Windows to Wildlife



WINTER 2014 A PUBLICATION OF IDAHO WATCHABLE WILDLIFE AND IDAHO DEPT. OF FISH & GAME'S WILDLIFE DIVETESITY PROGREM

White for Winter

by Beth Waterbury*

Salmon Region Wildlife Diversity Biologist, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game

Camouflage is an animal survival tactic that serves both predator and prey. For prey species, camouflage is their first and often best line of defense, allowing them to avoid detection by predators. Camouflage also benefits predators, which require stealth to stalk and catch their prey.

In northern regions with significant snowfall, some mammals undergo a cyclic color molt known as "seasonal camouflage." Triggered by seasonal changes in day length, this adaptation produces changes in fur color from summer browns to winter whites to blend in with the landscape. Idaho's seasonal chameleons include the snowshoe hare, white-tailed jackrabbit, short-tailed weasel, and long-tailed weasel. The winter-white cloaks of these creatures serve a dual purpose: they blend with the snowy landscape and provide thermal insulation in frigid climes. The cells in white hair lack pigment and instead are filled with air which captures insulating warmth.

The snowshoe hare's transformation from brown to white is brought about by a hormonal response to daylight changes causing it to produce different hair pigments. The molt is gradual, beginning in August or September, taking up to 10 weeks. During its splotchy transition, the ground is likewise patchy with snow, providing effective matching camouflage. Snowshoe hares are fully white by mid-winter, except for dense, silky gray underfur and black-tipped ears. By March or April, increasing daylight length triggers another molt cycle back to brown coloration perfect for a summer wooded environment.

The white-tailed jackrabbit, a hare of northern latitude grasslands and shrub-steppe, is the only jackrabbit that undergoes two annual molts. Their coarse, gray-brown summer coat gradually transitions to nearly pure white with some buffy tint on the face, ears, and feet and black ear tips. In more southern latitudes, there may be a partial winter molt, in which only the hare's sides become white, or in some cases there may be no molt at all. Like the snowshoe hare, white-tailed jackrabbits in winter camouflage lie perfectly still in daytime "forms" to evade predators like golden eagles, coyotes, and bobcats. In deeper snow conditions, white-tailed jackrabbits use daybeds in under-snow chambers with interconnecting tunnels. The molt to summer pelage initiates in March and April.

Continued on page 2

Snowshow hare in summer © (CC-BY-SA-2.0) Miguel Vieira on Flickr



Snowshow hare in winter white © (CC-BY-SA-2.0) D. Gordon E. Robertson on WikiMedia Commons

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WINDOWS TO WILDLIFE

As both fierce little predators and prey for foxes, coyotes, and raptors, short-tailed and long-tailed weasels change coat color to avoid detection while stalking prey or being hunted. Similarly to hares, their spring and fall molts are regulated by photoperiod and hormones. The short-tailed weasel is referred to as an ermine in its winter-white coat punctuated by a black tail-tip. Some speculate that predators may focus on the ermine's black tail-tip, thus avoiding a more lethal strike to the body. In an interesting spin on seasonal camouflage, a subspecies of short-tailed weasel endemic to the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, where winters are snow-free, does not turn white in winter. Long-tailed weasels, too, show variation in seasonal camouflage, with populations north of the 40th parallel and east of the Cascades turning white in winter, roughly corresponding to the southern limit of regular snow cover.

Seasonal camouflage is a fascinating survival strategy, but it could become a liability in a changing climate. With climate scientists predicting decreases in the duration of snowpack in the Rocky Mountains and elsewhere, animals that change color with seasons may become increasingly mismatched to their surroundings. A stark white snowshoe hare against a brown snowless background would be easy pickings for a predator. Camouflage mismatch could have profound impacts on snowshoe hare predation rates. Over time, fewer hares would feed fewer predators, creating a negative cascade through the ecosystem. In a changing climate, animals that specialize in seasonal camouflage will have to move to snowy environments, adapt, or die. Recent research led by University of Montana professor L. Scott Mills found that snowshoe hares are able to respond to seasonal mismatch by changing the rate of their spring molt to existing snow conditions. Whether this response is shaped by genetics, temperature, or other mechanisms is not yet understood, but this exciting discovery of rapid local adaptation suggests that other mammal species that change color with the seasons may be able to persist in a changing climate by adapting in place.



