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## Drought leads to more wildlife sightings

### Fish and Game biologists expressing concern ahead of winter snows

by *JASON KAUFFMAN*

While regional wildlife may have benefited from one of the shallowest snowpacks in recent memory last winter, they may end up paying for it as snows begin to fall in the cold months ahead.

This winter, biologists with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game have plans to keep a close eye on the Wood River Valley's elk and deer herds to see how they're faring after an extra warm, extra dry summer with poor forage. Fish and Game biologists point to the area's 30 percent of average snowpack last winter as a reason for the meager plant growth and what is apparently one of the worst autumn berry crops in years.

Potentially compounding the issue could be the damage to key big game wintering areas caused by the Castle Rock Fire, which burned across a total of 48,520 acres in the eastern Smoky Mountains near Ketchum.

Portions of the burn area are considered highly important for wintering elk herds, said Regan Berkley, regional wildlife biologist with Fish and Game's Magic Valley Regional office.

Berkley said the south-facing grassy slopes in the lower Warm Springs Creek drainage, as well as in the Greenhorn Gulch area, saw significant stretches of prime winter forage burned off by the advancing flames during the months of August and September.

Troubling to biologists is a pattern they've seen and heard about from valley residents in recent weeks, she said.

"We are having some animals coming into places where we usually don't see them," Berkley said.

She said the unusual wildlife sightings have included elk grazing in lowland agriculture areas and black bears rummaging around for food scraps in residential neighborhoods.

The issue has been especially visible on valley roads. From south of Bellevue all the way to Ketchum, the appearance of elk and deer carcasses along roadsides has become a regular occurrence.

Berkley said black bears in particular have been highly visible this summer. She pointed to an incident in the Warm Springs area just last Friday as an example.

After receiving phone calls from several lower Board Ranch residents last week, three Fish and Game



Photo by Karl Weatherly  
Idaho Department of Fish and Game Conservation Officer Lee Garwood uses a snare attached to the end of a long pole to safely lower a young black bear to the ground last week in the lower Warm Springs Creek drainage. The orphaned bear was transported to the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Garden City. The center rehabilitates young black bears for eventual return to the wild.

officers were dispatched to the area to capture a young 40- to 60-pound bear. She said the bear, which was likely just a year-and-a-half old, was mid-way up large cottonwood tree when the officers arrived.

Karl Weatherly, one of the lower Board Ranch residents who called Fish and Game, said the young bear had been seen repeatedly by local residents last week. A professional photographer, Weatherly snapped a series of photos as Fish and Game officers climbed up the tree to capture the bear.

He said Lee Garwood, a Fish and Game conservation officer based in the Wood River Valley, used a noose on the end of a long pole to nab the bear. Once it was caught, Garwood dropped the bear from a safe height down to a waiting tarp held by others.

"He seemed totally unharmed to me," Weatherly said.

The young bruin isn't the only black bear Weatherly has seen near his home in recent weeks.

Locals, including himself, have regularly spotted a mother bear with two cubs, he said.

"They were on my deck at 6 a.m. one morning," Weatherly said. "They were obviously stressed out and looking for food."

Berkley said the young bear captured near Weatherly's home was transported to the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Garden City. The purpose of the center, which is run by Sally Maughan, is to rehabilitate young black bears for an eventual return to the wilds of Idaho.

She said young black bears like the one captured last Friday typically get pushed away by their mothers when they're about 2 years old. She said because the bear was younger than that, it could have gotten lost accidentally.

"It could be that it wandered a little farther away from its mother and didn't find its way back," Berkley said.

She said where the effects of the Castle Rock Fire may be most noticeable in the short term is in the distribution of elk herds.

"It looks like it has impacted some of their wintering areas," Berkley said.

She said the fire could actually have less of an impact on local mule deer herds than for elk. For mule deer, winter range is comprised of the rolling sagebrush steppe areas south of the valley.

"Most of the deer head way out of the area in the winter," Berkley said.

She said that throughout the fall hunting season, Fish and Game biologists will staff a number of roadside wildlife checkpoints. She said the purpose of the checkpoints is to count harvest numbers, but also to check on the general health of elk and deer.

"It gives us a chance to size up general body conditions," Berkley said.

## **Tips for living with wildlife**

Autumn is a critical time for local wildlife as they try to put on fat reserves that will carry them through

the coming winter. To discourage unwanted interactions between people, bears and other wildlife, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game recommends that Wood River Valley residents:

- Delay placing trashcans out at the curb until the morning of trash pickup.
- Place trashcans inside garages or other secure locations when they're not in use.
- Close garage doors to keep wild animals away from trash.
- Bring pet bowls and pet food inside once pets have been fed.
- Limit the use of bird feed, which can attract wildlife like bears in the fall.
- Report all bear sightings in populated areas to the local office of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The agency's regional office in Jerome can be reached at (208) 324-4359.

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