

# The Outdoorsman

Bulletin Number 18

Mule Deer Management

Apr-May 2006

## Despite \$736,000 in Emergency Winter Feeding Account, F&G Refused to Feed Starving Deer

By George Dovel



Elk were hit and killed by trains as they traveled the railroad tracks east of Montpelier searching for food.

For the first 50 years of its existence the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and its forerunner, the State Game Warden, fed starving deer and elk in critical areas during extreme winters. During extended periods when excessive snow depths on big game winter range prevent the animals from accessing forage that is normally available most of the animals will die unless they are fed.

Since virtually no natural food is available *during those extreme periods*, no amount of winter range improvement can increase survival. Spending a few million dollars to increase the quantity or quality of forage on a specific winter range may increase the carrying capacity in a *normal* winter but it will not save one additional animal during extreme conditions when that forage is covered by several feet of snow.

During the 1984 legislative session, IDFG blamed its failure to feed starving deer and elk in the Southeast Region on lack of funding. It convinced local sportsmen to



Starving deer in Montpelier Canyon stood on hind legs stripping needles and eating small branches as high as they could reach.

support the addition of a \$1.50 fee to every deer, elk and antelope tag sold, which would be used for winter feeding, winter range improvement, depredation prevention, and control of predators affecting the three species.

### Feeding Money Misused

Although the primary purpose of the dedicated fund was emergency feeding of big game, the money was continually misappropriated and spent on everything from new vehicles to promotional caps (hats). In the 1988-89 winter, following five years of drought, IDFG admitted losing 20,000 mule deer to starvation in the Southeast Region after spending only \$5,000 from the fund once it was forced to feed by Representative Pete Black.

During the severe 1992-93 winter deer and elk in southern Idaho were in poor condition in the fall. This was also due to severe drought across southern Idaho and was aggravated by wildfires and late hunting seasons.

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### Evidence of Malnutrition Ignored

Examination of mule deer killed by hunters in August and September of 1992 revealed that many already had insufficient fat reserves to survive even a normal winter. In southwest Idaho, ranchers were forced to pull their cattle off of drought-stricken summer range and begin feeding hay in September.

Winter conditions began early in the fall, with record precipitation in November and record snowfall on winter ranges by mid-December. Private citizens began feeding both deer and elk in many locations by mid-December and were able to save a nucleus herd of mule deer.

But most of Idaho's famous mule deer herd died from malnutrition because IDFG officials and employees insisted they were in good condition and refused to provide feed in time to save them. While private citizens were feeding the deer, Southwest Region officials held a late December special hunt in Unit 39 and allowed hunters to kill hundreds of malnourished deer rather than use the dedicated emergency feeding fund to save them.

From F&G's perspective, this made more feeding fund money available for its non-hunting/fishing projects and even provided additional income from the sale of late hunt permits after other deer hunting seasons had closed. Then, by feeding too little feed too late to save deer that were already starving, biologists convinced traditional IDFG supporters that emergency feeding did not work.

### Criteria Developed to Insure Proper Feeding

But thousands of angry citizens knew better and demanded safeguards to prevent a recurrence of the tragic loss of big game with a carcass value of several hundred million dollars. In the Southwest Region a diverse group of citizens, Boise County officials and IDFG field personnel hammered out criteria that would insure the animals were fed promptly and properly during the occasional severe winter when it was warranted.

The Feeding Advisory Committees created in 1994 formally approved specific criteria adopted by the SW Region in its Nov. 2, 1993 publication "Start Winter Feeding." With help from mule deer and other ruminant nutrition experts, we also developed a generic wild ruminant energy supplement block that eliminated the need to feed if poor quality natural forage is available

IDFG Criteria to begin feeding mule deer on the South Fork of the Payette River winter range included snow depths of 18 inches or more above 4,000 feet or three days of zero degree temperature. The criteria also included combinations of less snow and warmer temperatures, extended rain and wind that lower body temperature, or crusted snow that hinders movement.

### Changes in Body Condition Critical

We convinced the Wildlife Bureau to rethink their theory that the quantity and quality of forage on winter

range determines deer and elk survival during a severe winter. We reaffirmed the IDFG requirement to begin measuring stored body fat in deer killed in mid-summer hunting seasons, and continue to measure the degree of malnutrition (fat loss) on road kills throughout the winter.

Page 2 of "Start Winter Feeding" emphasizes the importance of determining the decline in body condition from month to month regardless of other criteria. In underlined bold-faced type it says, "**When the fat content of adult females reaches the point where excessive mortality is expected, feeding will be started.**"

For experienced observers, mule deer are one of the easiest animals to ascertain body condition by observation in the field. During the 1983-84 winter Colorado research biologists successfully fed 30,000 deer, 10,000 antelope and 5,000 elk and developed a matrix similar to that used by veterinarians to determine the stage of malnutrition from a quick glance.

At the first signs of excessive weight loss, or when natural winter forage is no longer available, feeding must begin immediately to be effective. A heavy snowfall or a heavy snow crust resulting from intermittent thawing and freezing may force deer and elk to fill their rumen with woody stems, yellow pine bark or other indigestible debris that is available.

When this happens, any delay in providing digestible feed quickly destroys the microorganisms in the rumen that allow natural or manufactured feed to be digested. Because of the 1-2 week delay in procuring hay, pellets or energy blocks and delivering them to the feeding areas, IDFG wisely agreed that feed, and troughs if used, must be stored in every potential feeding area by December 1<sup>st</sup> of every year.

### Energy Supplement Blocks

During the years that I was Vice Chairman or Acting Chairman of the SW Region Feeding Advisory Committee, we organized volunteers to make sure that feed and troughs were stored in the area by December 1st. Wildlife energy blocks were also stored, and distributed at pre-selected sites *when conditions warranted* to keep small scattered groups of elk or deer from joining together and migrating downstream.

This prevented unhealthy concentrations of hundreds of animals seeking food among farms and ranches that otherwise occurs during the start of severe winters. Unlike salt blocks, which result in damage to the surrounding environment, the energy blocks are utilized as needed by small groups of animals, which then leave to follow the traditional pattern of feeding over a wide area.

The blocks control intake of essential minerals and nutrients, while maintaining healthy electrolyte balance and allowing the animals to digest a wide range of forage. Unlike feeding pellets or hay, if the winter moderates and essential nutrients become available, the animals stop using the blocks and they can be discontinued.

But if the winter becomes more severe with deep snow covering the natural forage, both deer and elk can be fed high quality hay or pellets immediately without developing acidosis or other digestive problems. Over an eight-year period use of the blocks was enthusiastically endorsed by every user, as well as by BLM and USFS range specialists and former Idaho State Veterinarian Dr. Bob Hillman.

Use of the energy blocks saved hundreds of deer and elk from dying of malnutrition and prevented significant crop depredation for a fraction of the cost of feeding. Yet several IDFG officials, who admit knowing nothing about the blocks, now oppose their use with the vague claim that they have not been tested properly.

#### **Feeding Committees Subverted by F&G**

For the 12 years since it was enacted, I.C. Sec. 36-123 has required that the Regional Wildlife Councils provide the names of appointees to the Winter Feeding Advisory Committees. The Councils, formed by IDFG as support groups using sportsmen license dollars, were headed by Don Clower and frequently voiced opposition to all winter feeding.

The Code section also reads, "It is intended that the committees reflect the cross section of the major interest groups associated with each district." The "Wildlife Councils", or the F&G officials who actually approve the names before they are submitted to the F&G Commission to be confirmed, have interpreted that to mean members of special interest groups that support F&G agendas.

This is simply a case of "the rabbits determining who will guard the cabbage patch." Of the 35 Committee members originally appointed, I was the only one with experience and knowledge of emergency winter feeding as a biological tool.

One RMEF member in our Committee later resigned because he did not believe in emergency feeding and others admitted the only reason they agreed to serve was to recommend additional muzzleloader or archery hunting seasons in lieu of feeding. I had to repeatedly remind IDFG personnel that their participation in Committee meetings was to provide support – not interrupt and dictate to the Committee.

After several years, we had virtually eliminated recreational feeding of deer and elk in the SW Region and we set the standard for other regional Committees to implement effective emergency feeding programs. However IDFG continued to appoint new members whose agenda was to eliminate all feeding programs.