Short-tailed weasel © (CC-BY-SA-2.0) Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, Flickr



Short-tailed weasel (ermine) in winter © (CC-BY-NC) Fool-On-The-Hill, Photoree



White-tailed jackrabbit in its summer coat © Patrick Congdon

HELPING WILDLIFE IN 2014

Idaho Tax Checkoff: Benefits the Wildlife You Watch!

Consider making a donation to nongame wildlife in Idaho. The ONLY way to financially support animals that are not hunted, fished, or trapped is by donating on your Idaho State Income Tax form, purchasing an Idaho wildlife license plate, or by sending your direct donation to Idaho Department of Fish and Game's (IDFG) Nongame Wildlife Trust Fund.

Watchable Wildlife is a direct beneficiary of your donation! But if that is not enough, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, pygmy rabbits, native amphibians and reptiles and songbirds are just a few of the species that benefit from this donation.

Remember, IDFG receives NO tax dollars and nongame animals receive NO hunting and fishing license sales dollars, so donate via your Idaho State Income Tax form today!

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Page 2 of Idaho Individual Tax Form 40, line 33 gives you the opportunity to donate to the Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund.

This fund supports over 90% of Idaho's wildlife species (animals that aren't hunted, trapped or fished).

Besides purchasing a wildlife license plate for your car, or direct donation, this is the only other way to donate to this fund!



Photos: (top) long-billed curlew; © Mike Morrison; (bottom) woodhouse toad; © Bruce Haak

CONSETEVATION COTENETS

The Big Snooze in Idaho: Wildlife Squirreled Away for the Winter

by Becky Abel* Southeast Region Wildlife Diversity Biologist, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game

The season of snow and ice is upon us. Winter in Idaho may evoke thoughts of the holidays and spending time with family and friends, or perhaps eagerness to get out and recreate in that white stuff- whether on skis, snowboard, snowshoes, or snowmobile. At this time of year, many wildlife professionals are reminded of the fragility of populations of Idaho's cherished wildlife. It is commonplace to hear discussions about elk and mule deer migration, big game winter range, and overwintering eagles and trumpeter swans. For me, these harsh conditions often conjure thoughts of wildlife we don't often see, but whose livelihood depends on getting through the unforgiving winter with little to no sustenance; those critters that spend winter in a dormant state.

Wildlife have adapted to survive the winter season in various ways.

Neotropical migratory birds such as the American robin and Brewer's sparrows have the advantage we all want- the ability to migrate long distances south to spend the winter in more balmy climes. Other birds, for example cedar waxwings, overwinter in Idaho and adjust their diets to acquire food even when resources are scarce. Medium to large-sized mammals, for example red fox, have the ability to grow thick, insulating coats to keep warm. In order to survive cold temperatures, small mammals would have to grow such thick coats of fur that normal movement would be impossible.

Instead, small mammals can alter their behavior, burrowing under an insulating layer of snow and eating more frequently to maintain a stable metabolic rate. Other species of mammals migrate.



A cluster of Townsend's big-eared bats hibernating in Niter Ice Cave in southwest Idaho. © Dave Kampwerth, USFWS

Ungulates such as elk and deer migrate from summer to winter range where food resources are more easily obtainable, while a few species of bats migrate long distances to the southern U.S. and Mexico where insect prey are active year-round.

Comparatively few mammals and birds have adapted to winter in a unique way- by hibernating through it. Sounds nice, doesn't it? Although it may often appear that hibernating animals are sleeping the winter away, they're actually in a precisely regulated state of suppressed body temperature and metabolism. Hibernation is an energy-conserving strategy that homeothermic (warm-blooded) animals use to escape the decline in both food supply and ambient temperature during winter.

