity on alfalfa fields and native grass and forb seedings. To maintain productivity for wildlife, other manipulations occur annually, including burning, mowing, and chemical treatments (fertilizer and herbicides) in rangelands, farmed areas, and marshes.

Along with the farming, all areas aggressively treat noxious weeds. The habitat section treats 4,000-5,000 acres a year reclaiming valuable habitat from these invasive species.

Habitat improvement projects always include planting shrubs. In any given year, 50,000-60,000 shrubs are planted on WMAs by volunteers, contractors, and habitat personnel.

We also routinely install and maintain wildlife water guzzlers (about 13), wildlife nesting boxes (100s) for everything from peregrine falcons to bluebirds, and remove habitat that subsidizes predators at unnatural levels.

To monitor wildlife populations and determine the effectiveness of habitat improvements, habitat staff members conduct wildlife surveys, including banding ducks and doves, establishing trend routes for game and nongame species, spotlight counts, and wing barrels (to monitor harvest), participating in aerial survey, capture and marking of big game.

Habitat personnel are also involved in research. Some projects have been large and have resulted in master's level products. But many of the research efforts are geared toward determining whether a specific management practice yields the expected results. This may include trials of different forage crops, fertilization trials, methods to restore habitat after fire, and ways to return idle land to productive native habitat.

If it sounds like the habitat staff is busy, that's correct. It is a heavy work load for nine fulltime and about a dozen seasonal employees. And managing WMAs is only half the job. Biologists also work with federal, state and county governments, and private landowners.

We will be re-writing our WMA plans in 2012. If you would like to provide comments to consider for that effort, please drop us a note or a phone call. For information please see:

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/wma>

### *Did you know?*

Three NAWCA grants to the Henrys Fork Wetlands projects in Fremont and Jefferson Counties leveraged \$10,735,091 in partner funds to restore over 10,000 acres.

The wetlands of the Henrys Fork watershed provide crucial migration stopovers, nesting grounds, and foraging areas for 550,000 ducks, geese, and swans and for 200,000 other wetland-dependent migratory birds, representing 46 species. However, of the watershed's 96,000 wetland acres, only 3.5 percent were permanently protected when the NAWCA projects began in 2003.

This ongoing project offers vital wetland habitat to waterfowl in the Central Flyway, including palustrine emergent and cottonwood forested wetlands, riparian habitats, large perennial marshes and ponds, vernal pools, and associated uplands.

Idaho has 16 NAWCA projects either complete or under way. These projects have conserved 65,110 acres of wildlife habitat. NAWCA funding of over \$8.4 stimulated partner contributions of over \$37.3 million.