#### **Feeding Committees Denounced by F&G**

Instead of providing support for the Committees as the Code section dictates, the IDFG Big Game Chief publicly denounced the Committees and said they should be abolished. Then the SW Region inherited a new anti-feeding Supervisor and an anti-feeding Wildlife Manager and the education process started all over.

Within five years after the Committees had been formed, the handful of members who had worked so hard to make the program work had resigned. In every case, lack of cooperation from IDFG and/or refusal to appoint Committee members who supported emergency feeding were given as the major reasons for the resignations.

#### **Whistle-Blower Replaced**

When the severe 2001-02 winter hit, none of the feeding criteria were followed. When IDFG was finally forced to begin feeding by the media and the Legislature, it was too late to save many of the mule deer as well as many elk in some areas.

In the SW Region, IDFG failed to supply enough feed and Unit 35 volunteers were forced to either feed too little or not feed for 1-2 days each week. It also refused to feed elk so elk ate most of the deer pellets. Then, F&G cut the feed in Unit 33 by 75% and announced its intention to "wean the deer off of pellets" before green-up occurred.

While his fellow Feeding Committee members denied any problems, Jerry Stuart videotaped the mass starvation losses caused by cutting the feed. The tape was viewed during a Legislative hearing and at the next committee meeting the other members called Stuart "a traitor" for revealing the truth. He was replaced with an anti-feeding advocate by the Commission.

The SE Region admitted mule deer starvation losses of 50% while the SW Region denied abnormal losses even after counts proved otherwise. This disaster was recently repeated in the deeper snow areas during the 2005-2006 winter when IDFG and the Feeding Committees again refused to feed starving deer.

#### **Commission Feeding Policy Ignored**

Much of the early precipitation fell as rain at the lower elevations but deep snow began to accumulate there in January. During the first week in February IDFG received reports of 14 elk killed on the railroad tracks east of Montpelier.

Starving mule deer fawns were already beginning to die and many hungry deer were killed by vehicles as they traveled the plowed roads searching for something to fill their belly (rumen). This is one of the conditions when the F&G Commission Feeding Policy dictates that deer, elk or antelope shall be fed, yet that policy was ignored by both IDFG officials and the Southeast Region Feeding Advisory Committee.

#### **F&G Biologist Denies Deer Starving**

A February 16, 2006 article in the Pocatello Idaho State Journal provided a firsthand account of the starving deer by an Inkom area alfalfa farmer who plants and maintains winter habitat for pheasants and other wildlife. John Dudunake described seeing deer hung up on his four-foot fence, too weak to jump it.

He had driven the Old Highway a few days earlier and said gaunt deer were everywhere in the yards along the

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## F&G Refused to Feed *continued from page 3*

road, including some eating out of trash cans. Dudunake said what he saw was “horrible” describing the deer as “skin and bone.”

He said he had driven the road for 60 years and never seen a situation like that for the animals. However, SE Region Wildlife Biologist Corey Class disagreed and said, “Those deer are actually not doing too bad - their biggest problem now is road kill.”

Even if Class believed the excuse he offered for not feeding the malnourished deer, he should have provided evidence that the condition of those deer was “not bad” in the form of bone marrow sample results from all of the road-killed deer. He also should have provided a reason for not feeding the deer to prevent the excessive road kill and reduce the hazard to motorists.

But rancher/conservationist Dudunake was not the only citizen in the SE Region reporting that elk were hungry and deer were starving. By early February, concerned outdoorsmen and women from Malad to Montpelier were urging IDFG and the feeding committee to feed the starving deer.

### **Private Feeding Halted by IDFG**

Several area residents who began feeding deer were reportedly told by IDFG to stop or they would be issued a citation for violating I.C. Sec. 25-207A. That Code section allows the Division of Animal Industries to regulate or prohibit private feeding of big game in areas with a high risk of disease transmission by persons who purposely or knowingly feed in a manner that results in an artificial concentration of animals that may spread disease.

That Code Section does not apply to supplemental feeding activities conducted by IDFG, which would include private feeding approved by F&G. But it does require that IDFG cooperate with the Division regarding separation of big game and livestock in high-risk areas.

When large, unhealthy concentrations of hungry animals occur near ranches or other food sources during a severe winter, it is generally caused by the Department’s failure to feed the smaller groups of animals before they congregate in populated areas. Attempts to “bait” the animals to another location are only successful when a sufficient amount of feed is provided to satisfy the daily nutritional requirements for all of them.

### **Emergency Feed Authorization Too Late**

When local resident Vicki Beck first reported 14 elk being killed on the railroad tracks east of Montpelier, Regional F&G suggested local citizens should convince the Idaho Legislature to fund a 200-mile-long elk-proof fence. No effort was made to address the problem until local residents finally told Director Huffaker they were going to the Legislature unless he took action.

As anyone who has ever tried it knows, efforts by IDFG and the Bear Lake County Sheriff’s Office to haze the hungry elk away from their food source failed. On

February 21, after county employees bladed a feed site away from the highway, railroad tracks and ranches, F&G began “baiting” (feeding) the elk.

On March 10, 2006, Southeast Region officials finally announced IDFG approval of emergency feeding of elk and deer. The news release said F&G was distributing three tons of hay per night to feed more than 200 elk at the Banks Canyon feed site.

At a maximum intake of 10-12 pounds of hay per elk per day (average for all age classes), 6,000 pounds will normally feed a minimum of 500-600 elk but no explanation was given for the discrepancy. The same press release said that approximately 300 mule deer were “being baited from human conflicts with at least a quarter-ton of (deer) pellets per night” (~ 1.7 pounds per deer).

### **Mule Deer Feeding Facts**

When mule deer are fed deer pellets free choice, average consumption is normally about three pounds per deer per day. Extensive research in Colorado revealed that when mule deer were fed only an average of two pounds per day, adult buck mortality was three times as high as those that were fed free choice (almost three pounds).

Adult and yearling female deer mortality was twice as high for deer fed only two pounds per day as for those fed free choice. By feeding mule deer an average of less than two pounds per day near Georgetown Canyon, IDFG guaranteed an excessive loss of mature deer and near total loss of fawns.

Unlike elk, it is possible to “bait” mule deer away from an area where they are committing depredations and then hold them in the new area with insufficient feed. But the end result of that practice is that the more aggressive animals with the most fat reserves get the lion’s share of the feed while the bucks, fawns, and yearling females with fawns slowly starve to death.

The Colorado researchers apparently had enough livestock feeding experience or common sense to realize this and they strung the pellets out with a separate two-pound pile of pellets for each deer, to simulate natural foraging. But when deer are fed less than three pounds each in community troughs, once humans leave the more aggressive animals rush the troughs and dominate the feed.

With some variations caused by weather, mule deer normally follow what amounts to a feeding “schedule” over each 24-hour period. This facilitates proper digestion allowing maximum energy intake, and allows the warming action of the rumen to operate during critical periods of both day and night.

Forcing deer to unnaturally rush the troughs and gorge themselves and fight for the available feed once a day increases both feed intake and total daily nutrient requirements. But when adequate (not excessive) feed is provided, small groups of deer utilize the feed efficiently at various times during the day and night, which enables them to survive without wasting feed.

The studies by Colorado researchers Baker, Hobbs, et al, justifying emergency winter feeding of mule deer to mitigate losses during severe winters were provided to the Wildlife Bureau Staff in 1994. They are also available in the Journal of Wildlife Management to IDFG biologists, feeding advisory committee members and Idaho F&G Commissioners to help them determine whether or not to feed and how to do it successfully when it is indicated.

Instead, IDFG officials continue to publish the same misinformation and clichés to “justify” not feeding until animals start dropping dead in public view. And instead of investigating citizen reports of starving deer and elk, the feeding advisory committees simply repeat the false information F&G provides.

In his March 10, 2006 news release, SE Region Supervisor Mark Gamblin emphasized that the deer and elk were only being “baited” to prevent depredation of hay and ornamentals and prevent vehicle collisions. To support his claim that the deer did not need feeding he wrote, “That doesn’t mean that if someone offers them ‘ice cream’ they won’t eat it.”