Homeotherms use various strategies for hibernating. Bears experience profound hormonal changes in the months leading up to hibernation. They go through a period of hyperphagia, excessive eating and drinking, after which metabolic processes change and bears stop eating and become increasingly lethargic. Hibernating bears do not eat, drink, urinate, or defecate during hibernation and display severely decreased metabolism and respiration, while body temperature stays relatively high. Because there is no need to warm its body, a hibernating bear can wake up and react to disturbance relatively quickly. In contrast, small mammals such as bats and ground squirrels display a deeper form of hibernation; they maintain a state of suppressed metabolism and respiration, and they also lower their body temperature to just a few degrees warmer than ambient. Bats and rodents that hibernate are unique in that they have large amounts of brown adipose tissue- fat that is highly vascularized, creates heat, and provides more energy storage than white fat. Bats need to periodically arouse from hibernation in order to drink, urinate, and adjust their position inside the hibernaculum. The process of arousal is slow as they need to raise their body temperature as much as 30 degrees Celsius before they can react to stimuli. Bats often choose hibernacula with specific environmental conditions and those that offer protection from predators. Similarly, ground squirrels dig a single-chambered burrow underground for protection during hibernation.

Reptiles and amphibians also go into a state of dormancy during the winter; however, because they are heterotherms (cold-blooded), they cannot warm their own bodies up when conditions worsen. The only protection against freezing in winter depends on choosing a suitably protected spot. For example, the prairie rattlesnake chooses burrows on south-facing slopes and often shares the burrow with many other snakes in order to conserve heat. Amphibians, such as the great basin spadefoot toad, burrow under the soil to escape freezing temperatures, but can continue to respire through their skin.

Every winter, Idaho's wildlife walks a precarious line between survival and certain death. As wildlife enthusiasts, our duties are to help improve conditions, minimize disturbance, and educate others about these fascinating critters.

WINTER 2014 • 4. WINDOWS TO WILDLIFE

WINTER WILDLIFE EVENTS

Boise Watershed

11818 West Joplin Rd., Boise; (208) 489-1284 www.cityofboise.org/Bee/WaterShed/ Home/index.aspx

The Boise WaterShed is open every 3rd Saturday of each month from 10 am - 2 pm as part of the Watershed Weekend series. Join us for an outdoor walking tour of the Wastewater Treatment Plant at 1 pm. FREE admission! No pre-registration required unless indicated.

Jan. 18 - Family Snow Day

The morning will include fun snow-related activities, crafts, and games. At 10:30, BSU Geoscientist PhD student Annika Quick will do a demonstration on Idaho's mighty glaciers. Join us as we learn how glaciers can literally move mountains!

Feb. 15 - Wacky Weather

Join Scott Dorval, Chief Meteorologist for KIVI Channel 6, for an exciting opportunity to learn about our wild and wacky weather. The fun happens between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Learn how our weather differs from weather in other regions of the world. Discover how Boise's landscape is influenced by weather patterns and how this affects Boise's water supply and water use. Learn how the pros forecast weather, see weather demonstrations, and make your own mini-tornado. A wastewater treatment plant tour is scheduled from 11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Closed-toe shoes are required for the tour. For visitor safety, tours will be cancelled if snow or ice is on the ground.

March 15- World Water Day Celebration

Water is a basic requirement for all life, but water resources are facing increasing demands from and competition between users. At 10:30 a.m., Treasure Valley Engineers Without Borders will give a presentation about their work around the world in improving access to water. Then, groove to the world beat with a local drumming group at 11:30 a.m. Inside the exhibit hall, make global crafts and rain sticks and learn about local and worldwide water challenges. A wastewater treatment plant tour is scheduled from 11:30am to 12:00 p.m. Closed-toe shoes are required for the tour. For visitor safety, tours will be cancelled if snow or ice is on the ground.

Craters of the Moon National Monument

Arco; (208) 527-1300

http://www.nps.gov/crmo/index.htm

Jan 18, 25 and Feb 8, 15, 22- Winter Snowshoe Adventure

The day begins with a 30 minute classroom session followed by several hours out in the park on snowshoes. Look for tracks and climb a volcano on this 2-4 mile trek. Bring a lunch to eat in the field. Snowshoes are available for complementary use to those who need them (donations accepted). Reservations are required and participants need to be at least 10 years of age for this moderately strenuous walk. Call or email early to sign up for these popular excursions

Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge

13751 Upper Embankment Rd, Nampa, ID; (208) 467-9278

http://www.fws.gov/Deerflat

Directions: http://www.fws.gov/Deerflat/map.html

Jan. 19, 25; Feb. 8,15; March 8- Junior Duck Stamp Art Days

K-12 students are invited to drop in to have fun, draw, and learn about Idaho waterfowl. All art supplies are provided for you to create your own Junior Duck Stamp Art Contest entry. 10 AM-4 PM

Wild About Life Lecture Series; 2nd Tuesday of every month at 7pm; free

Jan. 14 -Gray Wolves of the Pacific Northwest

Gray wolves have been on the endangered species list for over three decades. What do we know about their biology and how are they managed in the Pacific northwest? Come find out what the future holds for Gray Wolves.

