

# TRIBAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT ON THE FLATHEAD INDIAN RESERVATION

By: Dale Becker, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Interest in and concern about wildlife by tribal people who preceded today's members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes has existed as long as the individual tribes. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, tribal people survived through the utilization of their natural resources. Wildlife was one of the most important resources for the provision of food, clothing, tools and raw materials used to fill a variety of basic needs. With the acquisition of horses, the tribes were able to range over a larger area, hunting and gathering as they moved. During this period, they often moved throughout Montana to hunt buffalo and other wildlife.

The Flathead Indian Reservation was established under provisions of the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, the Flathead Indian Reservation was established as the homeland for the Kootenai, Salish and Pend Oreille Tribes (CSKT). Article Three of the Treaty provided the Tribes the exclusive right to hunt and fish on the Reservation, as well as the right to hunt, fish and gather on traditional open and unclaimed lands outside the reservation boundaries. Subsequent legal proceedings have re-enforced the Tribes' hunting rights on the Reservation and aboriginal lands in western Montana.

During the early 1900s, Indian lands were taken by the U. S. Government for creation of the National Bison Range, a major irrigation project, town sites, power sites, agency administration purposes, and land allotments to individual Indians. All lands not so allotted were then opened to homesteading by non-Indians.

In 1921, Ninepipe and Pablo National Wildlife Refuges were created with the request from the Tribes to protect migratory birds. Those refuges are currently managed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Additional wildlife management lands on the reservation are administered by the tribes, as well as Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The CSKT have always been very progressive and proactive in the management and protective of their incredible lands and wildlife resources, Tribal Council actions have resulted in the establishment of the 90,000 acre Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Area, the first tribal wilderness area. They have also created a Wilderness buffer zone and two Tribal Primitive Areas, as well as thousands of acres of Tribal Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management Areas, as well as special management areas for grizzly bears, elk and bighorn sheep. In addition, the

CSKT has been very proactive in protecting the clean air and waters of their reservation.

Today, the Tribes own or control approximately 60% of the 1.38 million acre land base of the reservation. Wildlife habitat under Tribal management ranges from semi-arid sagebrush-dominated grassland to glaciated wetlands to high elevation subalpine habitat. Much of the valleys on the Reservation are dominated by tilled agricultural lands and grazing lands. In addition, those areas also contain many areas of wetlands and riparian zones.

Contemporary tribal wildlife management activities began in the 1930s and continue today under direction of the Tribal Council. Contracted from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1988 under public Law 638, the Tribal Wildlife Management Program (TWMP) was established and functions under three programmatic components - population baseline data collection and monitoring, integration of wildlife issues into resource management decisions, program administration to enhance efficiency and effectiveness and public information and education. The TWMP currently employs a staff of one Wildlife Program Manager, five Wildlife Biologists, one Wildlife Habitat Restoration Biologist, two wildlife biologist trainees and one Wildlife Technician.

Since its inception, the Tribal Wildlife Management Program's Programmatic vision focused on the restoration and enhancement of the biological diversity of the ecosystems of the Flathead Indian Reservation and aboriginal lands by working jointly with other tribal programs and other natural resource management agencies. The TWMP staff works to provide the best management of all terrestrial wildlife and habitat resources possible, while simultaneously realizing the importance of traditional and cultural factors.

The TWMP has focused many of its efforts on the restoration of degraded wildlife habitats and the restoration of healthy populations of endangered, threatened and extirpated species of native wildlife. To date, tribal wildlife biologists have been very active in recovery of federal-listed wildlife species including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, northern gray wolves, grizzly bears, Canada lynx, trumpeter swans and northern leopard frogs. Reintroduction of peregrine falcons, trumpeter swans and northern leopard frogs has assisted in the current increasing populations of each species on the reservation.

Proactive population inventory and management programs have also been undertaken for the six species of native ungulates – elk, moose, bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goats, white-tailed deer and mule deer, as well as for black bears, mountain lions, and bobcats and other native carnivores. Tribal wildlife biologists have regularly surveyed several species of nongame birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles.

Wildlife managers are tasked with working with a wide variety of issues related to conflicts between wildlife and people. Those conflicts often involve the killing of livestock and poultry by bears, wolves, raptors and other predators and damage to agricultural crops by deer and elk, bears and waterfowl. Tribal wildlife biologists spend a lot of time attempting to inform the public about techniques and practices to minimize the potential for conflicts. When the conflicts do arise, the response to investigate complaints quickly and work with affected people to solve the conflicts, often by using fencing, electric fencing, scare devices and other methods. Even with a large amount of effort aimed at prevention of conflicts, the arrival of new residents requires constant reiteration of methods to avoid conflicts.