#### **Is This Fish and Game’s Ice Cream Cone?**

For 20 years SE Region officials have referred to feeding starving deer as “providing them an (unnecessary) ice cream cone” and for well known Pocatello gunsmith, hunter and conservationist John Kontes, Gamblin’s statement was the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” He sent me the photo on the right side of page 1, taken on February 24, 2006 in Montpelier Canyon, of a snow-covered tree that resembles an oversize ice cream cone.

Kontes and his companion, Pocatello sportsman Harvey Peck, described front hoof prints of does and fawns on the snow “ball” as they tried to reach some needles to add to the indigestible woody branches they were eating. Kontes also sent photos of several elk cut in half as they sought refuge on the railroad tracks.

#### **Advisory Committee Parrots F&G Claims**

*Beginning in early February* 2006, BLM and some IDFG officials from the Southwest to the Upper Snake either closed winter range to recreationists, or asked them not to disturb mule deer to help them survive the severe winter. Yet in the latter part of March, SE Region feeding advisory committee officer Rick Cheatum wrote, “*Until last week*, the deer herds in Southeast Idaho were doing very well this winter and it appeared the herd was going to make it through with a minimum of mortality.”

Then Cheatum quoted info in the March 24, 2006 Mule deer Fawn Mortality Study report which stated that 15 of 23 collared fawns northwest of Soda Springs had already died and “F&G said the deaths appear to be from malnutrition.” If Cheatum had taken the time to investigate the rural residents’ reports of mass starvation and checked the bone marrow content in dozens of road kills, he might have realized how illogical his claim that the deer “were in good shape until last week” sounds.

Instead, he simply repeated what F&G said rather than learn and report the truth that the deer had been in an advanced stage of malnutrition for several weeks. The extended winter and crusted snow merely caused them to die several days sooner.

#### **Claimed “Signs of Above Average Survival”**

Mr. Cheatum is also President of the Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation and his additional comments in their Second Quarter 2006 Newsletter continued to parrot IDFG propaganda rather than facts. “Green-up isn’t here yet but we are seeing some signs that survival of fawns and adult deer could be *well above average for the past few years.*”

On May 5, 2006 IDFG released an updated Fawn Survival Report indicating *the highest statewide mule deer fawn losses in the eight years they have been measured* in the 10 indicator units! This includes the severe losses during the 2001-02 winter when half of the mule deer in the Southeast region died from starvation despite a halfhearted effort to feed some of the deer.

Like F&G always does, Cheatum and his feeding committee ignored the criteria to begin feeding and played “Russian Roulette” with the Region’s mule deer, hoping that green-up would somehow solve the problem. And, as often happens, the Region’s mule deer and the citizens who own them were the big losers.

The fact that three small bunches of mule deer were “baited” in Georgetown Canyon beginning in late February to appease the most vocal citizens does not excuse the wanton refusal to feed the rest of the starving deer. Unfortunately the SE Region was not the only region where a feeding advisory committee ignored its mandate and allowed mass starvation to occur.

#### **F&G Supporter Votes Not To Feed**

Following the F&G failure to feed properly in Units 33 and 35 during the 2001-02 winter, the Boise County Commissioners submitted the names of three highly qualified local residents to fill a vacancy on the SW Region Feeding Advisory Committee. Instead of selecting one of the three, F&G Commissioner Watts chose a local apologist for IDFG who strongly defended the failed 2002 F&G feeding effort.

When the criteria to begin feeding were met this winter in Units 33 and 35, the new feeding committee appointee cast the tie-breaking 3-to-2 vote not to feed. The anti-feeding activists in IDFG won another victory and most of the mule deer in Units 33, 34 and 35 starved to death due to a decision based on ignorance.

As the snow began to melt on the south slopes in late April, deer carcasses were scattered across the landscape. The local conservation officer reportedly expressed amazement at the number of dead deer at one location and said he thought people were dumping them there.

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The May 5, 2006 Mule Deer Fawn Mortality report revealed that all but one of the 23 radio-collared fawns in Unit 33 had died and another report to the Commission confirmed the deer should have been fed. Adult mule deer does had also been collared in Unit 33 earlier in the winter and on May 19, the Commissioners were told that 38% of those adult does had died by early April.

### Huffaker – “This Is Not A Crisis”

Wildlife Bureau Chief Jim Unsworth told the Commission, "We lost a lot of deer," and recommended eliminating antlerless youth and archery hunting and cutting the number of late buck muzzleloader hunt permits in half. But Director Huffaker assured the Commission "This is not a crisis," and said that changing the hunting seasons was only a precaution and the number of dead deer "is within the normal range of winter losses."

To put Huffaker's statements in perspective it is important to remember that we have spent the past 13 years and several million sportsmen license dollars attempting to rebuild a mule deer population that was similarly decimated by former Director Jerry Conley's refusal to feed them. Conley also claimed it was not a crisis and insisted the population would "bounce back in two years."

Losing 96% of the fawns, most of the mature bucks and 38% of the adult females that had survived from May 2005 until they were radio-collared in Jan.-March 2006 is a major crisis. The statistics do not represent the *total* percentage of 2005 *pre-hunting season* adult females that died – a number that may be much higher than 38%.

### 2005-06 Winter Losses Not “Normal”

By averaging the late-winter-to-early-spring fawn losses at 66% in all 10 of the collared sample groups in five regions, Huffaker attempts to claim that the deaths are in the "normal range of winter losses." He ignores the warning of his own research biologists that averaging can only be done when all of the death losses are consistently high or consistently low (see "Deer Survival in Southwest Idaho," *Journal of Wildlife Management* 69(1):2005).

In this long-term study, the researchers concluded that measuring deer survival from a small sample in one area may not reflect survival in other areas, even when forage and weather conditions are similar. In other words, the recorded 36% death loss of fawns in the Boise foothills on the SW boundary of Unit 39 obviously does not compare with the 96% death loss in Garden Valley Unit 33, only 25 miles away.

Implying that an average of the fawn losses in these two tiny samplings reflects fawn losses in the SW Region's 17 units stretching from the Salmon River to the Nevada border ignores other facts in evidence. The mid-winter capture and collaring study is designed to identify specific winter losses from malnutrition and major predators as they happen and is not a substitute for winter counts, or ongoing bone marrow and weather monitoring.

However the fact that 60 percent of the monitored fawns in Garden Valley had already died in February (most from malnutrition) was an undeniable sign that winter feeding was needed immediately. It was also a sign that the recommended season changes should have been made at the March Commission meeting but the abnormal early losses were ignored by both Huffaker and the Commission.

### Feeding Committees, F&G Ignore Laws

Citizen feeding advisory committees were created in 1994 as an independent resource to tell IDFG when, where and how to conduct a proper feeding operation. Instead the committees have supported the Department's decision to let most of the mule deer starve during the only two severe winters in southern Idaho since then.

In 1994, the Legislature amended I.C. Sec. 36-111 to require F&G to put at least half of every \$1.50 collected in a separate sub account used only for winter feeding until more than \$400,000 exists. Then the surplus over \$400,000 may only be used to improve winter range for big game according to the amended Code.

This was done specifically to prevent F&G from spending the money for something else but, like the advisory committee law, it has not worked. F&G refuses to spend much money for emergency feeding which leaves a large surplus every year that becomes a slush fund to make up shortages in other programs, while it is charged to programs like the Mule Deer Initiative.

Although the Mule Deer Initiative promised that emergency winter feeding would be one of the tools used to prevent excessive mule deer losses during severe winters (Action Item 8), the February 2006 Update has omitted all mention of emergency feeding.

When feeding was indicated in SE Idaho in early February, the Legislative Services Budget Office reported the feeding account balance was \$736,000 on January 31, 2006. Yet Director Huffaker refused to declare the feeding emergency for another month, which caused thousands of mule deer to starve to death in areas where snow was deep. He is the fourth Director in 35 years to refuse to feed properly (the other three, Woodworth, Conley and Sando, were ultimately forced to resign).

During the 22 years since the \$1.50 feeding charge was first added to the cost of big game tags, sportsmen have paid nearly ten million dollars into the dedicated fund to insure that deer, elk and antelope are fed properly during the occasional extreme winter. Yet F&G has refused to feed timely in each of the extreme winters since then.

### The Tail Is Still Wagging the Dog

When Governor Kempthorne's F&G Commission appointees were asked by members of the Idaho Senate Resources Committee if they supported emergency winter feeding of big game, each responded with an emphatic "Yes" and their appointments were all confirmed. Yet none objected when Director Huffaker refused to allow the starving mule deer to be fed this winter.