Feb. 11 -Hike Safely: How to Recreate Safely in Bear/Lion Country

Do you have plans for a vacation or activity outdoors? Learn about the precautions to take when hiking and camping in areas with large predators, how to identify predator signs to avoid encounters, and what to do if you encounter a large predator.

Environmental Resource Center PO Box 819, Ketchum; (208) 726-4333 http://www.ercsv.org

Feb. 8- Winter Tracking

Spend the day learning how to decipher the messages animals leave behind in the snow with Ann Christensen. Ann will talk for one hour about tracks before we head outdoors to explore! We'll meet at the ERC office (471 North Washington, between 4th and 5th Streets) at 11:00 a.m. to sign in and arrange carpools, spend some time learning tracking basics indoors, and depart to head north to our tracking destination. We'll return to the ERC around 2:00 p.m. Bring snowshoes (and poles if you'd like), plenty of warm clothes, a lunch and water. No dogs please. Ann and the ERC will provide the teaching resources you will need for a successful day in the field. This workshop is appropriate for all ages and Ann particularly enjoys teaching the youngsters about tracking.

Suggested donation to attend one of these workshops is \$10 per person for ERC members and \$15 for non-members. Attendance will be capped at 25 individuals, so registration is strongly recommended. To register, call the ERC at 208.726.4333.

Foothills Learning Center 3188 Sunset Peak Rd., Boise; (208) 514-3755

www.cityofboise.org/Bee/Foothills/index.aspx

Second Sat. Programs are from 10am to 2pm. All ages welcome! Free; no registration is required. Please leave pets at home-thanks!

Feb. 8- Idaho's Big Predators

Join us for a fascinating program about Idaho's big predators. Learn about their habits and habitats and why they're able to make their homes here in Idaho. Get up close with skulls, pelts and other specimens from some of these interesting animals. Craig White, Regional Wildlife Manager, at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game will talk about where these animals live, what they eat, who eats them and other curious facts. Craig has researched predatorprey dynamics including work with elk, deer, bears, lions and wolves and he continues to be involved with management of these animals in Idaho. He will repeat his presentation twice, once at 10:30 am and again at noon. Of course we'll have many awesome hands-on activities about lions and wolves and bears, yes indeed!

[Continued page 6]

WINTER WILDLIFE EVENTS

Foothills Learning Center 3188 Sunset Peak Rd., Boise; (208) 514-3755 www.cityofboise.org/Bee/Foothills/index.aspx

March 8- Mammoths and Tigers and Sloths, Oh My!

A walk through the late Pleistocene in Idaho and the West. Take a walk back in time when large animals roamed with man, and ice covered much of the West. Learn about the mammoths, mastodons, saber toothed-cats, dire wolves, and giant sloths that lived and went extinct 100,000–10,000 years ago during the late Pleistocene. Explore the different theories about why these animals disappeared. Become a paleontologist for the day and go on a fossil dig, build a 3-D ice age animal, compare the climate then and now, and learn what the past can tell us about the future.

Ponderosa State Park 1920 N Davis Ave., McCall; (208) 634-2164

http://parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/parks/ponderosa.aspx

Ponderosa State Park is a great place to view winter wildlife. The park is closed to vehicles at the Activity Center in the winter, but strap on a set of nordic skis or snowshoes and enjoy the trails. We have groomed skate and classic trails throughout the park. We have marked snowshoe trails. They all wind through stands of 200-300 year old Ponderosa pine, western larch, and firs. The possible wildlife that may be viewed include: foxes, grouse, woodpeckers, pine siskins, nuthatches, chickadees, pine squirrels, owls, coyotes, jays, voles, pine martens, mule deer, and moose. If you don't see the animals, they do leave their tracks in the snow. Mounts of some of the parks animals are available for viewing at the Visitor Center in front of a larger fireplace.



