

Wildlife Program – Bi-weekly Report

November 1 to 15, 2021

LANDS DIVISION

Swakane-Burch Mountain Forest Thinning Restoration Project: Forest thinning work was completed for the year on the Burch Mountain Forest Restoration Project in Chelan County. Burch Mountain is one of the Swakane Units that are part of the Chelan Wildlife Area. Work on the remaining units in the project will begin after the snow and mud comes off in the spring, hopefully by early to mid-May.



Burch Mountain thinning and working in the snow

Washington Cattlemen’s Association: Burnham joined Lands Division Manager Wilkerson in attending the Washington Cattlemen’s Association’s (WCA) annual “Public Lands Forum.” They highlighted the grazing story map and discussed some of the changes in the Washington Administrative Code/Policy update from earlier in the year. They also addressed several questions from WCA members (including from some who hold WDFW grazing permits).

REGION 1

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Chronic Wasting Disease Hunter Check Stations: Wildlife Biologists Prince and Turnock staffed hunter check stations during the two weekends of the late modern firearm season. They spoke to hunters and took retropharyngeal lymph nodes to test and monitor for chronic wasting disease in Game Management Units (GMUs) 105-117.

Winter Elk Feeding Preparations: Wildlife area staff members continue to prepare equipment and make other preparations for a winter elk feeding program on the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area because of last summer's Lick Creek Fire. We are experiencing mechanical issues with a military 6X6 truck we would like to use for feeding and it is currently in Lewiston under repairs. We are also making modifications to a Department of Transportation (DOT) surplus snowplow for plowing gravel roads.



The South Fork Shed on the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area in September. Pictured on the right are 415 large bales of hay stored in this shed, about 230 tons.

Tucannon Bighorn Sheep: Assistant Wildlife Area Manager Dingman continues to check the Tucannon bighorn sheep herd weekly. There are still eight lambs alive out of the twelve that were born this spring.

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Hunting Access: Private Lands Biologist Thorne Hadley answered questions from hunters pertaining to hunting access in Columbia and Walla Walla counties. Thorne Hadley navigated several hunters through [WDFW's Hunt Planner Webmap](#), an interactive online mapping tool that identifies available access properties.

W.T. Wooten Wildlife Area: Natural Resource Worker Jensen continues to clean up trash in the campgrounds and around the lakes. He is also filling in for Access Technician Heimgartner this month in keeping the outhouses cleaned and stocked with toilet paper.

Steelhead Fishing: Despite low return numbers, steelhead fishing has been popular this fall on the Grande Ronde River and Snake River. Use has been high at Heller Bar and Grande Ronde River access sites.



The Grande Ronde River at the Shumaker Unit – Photo by Bob Dice, October 28

Water Access Area Maintenance: Access Area Manager Dziekan performed his routine site maintenance duties at water access areas in north Region 1. His focus for the week was shutting down areas that are now closed for the season. He did a final cleaning of the restrooms, a litter patrol of the area, and closed and locked gates where applicable.



Clear Lake Water Access Area Locked Gate (bent frame is old damage)

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

Beaver Dam: Wildlife Conflict Specialist Westerman responded a landowner with concerns about beaver activity on the little Spokane. Westerman relayed the benefits of beavers and solutions to possible conflicts.

Electric Fence Loan: Biologist Turnock setup an electric fence for a landowner experiencing bear conflict, the bear had dug underneath the 8-foot-high chain link fence to get to a crabapple tree in the landowner's backyard.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Asotin Creek Wildlife Area Fire Rehab Work: Biologist David Woodall has been working with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff members on a set of Lick Creek post-fire rehabilitation projects such as noxious weed control and native grass seeding. We are putting together shovel-ready projects that would start this fall with grass seeding and next spring with weed control. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundations has offered to help and provide some financial assistance for this.

Washington State Noxious Weed Conference: Assistant Wildlife Area Manager Dingman attended the annual Noxious Weed Conference in Wenatchee the first week of November. There were several excellent speakers at this year's conference. Natural Resource Worker Jensen attended the conference virtually.

W.T. Wooten Wildlife Area: Assistant Wildlife Area Manager Dingman and Natural Resource Worker Jensen seeded the fire line on Abels Ridge that was constructed during the Green Ridge Fire this summer.