# The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's Mandate

By George Dovel

When the Idaho Fish and Game Commission was created in 1938 by citizen initiative, it was given the authority, power and duty to supervise, manage and control the Department and to administer Idaho Wildlife Policy. That policy is to preserve, protect, perpetuate and manage Idaho wildlife to provide continued supplies for the citizens of Idaho for hunting, fishing and trapping.

In order to carry out that policy I.C. Sec. 36-104(b) requires the Commission to investigate and find facts regarding the status of wildlife populations and to hold hearings for the purpose of hearing testimony to determine if the supply of any species is being depleted, or will be depleted by taking it. If it finds any species is or will be depleted, it must adjust the bag limit, sex and season length, or close the season entirely if necessary to prevent that species from being depleted.

The Commission's mandate is a straightforward formula for sound, science-based game and fish management. But it has been so corrupted by pressures to maximize short-term revenue and reward special interest groups for their support as to make it almost impossible to obey.

## Commission Given Proper Tools

During Steve Mealey's brief term as Director, he implemented mandatory big game hunter harvest reports to provide the Commission accurate harvest information on which to base hunting seasons. He also implemented a system of establishing minimum deer and elk population quotas for each management unit (supposedly based on carrying capacity) below which no antlerless animals will be harvested.

The Commission established minimum buck:doe and bull:cow ratios but stopped short of implementing minimum doe:fawn and cow:calf ratios. All of these tools, combined with increased aerial census flights, simplified Idaho wildlife management and allowed more precise adjustments in seasons – or should have.

## Bonus Special Privilege Hunts

The problem is that each year the Commission also approves nearly 36,000 limited controlled hunt deer or elk permits – *most* of which are for bonus special privilege hunts which are allowed in addition to separate any-weapon, archery, and muzzleloader general seasons. There is no biological justification for the special privilege hunts yet they are considered “sacred” by the groups that lobbied for them and by the F&G officials who receive more than a million dollars in special fees from them every year.

The Commission public hearings, required by law to determine when wildlife populations, are being depleted or will be depleted, have turned into “Gimmie some more special privilege” sessions. Of the 21 people representing

themselves or various interest groups who testified on March 1, 2006, only *one* offered information and concerns about a declining wildlife population!

Sportsmen For Fish & Wildlife Executive Director Nate Helm presented letters from SFW's Mini-Cassia Chapter expressing concern about a proposed antlerless deer hunt in Unit 55, and from the West Side Sportsmen's Association opposing a proposed controlled doe hunt and other doe harvest in the SE Region. A letter from SEIMDF President Rick Cheatum pointed out that severe winter deer losses and failure to meet the antlerless harvest threshold meant no antlerless season should be implemented.

This is the type of unbiased, documented input that the Commissioners are required by law to consider in determining whether or not to allow antlerless deer harvest. The Commission reduced the proposed number of limited antlerless youth hunt permits in five units to only 150, yet gave archers 32 days of *either-sex* general season hunting in all 12 of the SE Region general season mule deer units!

## Biennial Deer Seasons – A Formula For Disaster

Two outfitters requested that deer seasons be set two years in advance to allow more long-range bookings. Several weeks later, Big Game Manager Brad Compton announced that he was working on a plan to set deer seasons and regulations two years at a time to allow mule deer *hunters* more “flexibility” in planning their hunts.

This dangerous action would violate the Commission's lawful mandate to hold hearings and set seasons (every year) and could result in massive mule deer losses just as it did when their predecessors tried it.

In March of 1992, the Commission issued two years of Big Game Regulations. The 1992 hunting season was followed by massive winter losses, which dictated many changes in seasons and antlerless harvest.

But IDFG was unwilling to eliminate the money-making special hunts and extra doe tags so it published a 1993 supplement reducing the 4,220 antelope permits by 200, but **increasing** the deer permits from 10,370 to **12,880** and increasing the elk permits from 20,285 to **23,995!**

Thousands of hunters from across southern Idaho who had witnessed the mass starvation refused to buy a deer tag. But 157,277 deer tags were still sold to gullible resident and non-resident hunters who believed the F&G propaganda and flocked to the hills – many with regular tags and extra antlerless tags to fill.

Although hunters killed 6,000 fewer elk and 17,000 fewer deer than they had the year before, the combination of an extreme winter followed by excessive female harvest in 1993 delivered a severe blow to Idaho's mule deer population.

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### Commission Panders to Special Interests

The mule deer population has never recovered and there is little likelihood that it ever will unless the Fish and Game Commission stops pandering to special interest groups and starts managing the wildlife resource. The Commissioners' failure to make special interest groups "bite the bullet" along with the average deer hunter reflects their unwillingness to change the status quo.

During the March 1, hearing, three rifle elk hunters complained about their limited permit late elk hunt in the McCall Zone being given to unlimited muzzleloader hunters. The following day Commissioner McDermott commented that Idaho has a tremendous amount of hunting opportunity and questioned why the muzzleloader hunt needs to be separate which further complicates the big game hunting rules. He did not receive an answer.

Commissioner Watts admitted that 60% of the winter-collared fawns in the Garden Valley area had already died by mid-winter, yet supported the biologists' recommendation to continue special privilege either-sex archery and youth hunts in Units 33, 34 and 35. He also recommended no change in the special privilege late season muzzleloader buck hunt despite the obvious loss of mature bucks from starvation.

Harvest success in the 2005 October "any weapon" general deer season in those three units was 22% including youth doe hunters (only 17% success for bucks of which only 31% were 4-points or better). But harvest success in the special privilege late muzzleloader buck hunt was a whopping 65% of which 100% were 4-points or better!

In May when SW Region officials told Watts that most of the deer in Units 33, 34 and 35 had died He voted to stop the doe harvest by archers and youths but only to reduce the number of permits in the late muzzleloader buck hunt. That hunt allows hunters to drive the paved road during the peak of the rut or later when snow has forced the deer down, select a big buck, walk a short distance from their vehicle and shoot it.

### Elk Meat Hunters Must Use Muzzleloaders

With about 200 applicants, including nonresidents, for the 149 permits, a resident has about a 3-in-4 chance of drawing a permit. Whether or not he or she draws the buck permit they can still drive the same paved highway from Banks to the Stanley Basin with their muzzleloader and an "A" Elk Tag and shoot at a cow elk near the road.

If an adult rifle hunter wants to kill a cow elk for the freezer in the area, he can hunt in only portions of two units and must compete in a drawing for either 50 or 100 permits. Yet by buying a muzzleloader permit and an A-Tag an unlimited number of hunters can kill a cow elk in any of four different general season units from Nov. 10 to Nov. 30.

In 2005, 1,155 hunters with muzzleloaders killed 410 cow elk in this late special privilege hunt. The

following photograph shows the three youngest members of the Sandy and Marilyn Donley family posing with the cow elk each killed in the 2005 late elk hunt.



Sadie, Amanda and Ken Donley with cow elk they each killed with their muzzleloader during the 2005 late muzzleloader elk season.

The Donleys are skilled hunters and fishermen who have been forced to adjust to the special privilege hunts sold by IDFG since the mid-1980s. Each has seen firsthand the exploitation of Idaho game by F&G selling hunts when the animals are most vulnerable.

### Another Special Privilege Hunt

In Unit 39, which begins a couple miles south of the Donley home in Garden Valley, a spin-off group calling themselves "Traditional Muzzleloader Hunters" was given a late summer general antlerless deer season in 2004 which coincides with the antlerless elk season they were given in 2001. In September 2005, 469 "traditional" hunters killed 102 cows and calves and 380 "traditional hunters killed 140 does and fawns in Unit 39.

Despite the fact that their *alleged* "low" kill rate was used as a major excuse to justify both hunts, their 2-yr. elk kill rate was **22% higher** and their 2-yr. Deer kill rate **27% higher** than general season rifle hunters in the same unit! But archery and black powder are not the only special privilege hunts that cannot be justified biologically.

### Restore Biologically Defensible Seasons

The Department offers limited mid-summer any-weapon buck permits and an unprecedented assortment of special privilege mule deer and elk hunts stretching from August 15th for deer and Aug.1st for elk, through December 31st. Why not add a single-shot rifle hunt, a single-shot pistol hunt, a special shotgun hunt, and then a single-shot shotgun hunt? The possibilities are endless!