Hagerman Bird Festival

February 14-16, 2014

During the winter months, Hagerman Valley and surrounding areas play host to tens of thousands of waterfowl. In addition, bald eagles strike spectacular poses in cottonwood roosts, trumpeter and tundra swans gracefully dot hidden ponds, and there always seems to be a rare bird or two in the area to excite us all. Join us for a weekend of birding fun, education, and camaraderie. Festival activities will include beginning and advanced bird trips led by experienced birders, interactive workshops, youth activities, and keynote presentations.

Where: Hagerman, Idaho

When: Date February 14 - 16, 2014

Contact: Delores Smith, Festival Coordinator
Email: hagermanbirdfestival@gmail.com

Website: <u>www.HagermanBird.com</u>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/HagermanBirdFestival

Registration fee is \$50/adult and \$25/ child up to 16 years old. Fee includes: Your choices of workshops and field trips, meals, social and banquet events. (River Boat Birding Trip is an additional fee of \$20 per person)

How to register: Go online at www.HagermanBird.com; or request a registration form by emailing hagermanbirdfestival@gmail.com; or call us at 208-352-3175, or write PO Box 503; Hagerman, ID 83301















Celebrating the Diversity of Winter Birds





WATCHING IDAHO'S WILDLIFE

Snow Geese on the Move

by Bruce Ackerman* Staff Biologist, Idaho Dept. of Fish & Game



Snow geese in flight over a field © (CC-BY-SA) Rick Leche on Flick



Snow geese © (CC-BY-SA) Mizmak on Flickr



Snow goose wading in water © (CC-BY-SA) cv.vick on Flickr

It is a thrilling sight to see thousands of snow geese flying in and pouring into a small pond. Wave after wave of white geese silhouetted against the blue sky. They literally drop down out of the sky and come in for a tight landing on a crowded pond.

The snow geese we see in the spring in southwest Idaho spend the winter in central California. They fly up to Idaho and stop over for a few weeks to refuel, before continuing to fly up to their breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic, the north slope of Alaska, or Wrangel Island in Russia! After a short arctic summer, they will be headed back south again in the fall.

Snow geese fly out daily to feeding sites on private land away from one of their favorite stopover locations, Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). They fly out to feed before dawn, usually on corn stubble several miles away. They fly back at mid-day to their resting areas on the WMAs where hunting is not permitted. The farmers really help the geese by leaving some residual grain in their corn and wheat fields. Without this grain, the geese would not likely be stopping over in southwest Idaho.

If you are lucky, you may notice that some of the snow geese have been banded with leg bands and colored neck bands. They were banded on their summer breeding grounds in the arctic.

In March, there can be up to 60,000 snow geese, 40,000 greater white-fronted geese (also called specklebellies by hunters), and 5,000 sandhill cranes in southwest Idaho. Small numbers of the smaller Ross' goose species are also present, and thousands of other ducks, geese, and swans. It is truly spectacular to see these numbers of waterbirds flying over in waves.

There is a small amount of hunting for snow and white-fronted geese during the spring, but primarily on private land. The reason that there is a spring hunt for snow and white-fronted geese is that their populations are so healthy, that they have increased substantially, to the point where they are damaging the vegetation on their breeding grounds. The snow geese hunting season ends March 10, 2014.

To view these magnificent birds locally, visit Fort Boise and Roswell WMA, near Parma, and Montour and Payette WMAs near New Plymouth. This is at the far western edge of the Treasure Valley, adjacent to the Snake River and the Oregon Border. It's about a one-hour drive west of Boise and the best time to visit is in March and April during late morning. Sometimes the geese are seen feeding on private land. Remember not to trespass on private land. View the geese from a distance. Have some patience and remember that these huge flocks are travelling on their own schedule, not ours.



© Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve

Windows to Wildlife

Wildlife Diversity Program PO Box 25 Boise, ID 83707-0025

Forwarding Service Requested

Windows to Wildlife is a quarterly publication of the Idaho Watchable Wildlife Committee and IDFG Wildlife Diversity Program.

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