The Tribes have acquired approximately 11,000 acres of wetland, riparian and grassland habitats for wildlife habitat mitigation lands as part of a mitigation settlement for SKQ Dam, a major hydroelectric facility located on the Reservation. These lands, some of which have been restored for wetland and riparian values, are managed specifically for wildlife habitat values, and they produce large numbers of both game and nongame wildlife species.

Given the historic ecological, cultural and spiritual relationships between the people of tribes and bison, tribal wildlife biologists and other staff have also been active co-managers of bison at Yellowstone National Park as a member of the Interagency Bison Management Team. As a result, tribal representatives annually coordinate management actions and treaty-based hunting of bison that leave the park with other state and federal natural resource management agencies, providing a reconnection with the bison resource there and tribal members.

The CSKT has also been an active player in bison management. Tribal members brought some of the last remaining bison from the northern Great Plains to the Reservation and carefully grew a substantial herd of bison, only to be forced to sell the animals due to the opening of the Reservation to non-Indian homesteading in the early 1900s. At that time, President Theodore Roosevelt established the National Bison Range on an approximately 18,000 acre tract on the Reservation – land that had been taken from the Tribes' control and ownership. In late 2020, as part of the Montana Water Rights Act settlement with the CSKT, the refuge land was transferred to Trust ownership by the BIA for the benefit of the CSKT. Plans are currently underway for the future management of the Bison Range and the wildlife there by tribal managers.

In recent years, western Montana, including the Flathead Indian Reservation, has experienced phenomenal growth of the local human population, seemingly becoming a destination for retirees, recreationists, tourists and relocating Americans. This growth and the related activities has resulted in substantially increased subdivision and related traffic on U. S. Highway 93, the main public thoroughfare through the Reservation. This increased traffic has also resulted in human and wildlife safety concerns, as wildlife collisions and habitat fragmentation has increased.

After several years of disagreements, in 2000, the CKST, Montana Department of Transportation and the Federal Highways Administration signed a unique Memorandum of Agreement that centered upon a concept of the Spirit of Place and how unique the Flathead Indian Reservation is. The agreement also included special wildlife mitigation features for the design of the highway, including a wildlife overpass, 41 wildlife underpasses, wildlife fencing and jump out structures and wetland mitigation stipulations.

Most of the highway has been reconstructed, but a significant ecologically important segment is yet to be completed. Tribal wildlife biologists worked closely with biologists from the Western Transportation Institute to monitor wildlife use of these structures and analyze their reduction of animal-vehicle collisions. To date, tribal wildlife biologists have hosted visitors from several states, as well as China, Myanmar, Mongolia, Canada, Slovenia and other nations and discussed the structures with them.

With the current and changing human demography living on the Reservation and the ev-

er-changing public attitudes about wildlife, the TWMP constantly refines its public outreach efforts and methodologies to reach out to the public about critical wildlife and habitat issues and general wildlife topics of interest. Many of those efforts involve working with school children to help foster a better understanding and appreciation of the special area in which we live and the unique assemblage of wildlife species that we share it with. An example is the tribes' annual Flathead River Honoring, an event to inform local elementary school children about wildlife and other natural resource topics. Other efforts involve close work with local teachers. Outreach efforts are also aided by the development of a CSKT Wildlife Management Program Facebook site and a section of the Tribal Natural Resources Department website ([www.csktnrd.org/wildlife](http://www.csktnrd.org/wildlife)).

Although the CSKT have weathered significant difficulties and challenges down through the years, the people have always cherished and protected the wildlife of the Flathead Indian Reservation and their off-Reservation aboriginal lands. That tradition continues today, with strong cultural support for wildlife and habitats by the two Culture Committees and Elders, as well as the strong support of the Tribal Council and tribal people.



*Photos: (L - R) - Blackbear using a highway wildlife crossing; Flathead River Honoring; and Reintroduced Trumpeter Swans.*



*Photos: (L-R) - Highway wildlife overcrossing; tribal wildlife biologists with trumpeter swans; and, tribal wildlife biologists tagging a grizzly bear.*



*Photos: (L - R) - Tribal and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks wildlife biologists working with bighorn sheep; and Wetland Restoration area.*



*(Above): Wildlife and Conservation and Management Areas on the Flathead Indian Reservation.*

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