Abel's Ridge fire line grass seeding

DNR Section: Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Finch met with biologists from WDFW and U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) at a Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) managed section of land, adjacent to BLM and WDFW lands. This property is also located reasonably close to the one sage grouse lek in Lincoln County. They examined the results of the lessee's (required) replanting efforts on the parcel's old farm field. More native plants had sprouted than was expected, so the group decided to not offer the DNR or the lessee technical advice on further site improvement, unless requested.



Left to right: WDFW District Assistant Wildlife Biologist Carrie Lowe, WDFW Natural Resource Technician Donovan Colvin, BLM Wildlife Biologist Jason Lowe, and WDFW Vegetation Ecologist Kurt Merg. Not shown: WDFW District Wildlife Biologist Mike Atamian and WDFW Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Mike Finch

Post-Fire Habitat Restoration: On both Saturday, November 6 and Wednesday, November 10, Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area (SLWA) hosted planting parties consisting of volunteers and WDFW staff members. Saturday's turnout of about 20 included Spokane Audubon members, Inland Northwest Wildlife Council (INWC) members, and unaffiliated volunteers from nearby areas. Wednesday's group of six included two volunteers: a Wilbur resident and a Liberty Lake resident who had heard of the opportunity. Over 8,000 stems of native shrubs and forbs were planted. Also, on November 6, SLWA staff members formally thanked INWC volunteer Floyd Barlow for his contribution of 200 hand-made bluebird and kestrel nesting boxes, including one kestrel box with a plaque memorializing the fire's date. These boxes will replace those lost in the Whitney Fire. This habitat improvement will speed up shrubsteppe recovery and provision of cover for a variety of animal species.



Left: Marie Neumiller, INWC Executive Director, on November 6, 2021
Right: Planting crew on November 10, 2021

Conducting Business Operations and Policy

Simmons vs WDFW Trial: Wildlife Area Manager Dice served as counsel representative to Attorney General's (AG's) defending WDFW in the Simmons vs WDFW trial in Asotin County Superior Court. The Simmons filed a lawsuit against WDFW, alleging staff were negligent in not noticing an unmarked powerline across Ayer's Gulch on the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area and that this was a safety hazard. A helicopter piloted by 17-year-old Hudson Simmons and his 16-year-old passenger Hayden Simmons fatally crashed into the powerline July 1, 2015. The resulting crash also started a large wildfire. The jury determined WDFW was not negligent. The powerline was marked with marker balls by Clearwater Power after the accident.



The Ayers Gulch powerline on the Asotin Creek Wildlife Area

ATV Salvage on the 4-O Ranch Wildlife Area: Wildlife Area Manager Dice and Natural Resource Worker Rimmelspacher attempted to salvage parts off a wrecked WDFW four-wheeler on the wildlife area. An intern working on the wildlife area rolled the ATV into a canyon back in June. Luckily, he was not seriously injured. The ATV is a total loss.



Natural Resource Worker Rimmelspacher salvaging parts off a wrecked ATV

Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Bonneville Power Administration Contract: Wildlife Area Manager Anderson submitted a revised Line-Item Budget to Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), to reflect the employment status change Natural Resource Technician Donovan Colvin from career seasonal to year-round employment.

Sherman Creek Wildlife Area Water Issues: Sherman Creek Wildlife Area Assistant Manager Palmer ordered, received, and installed a small tankless water heater for the restroom at the Wildlife Area headquarters. The old heater had failed a week earlier. Two temporary technicians are residing in trailers by the headquarters through November, so they will appreciate hot water in the sink and shower.

Wolf Advisory Group Meeting: Wildlife Biologist Prince attended the two-day wolf advisory group meeting. This was the first meeting with new facilitators, and everything went very smoothly. The meeting was both productive and informative.

REGION 2

HERE'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

Managing Wildlife Populations

Pygmy Rabbit Work: Biologist Morris and Cook assisted with pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) captures over two days as part of their fall trapping efforts and review of rabbit genealogy in breeding enclosures. Cook and Morris helped set traps and corral rabbits into nets.



Early morning below Chopaka Mountain. Similkameen-Chopaka Unit – Photo by Haug



Pygmy rabbit trap set under sagebrush



Biologist Gallie weighing a pygmy rabbit – Photo by N. Cook

Deer Management: Biologist Rowan continued preparations for drainage of irrigation canals, which impact mule deer due to their entrapment in canals when they attempt to cross them during autumn/winter migration to areas with less snow and better forage. Rowan worked with the Bureau of Reclamation, Irrigation District, and volunteers to coordinate activities. Rowan reconstructed additional ramps with the assistance of the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) crew, and transported them to the Irrigation District for them to deploy. We are already receiving phone calls concerning deer in the various canals. Rowan performed a canal survey to look for deer and found a fawn in the canal west of Ephrata. Rowan dropped a ramp, but the deer was in poor condition. The hope is that the deer will find the ramps and understand they can be climbed allowing for escape.