Until these special privilege hunts are eliminated and we return to biologically defensible seasons that don't run the stored winter fat off of the animals for **3-5 months** in a row, big game populations – especially mule deer – will continue to decline. The first step is to stop bribing sportsmen groups with special privilege hunts in return for their support and extra permit dollars.

# The Truth About Hunter "Caps"

By George Dovel

*Early in May we were forwarded a copy of an email originally sent from Utah Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife founder Don Peay, describing cooperative rangeland restoration projects in central Utah. It included the Forest Service project leader's comment that if Utah reaches a million acres (of restoration) "the good old days of deer hunting have a chance to return."*

*The email included a comment from former Director of CSI and SFW-Idaho Chapter, Jim Hagedorn, asking why this type of cooperation couldn't happen in Idaho. The email also included the following response from SFW-Idaho founder Kelton Larsen, sent to a long list of sportsmen, F&G Commissioners and me: - ED*

Jim,

Thirteen years ago Utah was in the same boat as Idaho is today! S.F.W stepped up and turned things around. I know this from personal experience. The problem we have in Idaho is that everyone is after their own piece of the pie.

Utah learned they had to start managing for the resource. The biggest lie in the state of Idaho is that we are managing for opportunity. This same lie fits Fish and Game's pocket book who has to meet a 75 million dollar budget whether they have the resource or not! In other words, you can't sell what you don't have.

Some Idaho sportsmen and Fish and Game Commissioners have bought into the lie that Utah manages for the rich! Although I don't agree with everything Utah does, they have put together a good program especially from thirteen years ago. When everyone quits fighting over every little piece of the pie, then we can start doing some great things that will directly benefit wildlife.

The other day a gentleman told me he was ashamed that he was not taking his kids hunting. He said, "The hunting is so lousy that I don't enjoy going hunting anymore". The funny thing is I hear that from many sportsmen. When Idaho finally wakes up and starts managing for the resource then you will be able to see great things happening with projects that have a major impact on wildlife.

You will notice in the last Sportsmen Voice (*SFW quarterly publication*) the picture of the Moose. Don Peay basically said, "Everyone doesn't have to have a tag to have a quality family experience. If my friend or family member happens to get a tag and I don't, I can still go with my friend. I can help him spot, camp and have a great time. You do not have to pull the trigger to have a great time."

In fact, taking a picture of a monster Mule Deer would get me excited. With human populations being what they are, and all the modern technology we have, no state in the west has had success without some type of cap or

restriction. I will challenge anyone including our Fish and Game Commissioners to prove me wrong on that one!

Proper management is one element that is always left out of the Idaho Fish and Game equation. Get sportsmen excited again and the sky is the limit, which will in turn increase hunter opportunity.

We can all lie to the bishop Jim, but lets not lie to each other. At some point we are going to have to put some cap or restriction on the biggest predator, the sportsmen. If you save some today you will always have some for tomorrow.

Thanks Kelton

I sincerely appreciate Kelton sending me a copy of his email and I accept his challenge to show him one state in the West that manages mule deer successfully without capping the number of hunters. But first I believe a reality check is needed regarding Idaho attempting to imitate Utah's million-acre range restoration plan.

Such a project would require a minimum of 10 years to complete at a cost exceeding half a billion dollars. Insufficient moisture, competition from weeds, destruction of seedlings by rodents or deer, wildfires or extended periods of drought can all cause dramatic increases in that cost and limit success.

One million acres comprises less than three percent of Idaho's public lands and rehabilitating rangeland is often not cost effective. Even if it doubled the harvest of deer, and there is no solid evidence that it would by itself, it would cost far more than the value of the extra deer harvested. Lacking proof of positive economic benefits, it appears doubtful that taxpayers and their elected federal and state representatives would support such a program in Idaho at this point in time.

I agree with Kelton's analysis that Idaho's problem lies with IDFG managing for money rather than manage the resource. I also agree that certain sportsmen groups (but definitely not "everyone") are part of the problem by fighting over the remaining pieces of the pie. But I do not agree that hunter "caps" can ever provide a solution.

## **Wyoming Does Not Cap Resident Deer/Elk Hunters**

Now, Kelton, about that challenge. Pages 4-11 of the September 2005 Outdoorsman (Bulletin No. 14), presented an in-depth analysis of deer hunting in three states that cap the number of resident deer hunters, and in Wyoming, which does not limit residents.

All three of the state game agencies that cap hunters also offer exclusive special-privilege hunting seasons to a very limited number of hunters. And all three of those states allow hunters to bypass having to draw for a

*continued on page 10*

### Hunter "Caps" *continued from page 9*

chance to hunt by either bidding enough money in a special auction or paying enough money to an outfitter or landowner who is authorized to sell them a tag for whatever fee he can collect.

#### Equal Harvest Opportunity for Residents

Unlike Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Idaho, Wyoming offers equal deer and elk harvest opportunity to every resident who chooses to hunt. Eighty-six percent of the deer areas and 49% of the elk areas have general seasons open to anyone in the state.

The units that require a resident to draw for a hunt permit have easy access to herds close to population centers that are extremely vulnerable to over-harvesting. But no general season deer or elk area is ever changed to a limited controlled hunt area without research, proof of biological justification and a public hearing.

There are some controlled hunts in general season deer areas but they are for a limited number of does or white-tailed deer where a general doe season shorter than one week to limit harvest would not be fair to some hunters. Areas where doe harvests can be sustained have general either-sex or separate general antlerless seasons.

In areas where it is indicated for mule deer, antler-point restrictions are used and some of these also allow either-sex whitetail harvest. But, unlike Idaho, Wyoming does not give special harvest opportunity to any buck hunter where a general season also exists.

With only a handful of exceptions, Wyoming does not allow mule deer hunting during the rut, unlike the three "capped" states and Idaho. Extensive hunting during this period could skew the buck/doe ratios to unacceptable levels, but the absence of November hunts assures optimum conception, increased winter survival and more trophy animals available to all hunters during the following October season.

With abundant game and most hunting seasons opening on October 15<sup>th</sup>, most Wyoming residents prefer to hunt in their local area. But nonresidents, who are already driving long distances, tend to travel a little further to hunt a Region that reports the highest harvests.

To prevent overcrowding in any region, Wyoming sets a separate nonresident quota for each of its 14 regions. Nonresident general hunt quotas and separate limited hunt quotas are also set by the Commission each year.

#### Hunter Harvest Statistics

As with many statistics, hunter harvest success is often misleading. In states that restrict the number of hunters of a big game species, the success percentage may appear quite high yet the total number of animals harvested may be quite low.

Conversely, in states that have unrestricted general open seasons the success percentage may be lower. Also, including both deer for the hunters that kill two deer, doubles the actual success rate per number of hunters.

But despite the fact that three of the states have capped the number of deer hunters well below historical levels, both Wyoming's deer harvest success rate and its number of deer harvested is substantially higher than in any of the other states. I have used the 2003 statistics below because one state has not provided 2004 data and only two states have published 2005 data.

The 2004 deer harvests in the states that reported, were consistently higher, with Wyoming hunters killing 1,756 more deer and the harvest rate jumping to **65.9%**.

#### 2003 Deer Harvest

State	Hunters	Harvest	Kill Ratio
Wyoming	73,660	45,710	62.1%
Colorado	88,009	37,602	42.7%
Utah	89,239	23,279	26.0%
New Mexico	41,365	8,527	20.9%

#### Creating Trophy Units

Setting aside some units for trophy hunting and spending inordinate amounts of money on them while severely limiting hunter participation is not unique to Utah. Idaho has several similar units of which the most famous is Unit 11, set aside for elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep.

Based on 2005 drawing odds it will take 17 years of applying to draw a Unit 11 bull elk tag with a harvest success of 64% (of which only 45% are 6-pt. or better). It will take nine years to draw a buck mule deer tag to hunt in October, and 12 years to draw a November tag (success is 79% and 88%, with an 86% chance of killing a 4-pt. or better).

According to Utah's published 2004 drawing odds, drawing a "Premium Limited Entry" tag in Utah would take: archery - 16 years, rifle - 38 years, muzzleloader - 35 years. "Limited Entry" drawing would take: Archery - nine years and for rifle or muzzleloader - 17 years.

#### Trophy Units Cause Overcrowding Elsewhere

If you prefer to gamble for an excellent chance to harvest a mature buck or bull in Idaho or Utah once every 10-20 years, that's your choice. But what many hunters fail to realize is the severe impact this has on mainstream hunters and the deer and elk they hope to harvest.

When IDFG limits bull elk hunters to 71 and buck mule deer hunters to 109 in Unit 11 (with only slightly higher limits in adjacent Units 13 and 18) most of the lucky people who draw a permit live elsewhere in Idaho or out of state. It doesn't require rocket science calculation to realize that creating three special privilege units in that area has forced hundreds of local deer and elk hunters to either give up hunting - or else travel to some other area.

This causes overcrowding in the new area and creates additional stress for those local hunters and the game they normally hunt. When Utah similarly locked up areas like the Book Cliffs and Paunsaugunt to all but a handful of deer hunters, this created a similar hardship on the 95,000 so-called "general season" deer hunters.

### Less – Not More – Hunting Opportunity

Although I appreciate the tremendous amount of energy, time and money Don Peay and others have expended to accomplish increased localized predator control and the extensive habitat program in Utah, I do not agree with his claim that hunting opportunity has increased dramatically there.

The addition of a few permits to the exclusive limited entry units has been offset by the general season deer hunter cap being lowered by 2,000, a reduction of 9,000 spike elk general season permits, and cutting deer seasons from nine days to five in two Regions.

Except for a privileged few there is less hunting opportunity for deer hunters in Utah today than there was in 1994 and fewer deer are harvested. Deer harvests remain a fraction of what they were from 1945-1992 and there was no sudden loss of habitat in 1993 to explain the deer herd's failure to repopulate its range.

Just like Idaho, Utah refused to provide adequate feed in 1992-93 and then refused to admit the losses and continued to kill off its breeding stock in the 1993 hunting season. The following graph provided by Utah Division of Wildlife shows the failure of Utah's deer herd to recover following the crash in the 1992-93 winter:

**Total Deer Harvested**  
1950-2002



If you examine the graph carefully, it's easy to trace the impact of severe winters beginning with the back-to-back record snowfall winters from 1948-1951. Mule deer populations recovered quickly because the losses were mitigated by emergency feeding and controlling predators.

But the environmentalist agenda of the early 1970s prohibited emergency feeding and predator reduction and the results are obvious. Over-harvesting female mule deer during the 1980s and the biologists' reliance on theories such as capping hunters in the 1990s, prevented recovery through the 2001-02 winter when Utah began harvesting fewer deer than it has since the 1930s.

The fact that mature bucks are starting to be seen in Utah's general season units is due to three successive mild winters, ideal fawning conditions and extremely short hunting seasons – not to limiting hunters 12 years ago.

The claim that man is the biggest predator may have been true in some American Indian tribes that depended on wild animals as a major food source in pre-Columbian times. But in our world, wild predators are the main cause of mule deer mortality, followed by extremes in weather and other natural disasters including parasites and disease.

It is the wildlife managers' duty to mitigate the occasional extreme losses from natural disasters and minimize the radical fluctuations between feast and famine that always occur eventually without man's intervention. Otherwise entire ecosystems suffer extended periods of famine and disease which the "let-nature-take-its-course" addicts choose to call "cleansing".

Wildlife biologists who insist they can't do anything about predation, drought and extreme winters ignore their own textbooks. The end result of their misguided hands-off management philosophy can currently be observed in the unhealthy vegetation, prey species and predators in Isle Royale National Park.

### Hunting Opportunity vs Harvest Opportunity

From Kelton Larsen's email, it appears that he does not understand that F&G continues to expand *hunting* opportunity by providing better *harvest* opportunity for a handful and removing that *harvest* opportunity from the majority. Expanding *hunting* opportunity for the dollars and support it gets from small vocal groups is the reason Idaho allows its big game herds to be stressed unnaturally by hunters for up to 155 consecutive days from mid-summer to early winter.

Providing reasonable *harvest* opportunity for all hunters and enabling its mule deer herds to survive harsh winters is the reason Wyoming only allows mule deer hunting in most rifle units from October 15-31, with earlier closing dates in a few units when it is necessary. There are some mule deer seasons set for hunters who cannot hunt during the last 17 days in October and many general whitetail seasons are Nov. 1-30.

### Realistic Solutions That Work

1. Instead of proposing caps or other restrictions on the number of hunters, which penalizes both present **and future** hunters and does nothing to improve big game numbers, insist that the Idaho F&G Commission eliminate every special privilege big game hunt where a general any-weapon or archery season already exists.

2. Establish realistic antlerless mule deer harvest thresholds in every deer unit and demand they be obeyed. Zero mule deer doe and fawn hunting for any reason except crop depredation or public safety problems that cannot be resolved by other means, until the threshold is reached.

3. Stop requiring hunting license buyers to subsidize "trophy" big game units that exclude hunters.

4. Place a moratorium on license fee increases and a hold on the \$400,000+ annual feeding surcharge until the 2006 winter losses are mitigated with steps **1-3**.

# Vancouver Island Wolves

By Valerius Geist

*(Dr. Valerius Geist, Professor Emeritus of Environmental Science, University of Alberta, is recognized worldwide as the foremost authority on North America's big game species. In February 2006 I requested he provide me a copy of his 2003 letter to wolf researcher Dr. Erich Klinghammer, which was subsequently published in the May 2003 edition of "Virginia Wildlifer".*

*He graciously complied and gave me his permission to publish it in The Outdoorsman. I believe readers will find this personal account of his experiences living in close proximity to wolves entertaining and informative.-ED)*

Dear Erich,

The last of the wolf pack that occupied us since their arrival here in summer 1999 is now dead (March 12, 2003) and so it's time to finish off the story. It's a narrative account, not a scientific paper.

It all fell upon us very suddenly and without warning. Had I known then what I know now, I would have taken census data and organized systematic data collecting.

It did not happen because I had no idea what was to unfold. So, read it and if you want to publish it feel free to do so.

Nothing prepared me for the experiences with Vancouver Island wolves, not the writing of colleagues, nor my own observations during years of field work, especially two winters in northern British Columbia. Wolves came through my Stone's sheep study area then, every two weeks. Since timberline was low, I was afforded splendid opportunities for observation.

In retrospect it appears that, had I taken the European literature more seriously, I might have been better prepared. However, I had assumed that literature to be irrelevant to an understanding of North American wolves.

When I was a graduate student in the early 1960's, Vancouver Island wolves were so scarce that their very existence was doubted. Then in the 1970's wolves became common and swept the island north to south. The hunter harvest of black-tailed deer dropped from about 25,000 deer annually to the current level of about 3,000.

Nevertheless, during the many summer vacations on the island from 1958-1995, we heard virtually nothing of wolves. There were reports of occasional sightings of single wolves, but little else and there was no obvious publicity.

When we moved to Vancouver Island after retirement in 1995, I was keen to find out if wolves were in our vicinity. We bought an acreage at the edge of the

farming district north of Port Alberni, only a few miles south of the boundaries of Strathcona Provincial Park.

Two salmon creeks traverse our land. It adjoins a dairy farm and it was also a farm where initially pigs, but later sheep and cattle, were being raised. Large well-fertilized meadows, repeatedly cut for ensilage and hay and grazed by livestock, extend in the valley flanked by dense second-growth, often swampy, forests of red cedar, red alder, broad-leaf maple, cottonwood, Sitka spruce, hemlock, Douglas fir, etc.

Whenever there was a snow blanket, usually a temporary one, we searched the area for tracks. In this extensive meadow system and the adjacent forests I found possibly one wolf track in December 1995, and none in 1996, 1997 and 1998.

In January 1999 my son Karl and I found a pair of what appeared to be wolf tracks in a pocket of dense black-tailed deer activity about three miles from our house. We then suspected that a pack might be forming. It did.

A wolf pack arrived in late summer 1999. The ultimate origin of the wolves is very likely Strathcona Provincial Park, a large class A provincial park in which there is no hunting, where wolves currently co-exist with elk.

Since our land and our neighbor's land bordered on crown land and extensive private forest lands, our lands formed an edge with fairly wild but young second-growth forests. These flanked the Beaufort Range, which rises sharply about one km from our house to a height of 5000 feet (Mount Joan).