Rowan also continued preparations for aerial surveys of our Desert Unit, which entailed contacting the pilots, working with internal staff members, finding Flight Followers, and gaining appropriate permissions and information related to our budget and COVID-19 protocols. These aerial surveys allow WDFW to obtain population estimates for our mule deer subherds.

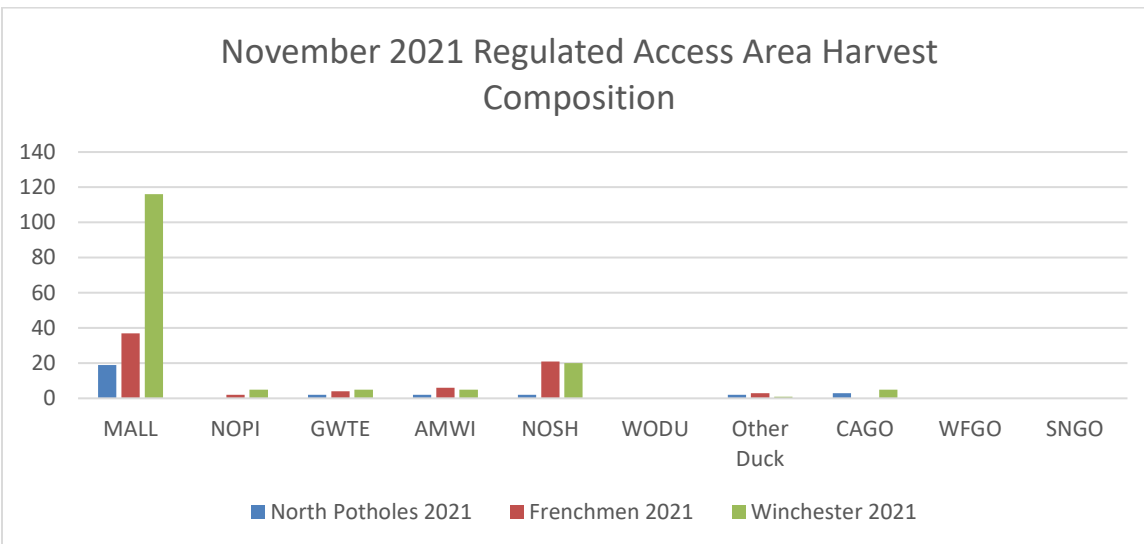
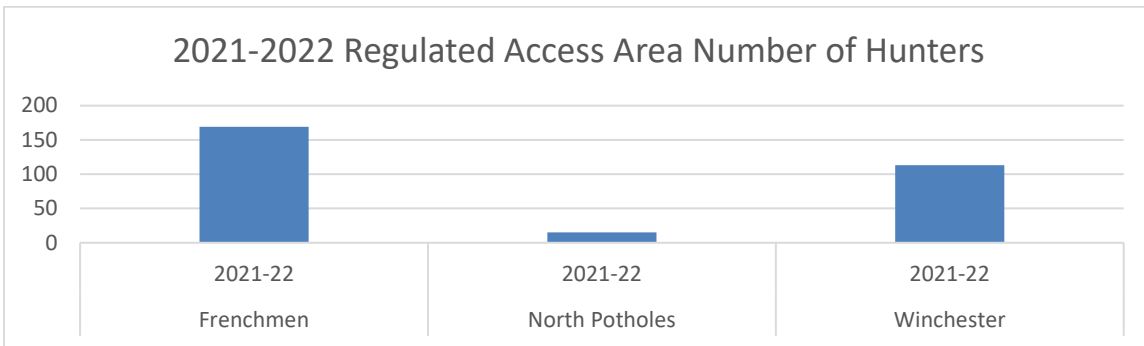
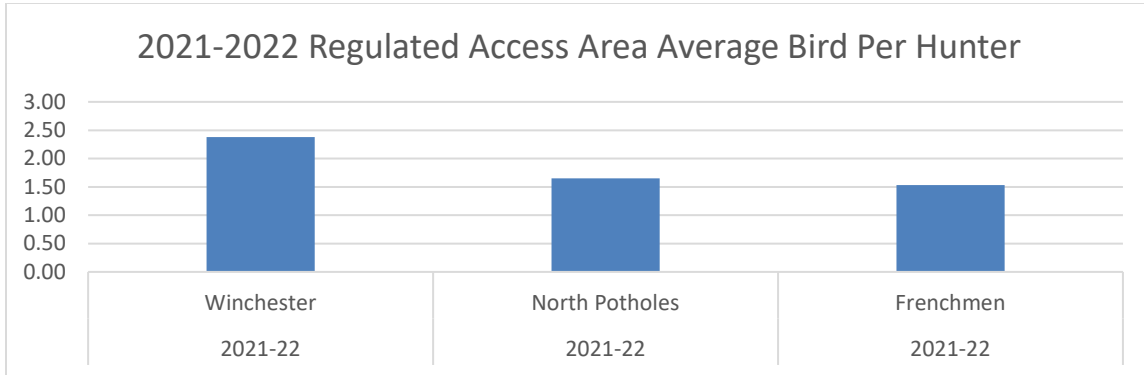
Northern Leopard Frogs: Northern leopard frogs have entered brumation and will likely stay in their over-wintering cover until February or March. Biologist Grabowsky has transitioned to data analysis of 2021 recovery project data and planning/ implementing tasks related to advancing the northern leopard frog recovery project.

Although the reporting period is only halfway over for the first 2020 Competitive State Wildlife Grant Program (CSWG), data organization and analysis after field season is vital to ensuring data stewardship and general information retention. This also allows biologists to prepare for reports during the time of year when amphibians are not active. All field 2021 survey data including habitat management data, egg mass, tadpole, metamorph, and post-release survey data is being consolidated and analyzed for addition to both internal and external reports.

Evaluation of habitat feasibility and species presence across several potential reintroduction sites is underway. Over the past month, environmental DNA (eDNA) has been collected from several sites around Columbia Basin Wildlife Area and DNA samples have been collected from fish species in the area. To accompany eDNA analysis, Biologist Grabowsky is preparing a habitat and vegetation evaluation process to assess these sites.

Providing Recreation Opportunities

Regulated Access Areas: November has brought a rise in bird numbers at all the Regulated Access Areas (RAA). Frenchman and Winchester have been seeing a good amount of hunter participation and decent harvest. North Potholes reserve has started gaining duck and goose numbers and with birds going to feed in Hiawatha Valley, hunters have taken the opportunity to hunt the RAA. Mallards have been the main species of harvest at all RAAs with northern shovelers being second most harvested. Biologist McPherson has noticed an increase of northern pintails especially at the Winchester RAA.



Private Lands Hunter Access Program: Biologist Morris checked several fields enrolled in the Hunter Access Program to ensure signs were in place and in good condition, and to become more familiar with lands enrolled in this area. Biologist Cook and Biologist Morris started contract paperwork for a Waterfowl Habitat and Access Program (WHAP) contract. In Region 2, these contracts will focus on hunter access for waterfowl that will be like the previous corn stubble program. There will be two sites this year. They will also include a late goose season opportunity.

Access Site Maintenance: Water Access staff members with assistance from Fish Biologist Schmuck removed dock sections from both Blue and Sprague Lakes. The docks are removed to prevent damage from being frozen in during the winter months. Assistant Manager Steele attended virtually the 71st annual Weed Conference. Manger Harmon and Assistant Manager Steele checked on progress at the Lind Coulee water access site. This site was approved for a Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) grant. The boat launch has been extended, the restrooms are being replaced and the parking lot has had asphalt laid over about three quarters of the lot and an ADA ramp is being installed.



Fish Biologist Schmuck working hard to get a dock section to shore. Thanks Mike! – Photo by Harmon



ADA loading platform in progress – Photo by Harmon



Boat ramp extension – Photo by Harmon

Providing Conflict Prevention and Education

Deer Depredation on Fruit Trees: Specialist Heilhecker wrote a Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreement for an orchardist with deer damage to young fruit trees. A landowner kill permit was issued. Specialist Heilhecker spoke to a different orchardist who inquired about a damage prevention cooperative agreement and landowner kill permits but has yet to receive confirmation as to whether the orchardist was interesting in signing an agreement.

Processing Range Rider Payment: Specialist Heilhecker completed payment paperwork for contracted range riders and a livestock producer with a damage prevention cooperative agreement. Paperwork was submitted to headquarters for processing.

Agricultural Lease Plan: Specialist Heilhecker consulted with WDFW lands staff members before writing an “annual operating plan” (AOP) for an agricultural lease on the Methow Wildlife Area. She recommended nonlethal deterrence measures to help minimize wolf-livestock interactions. The AOP will move through an internal approval process before being presented to the lease holder.