From 1995 to 1999 the forest edges of this large meadow system disgorged small groups of deer every night. Census counts and track counts in snow indicted about 120 deer in the meadow systems, with some 40-50 in a series of meadows close by.

This suggested a density of about 30-40 deer per square mile. These were rather small-bodied black-tailed deer, which struggled with liver flukes and unknown infections as revealed on autopsy by greatly enlarged spleens.

The deer emerged in much the same locations which I will term the "hotspots" and they came as well-spaced groups of does and fawns; bucks were rarely seen. The eastern edge of this area bordered on second growth Douglas fir forests, and the western part on barns and residences on acreages.

These were almost free of deer as deer apparently respected the many dogs kept on farms and by households. Black bears were sighted very often and consistently. A number of huge males had taken up residence in the valley, keeping females out except at mating time.

In late spring bears could be counted on to appear daily. Cougars were present, but invisible. In winter some 50-80 trumpeter swans could be found daily in these meadows, as well as large flocks of widgeons numbering several hundred, about 50-70 mallards, a dozen green-winged teal and a sporadic smattering of other ducks, including wood ducks and diving ducks that rested on several small ponds. Feral eastern cottontails were making their presence known.

Raccoons were uncommon, as were mink and otter. Ruffed grouse and pheasants were initially not rare. Among song birds, starlings, brewers and red winged black birds, formed large flocks as did band-tailed pigeons which favored chicken feed in our chicken coops.

There were seasonally large swarms of crows and a good many ravens year round. Turkey vultures were summer residents. Bald eagles were initially very common.

Red-tailed hawks, Goshawks, Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks, pigeon and marsh hawks were occasional visitors. Great blue herons and night herons were common. We counted some 70 bird species from our kitchen window.

In springtime the countryside rings with the chorus of tree frogs and western spotted frogs. Much of the animal life centered about the agricultural activities, especially about disturbed soils that generate fertility spots heavily exploited by wildlife. The closely managed cattle farm is particularly attractive to wild life.

The creeks carried runs of Coho salmon as well as steelhead and ocean-run cutthroat trout. The salmon were avidly preyed on by bears in late fall. These were not shy about harvesting our fruit trees with rather severe pruning.

The wolf pack made its presence known by July 1999 and deer sightings dropped precipitously, reaching virtually zero in the large meadows by October. Only an occasional fresh track still betrayed a deer, even in the rutting season when deer are exceptionally active.

Night observations revealed deer hugging barns and staying in meadows close to the very buildings they had previously avoided. Dogs were attacked by wolves and several were killed or severely wounded even though some owners rushed in to save their dogs.

Two dairy cows were found dead long after the fact, and a third one had to be put down, having been severely injured about udder, sexual organs and anus. A wolf injured a newborn calf and its dam within 200 paces of the cow barns.

The calf was rescued by the hired man on the farm, who rushed it to the barn on a quad. The wolf followed right to the barn. The injured heifer (a clearly visible cut on the inside of the tarsus of the right hind leg) subsequently limped, and when resting isolated herself from the herd and lay down at the forest edge or within shrubbery.

Of the three cattle kills that could be attributed to wolves, two were of cattle that apparently made their last

stand in a deep pocket of a drainage ditch in water. The third one was run into the corner of a pasture against barbed wire beside a gate, where she was cornered and mutilated

A few cattle returned with docked tails and slit ears. There were many sheep kills. One neighbor saw a wolf appear in his yard and make off with a turkey.

While there was great tolerance for bears and cougars in the neighborhood, and initially some denial that wolves were the cause of the dead and mutilated cattle, this attitude changed, in part because the wolves soon acted brazen. They did not flee from people, but stood or sat and looked them over, ran past them at short distances or approached to investigate.

They approached and followed people mounted on horseback and were photographed doing so. This accelerated to the point in three instances, of single wolves approaching and barking and howling at people from as close as 15 paces away.

One of those people was my wife (two instances) and the other my next door neighbor. I was the subject of a deliberate intercept once by the largest of the wolves. He saw me, ducked into timber then circled to intercept, howling twice at me, before stepping out on the road about 50 paces off, clearly interested. Our eyes met and he fled across the road.

When attacking dogs the wolves acted as if oblivious of the owners who could hardly dissuade the wolves by shouting and hand waving, and in extreme cases driving between wolf and dogs with a motorcycle or tractor or firing a shotgun repeatedly at the wolves.

This matched reports I received - privately - from a fellow wildlife biologist, and it matched with a previous publication about wolves on Vancouver Island. Also, the wolves became oblivious to gunfire.

That summer, two wolves apparently habituated on a camp ground on Vargas Island off Tofino, attacked a camper and injured him seriously before the wolves were driven off by other campers. The two wolves were shot and proved to be healthy on inspection and filled with deer fawns.

A road to our back meadow, previously a favorite route for leisurely walks with children, was no longer used by people except when mounted on or in some vehicle. When walking our dogs, I went armed.

Initially dogs and cattle responded noticeably to the presence of wolves. The cattle bunched, ran and even broke through fences and hastened from the meadows to the barns. Yet these very cattle would follow closely or even chase black bears. When we heard the first wolf howling our very large Bouvier des Flandre female, whined and tried to get into the basement for shelter. On our walks, the dogs stuck to us closely during portions of the walk. This was not usual behavior.

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### Vancouver Island Wolves *continued from page 13*

A decade earlier a wolf showed up and precipitated similar actions by cattle, a few of which also lost the end of their tail. This wolf was shot as it fled, and matters returned to normal.

Another long time resident described earlier visits by wolves, as well as his shooting a wolf out of a pack of seven, and killing another large male at short distance while grouse hunting as it stood and stared at him. Wolves were thus episodic visitors to this meadow complex. Standing up to people was a recurring theme.

In 1999 three wolves were trapped by the predator control officer on the farm with sheep. Another wolf was killed by a duck hunter whose dog was attacked in his presence by three wolves. He wounded a second wolf and it may have been the same wolf whose skeleton was found subsequently. I shot one of two wolves that appeared together, a female.

In 2000 three wolves were taken by the control officer. My neighbor shot two wolves and I shot one.

In 2001 two adult wolves were present. Trapping failed, though two traps were sprung and had been dragged off. My neighbor shot a large male wolf, which was sent to the US Fish & Wildlife Service forensic laboratory in Ashland, Oregon.

I shot a wolf, which dropped at the shot but subsequently ran off, not to be found despite extensive searching by two neighbors and myself with a dog. This wolf reappeared in late summer 2002, limping, with a healed but poorly functioning right front leg.

I saw him three times and my neighbor saw him twice. We had an informal agreement not to shoot him as this wolf had been seen fraternizing with sheep dogs, a rarely observed occurrence.

This wolf made an appearance early in the morning on February 28<sup>th</sup> in front of our house, where he barked at my wife. He might have been attracted by one of our female dogs which was then in heat. This wolf was shot by a sheep farmer on March 12, 2003 and was turned over to BC Fish and Wildlife for further analysis.

That was apparently the last wolf about. However, in the 2001-2002 winter we tracked a pack of four wolves whose visit was brief.

Although bears and cougars were largely innocuous, bear and cougar problems erupted in 1999 when four bears were killed, and in 2000 when an additional four bears were dispatched – none by a hunter. It is surmised that poor berry crops precipitated break-ins by bears into sheep sheds, poultry barns, hog pens as well as brazen appearances in orchards – all very close to houses.

One bear was run over by a truck and seven were trapped or shot. All of these bears were exceptionally large males. One huge, but very shy male survived, as did several smaller males.

One large male confronted my wife and myself. While he survived that encounter he disappeared and was apparently shot while breaking into livestock pens.

In 1999 two apparently starving yearling cougars settled down to killing a cat-lover's pets and were dispatched by the predator control officer. A third yearling cougar was killed by hunters after it settled in among houses and even killed a deer in a barn.

Thus in four years there were killed within a 2 km circle around our house 13 wolves, eight bears and three cougars.

The effect of wolves on wildlife was not only direct, but also indirect. The sheep operation acquired five herding dogs, three of breeds that were bred to keep wolves away.

These dogs chased deer, not only from the meadows used by sheep, but also from adjacent meadows. They made life intolerable for deer over about three-quarters of the observation area.

Their roaming could be observed directly as well as tracked in the snow. These dogs all but eliminated deer and bear activity within their radius of operation.

When wolves were about the dogs moved up to a kilometer from the sheep to confront wolves in prolonged barking matches. Eventually, they were seen – repeatedly – to fraternize with wolves. The last wolf shot was sitting among the sheep dogs.

Since we had three and a half years of observations when there were no wolves about, we were able to compare the before and after when wolves were present. We also observed the effects following absence of a wolf pack or from the sporadic appearance of a single wolf.

The deer deserted the areas hunted by wolves and moved into the close presence of people and houses – despite dogs. That is, while deer formerly avoided the areas closely patrolled by farm dogs, they now accepted the presence of dogs and lived closely about human habitation.

The deer were largely night active when most dogs are safely in houses. While we experienced no deer damage to our orchard, ornamentals and garden when the wolves were absent (1995-1999), such damage rose sharply and severely in the presence of wolves.

In the following years the antler size of bucks increased noticeably as did their body condition. The deer became tame and brazen, particularly in establishments with no dogs or no effective guard dogs. A fraternal group of bucks formed in 2000 which lived among buildings and was very active, but strictly at night.

Only exceptionally were these bucks seen at dusk and dawn. In the fall of 2001, after the last wolf had been shot (injured), deer began to appear in the ecological "hotspots" again.

The survival of fawns through the winter of 2001-2002 was very high, as was the survival of fawns the following year. The differences were dramatic!

Now that deer recovery is in progress the number of deer, which was about 120 before the wolves arrived, is currently about 20. However, this does not count the deer which now live permanently among houses and barns. In my observation area these amount to another 20 deer.

With the arrival of wolves in the large meadows, the trumpeter swans abandoned these in 1999-2000, and did not return for two years till the winter of 2001-2002 when there was no resident wolf pack present. The same meadows were also abandoned by ducks and Canada geese.

When the first deer started to re-appear about the meadows following the absence of wolves, so did a few ducks and geese. The return of the Trumpeter swans was dramatic as the same number of swans were seen last winter as in the last winter before the wolves came, about 70-80 swans.

However, ducks and geese used small meadows close to the barns even when wolves were present. When the injured lone wolf returned, the trumpeter swans again left the meadows and the deer became very alert.

It appeared that the longer the wolves stayed, the more they were shot at and missed, the bolder they became. The sheep appeared to be a primary attraction.

The sheep dogs and wolves developed a "dear enemy" syndrome, and we learned to differentiate the nightly barking of the dogs when they were up against wolves, as opposed to harassing a bear or deer. After sunset the dogs rushed out to the eastern edge of the meadows where these met the tall forest along the mountain slope. Here vigorous extended barking and an occasional howling occurred.

At dusk on October 19, 2001, when only a lone wolf remained, I observed him fraternizing with the sheep dogs. Fraternization had been observed a number of times by the owners of the sheep.

In September 2002, when the same wolf returned, there was evidence of extreme interest in the wolf by the same dog that was most friendly towards the wolf in the fall previous. The sheep remained a source of attraction to the lone wolf.

We found two stray sheep apparently killed and eventually eaten by a wolf in the winter of 2001-2002. We repeatedly tracked this wolf heading towards the sheep farm, where he was repeatedly seen with the dogs by our neighbor and was eventually shot while sitting among the sheep dogs.

It is important to note that deer, outside suburbs, cities and farmsteads are very rare animals. Vancouver Island has been subjected to extensive clear-cut logging which has removed the type of old growth forests that deer depend on in winter.

Where such patches were left, deer concentrated and apparently attracted mountain lions, wolves and black bears. The latter are thought to be efficient fawn predators.

In late spring 2000, 2001 and 2002 I spent eight (8) evenings scouting for black bears in forested mountains west of Port Alberni. I saw a total of 45 bears, about 60 elk, but only one deer, a young doe. Even deer tracks were exceptional in the vast logged off areas.

A combination of loss of winter range and greater susceptibility to predation is thought to have eliminated black-tailed deer in the hinterlands of the island. Fellow biologists recount how, after the arrival of wolves, deer skeletons littered the forest.

A small, but thriving elk population is thought to maintain wolves, which then eliminate pockets of deer wherever they develop. This would account for the episodic appearance of wolf packs.

These wolves were different in external appearance and acted differently from northern gray wolves. They were yellow with black markings, giving at a distance a mottled dark gray appearance not unlike some German shepherd dogs.

They were small, weighing 60-72 pounds and had the large webbed paws of wolves. Their appearance was not unlike that of other coastal wolves.

A large male wolf analyzed morphometrically was in all respects a wolf. It had no characteristics of dogs, although it sported a number of idiosyncrasies in the skull. A genetic analysis is in progress.

Of three other Vancouver Island wolves two had mtDNA typical of domestic dogs. These wolves howled little and never loud. They barked considerably like dogs.

They were also hard to dissuade in their attacks on dogs, killing and feeding on such right in front of houses. They harassed dogs almost under a veranda despite loud protests by my neighbor, chased dogs under a moving tractor, attacked dogs right in front of one or several persons, and were persistent even when my neighbor drove with a motor bike between his dogs and the attacking wolf.

They were not shy, even brazen, were not readily discouraged by human presence, and even approached people to very close range howling and barking, or followed them barking at them. These experiences match that of other persons on Vancouver Island.

What appears to have happened is that wolves built up, virtually eliminated their primary prey, black-tailed deer, and then through food shortages grew small in body and became emboldened to approach farms and houses for food.

Our wolf observations thus resemble those reported from Eurasia. Had there been enough wild prey, it is unlikely that wolves would have targeted livestock and pets or brazenly approached and threatened humans. What we experienced is likely to repeat itself wherever wolves severely deplete their prey.

And this is likely to happen where governments are afraid to take appropriate steps early and, instead, succumb

*continued on page 16*

Vancouver Island Wolves *continued from page 15* to the "nature knows best" notion, as it keeps them out of trouble with vociferous elements of the public. The best management approach would be to intervene early and maintain a viable predator- prey system with a large ratio of prey to predators.

Val Geist

## Notice to Readers

It was two years ago in March when we resurrected The Outdoorsman and began publishing facts about the management of Idaho's wildlife. Thanks to donations from those who receive it in the mail, we have mailed, and sometimes also hand delivered, each issue to all 105 Legislators and to an increasing number of other officials.

Because it presents facts rather than sound bites, the articles are often pretty difficult reading. One reader commented that reading an Outdoorsman article was like taking a drink from a fire hose, and several have said they read each article several times to better understand the issues.

Sometimes it's frustrating when a long-time reader advocates a "change" to "more of the same," but it's rewarding when we receive donations, encouraging letters or information from legislators and state employees. The exchange of information indicates that officials who have the responsibility to protect and manage our wildlife resource are reading the facts we provide.

One reader sends us \$4 or \$5 every six months or so and, because distributing reliable information is our goal, he receives the same attention as donors who donate what it costs us to print and mail. We received a substantial donation from a Chapter of SFW 22 months

ago and we have made every effort to distribute it, including all back issues, to as many SFW members as we could since then.

But that was then and this is now. The last issue cost more than \$1 per copy just to print and mail and we believe that sportsmen groups who benefit from the information should donate enough to pay at least the printing and mailing cost of the issues they receive. I donate about 200 hours for a single issue and 400 hours for a double issue plus all of the other expenses.

So unless we receive "renewal" donations sufficient to cover printing and mailing costs, we'll divert those issues where we believe they will do the most good. Of course we will continue to send them free to all Idaho legislators and to an expanding list of state and county officials to help them make informed decisions on wildlife issues.

To those of you who continue to help support our publication of facts with donations in any amount, I offer my sincere thanks. With your continuing support the necessary changes will be made just as they were in the 1970s.

## Short Shots

An organizer of the Anti-Wolf Initiative advised us they gathered a little over 40,000 signatures but a majority were not registered voters. The spokesperson declared their intent to gather the required signatures in 2008.

When S1283, the Senior Fee Reduction bill was received in the House, Speaker Bruce Newcomb sent it to his own Ways and Means Committee where it died for lack of action. Newcomb reportedly held several Senate bills hostage in his effort to get his Irrigation Bill passed but he released most of them later

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