Conserving Natural Landscapes

Methow Valley Trails Collaborative – Fire and Trails Discussion: Okanogan Lands Operations Manager Haug met with the Methow Valley Trails Collaborative along with representatives from the DNR, State Parks, and USFS. The group discussed this past year’s fire season, impacts on recreation, local economies, and our input regarding how agencies thought the firefighting effort incorporated concerns about suppression effects on recreation resources. Manager Haug provided input on successes during the suppression effort and challenges regarding protecting recreation features. DNR provided some important information about potential funding to help mitigate for future wildfire effects. Overall, it was good to hear a community perspective and provide an agency response to their concerns.

Scotch Creek Shrubsteppe Mowing: Staff members mowed approximately 70 acres of a shrub steppe restoration field that was planted in 2015. The field was being invaded by various annual and perennial weeds. The mowing will improve bunch grass vigor and allow small growing forbs access to sun light, which were previously, shaded out by taller vegetation. Herbicides will be used next spring to treat the annual and perennial weeds.



2015 restoration field looking Northeast. Schalow Mountain and Roberts Lake – Photo by Dupont

Eder Unit Fire Line Seeding: Scotch Creek staff members finished spreading native grass seed on a dozer line that was constructed by DNR fire crews across the Eder Unit in preparation of the Nk'Mip Creek Fire crossing the border from Canada. Thankfully the fire never crossed the border, and the dozer line was not needed. DNR fire crews rehabbed the line by smoothing out the soil berm and installing water bars on the slopes to prevent erosion.



*Eder Wildlife Unit looking Southwest, Radar Mountain and Lake Osoyoos in the background
– Photo by Dupont*

Scotch Creek Riparian Restoration Project: Staff members completed putting girdle guards around the base of the 600 water birch seedlings that were planted two weeks previously. The guards protect the base of the shrubs from being fed on by mice and other rodents, causing the seedlings to die.



Staff member Medina checking out Beaver Dam Analog (BDA) #15, the last, farthest downstream BDA in the project area. BDA #15 was constructed in November 2021

Chesaw Unit Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Forb Planting: Staff members planted approximately 850 forb seedlings at a project site located northwest of Strawberry Lake on the Chesaw Unit. The purpose of the planting was to increase habitat diversity and provide forage opportunities for wild ungulates. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) purchased the forb plugs as part of a match for WDFW doing weed control on the project site.



Staff member Medina planting a forb plug in an augered hole and packing the soil around the roots – Photo by Dupont

Methow Forest Restoration: Last week, the Methow Wildlife Area took advantage of one sunny day to implement a seeding project in the Ramsey Creek area. This project is essentially the final stage of the Methow Forest Restoration Phase II project, which had previously comprised the commercial and pre-commercial thinning of 300 acres in the Ramsey drainage. With the help of HiLine Helicopters, 4,000 pounds of native grass seed was aurally broadcast throughout the entire 300-acre forest treatment unit. Additionally, another 1,000 pounds of native grass seed was broadcast along the adjacent perimeter of a 60+ acre strip along the Cub Creek 2 Fire. We are hopeful for positive results as the grass seed fell upon the perfect seed bed, nutrient rich black earth from our prescribed fire just a few weeks ago. Snow is actively covering the seed until the spring melt. Thanks to HiLine for helping us on short notice and thanks to Sean and Micah from the WDFW Burn Team for helping Methow Wildlife Area personnel manually load all 5,000 pounds of seed into the aerial broadcaster.



WDFW staff manually loading native grass seed into a hopper to be aurally broadcast over the Ramsey Creek prescribed burn unit. The loading area was less than 1 air mile from the burn unit. The HiLine Helicopter pilot, Jason Moorehead, was able to broadcast 400 pounds of seed in less than 5 minutes per trip – Photo by Troyer



HiLine Helicopter Pilot Moorehead leaving the loading area with a 400-pound load of native grass seed destined for the Ramsey Rx burn unit – Photo by Troyer

Volunteer Methow Noxious Weed Control: A dedicated crew of volunteers led by the Methow Beaver Project’s Alexa Whipple and consisting of Joe Weirich, Julie Nelson, and Dave and Jim Clements tackled a puncture vine infestation near Lester Road in the Methow Unit. The group utilized an ingenious method for collecting the puncture vine seeds. They used cardboard to pick up the seeds and then brushed them off into a bin, over and over. The five volunteers collected about a pound of seed heads in the span of over two hours. We greatly appreciate their stellar efforts and will continue combatting the noxious weed infestation in the spring.



A dedicated group of volunteers manually collected invasive puncture vine seeds at an infestation near Lester Road in the Methow Unit – Photo by Alexa Whipple, Methow Beaver Project

Scotch Creek Fence Maintenance: Staff members completed rebuilding 150 feet of stock fence in the Coulee Basin. The fence was burnt during the Okanogan Complex Fires in 2015. The newly built fence should aid in keeping livestock from drifting down to the Coulee agricultural fields in the fall.



Staff member Medina, stretching wire and finished fence below Dunn Mountain – Photo by Dupont

Douglas County Habitat Restoration Project: Private Lands Braaten completed planting 1400 trees and shrubs for sharp-tailed grouse winter cover. Laying Lumite fabric mulch this week is priority.



Private Lands Biologist Braaten hand planted 1400+ riparian plants for wintering Sharp-tailed grouse in North Douglas County on private lands

Habitat Plots: Biologists Morris, Cook, and Rickel worked with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff members, Technician Clements, Biologist Gallie, and multiple volunteers from Foster Creek Conservation District, Conservation Northwest to improve habitat for pygmy rabbits on private land in the Pygmy Rabbit Recovery Emphasis Area by planting sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*), woods rose (*Rosa woodsii*), and golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) in an area affected by fire in 2017. Approximately 4000 shrubs and plants were installed and will help get the shrub component jump started in recovery. Native grasses are established and generally dominate the site. This location is also near pygmy rabbit recovery efforts.



Biologists Rickel and Cook planting woods rose

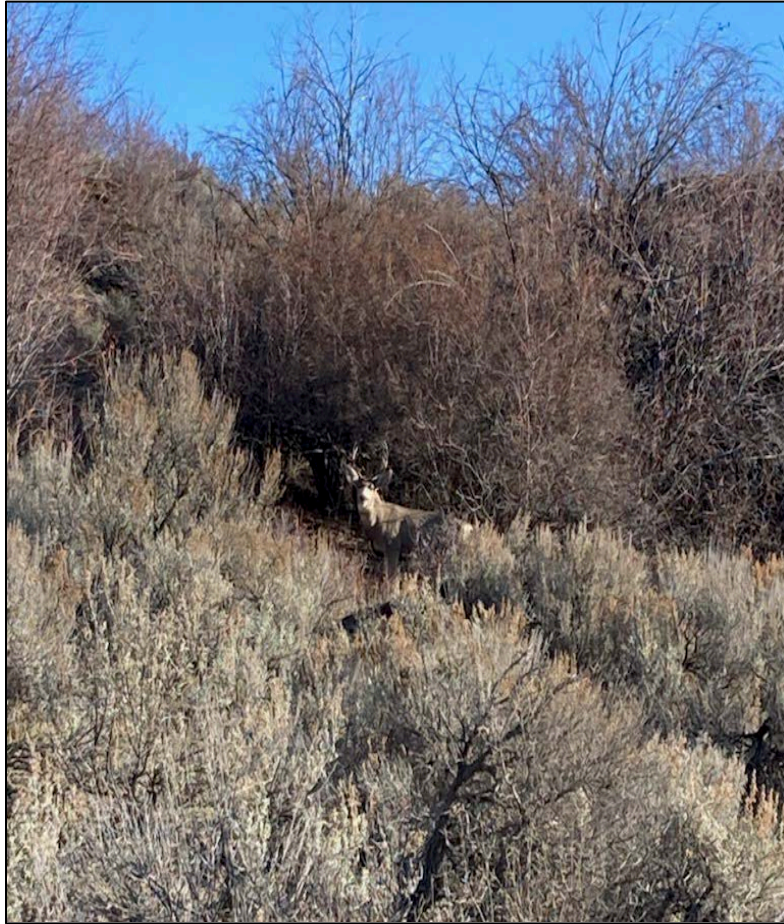


Sagebrush plug in habitat planting



Woods rose in habitat planting

Other



Mule deer buck on the Ellemeham Mountain Unit – Photo by Medina



Pair of trumpeter swans on the Chopaka Unit – Photo by Dupont



Bald eagle overlooking Palmer Lake – Photo by Dupont



Reflections of Little Chopaka Mountain from the Similkameen-Chopaka Unit – Photo by Haug



Potholes Reservoir with very low water level – Photo by C. McPherson