



Idaho Naturalist news

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The Idaho Naturalist News is a quarterly newsletter of the Idaho Master Naturalist Program. For questions, comments, or contributions to this newsletter, contact the designer at Sara.focht@idfg.idaho.gov

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A large part of being a naturalist is just observing nature. Idaho Master Naturalist Mary Van Fleet has been watching this moose cow with her 2 calves right in her yard this summer. Moose twins are more common in areas where moose density is low. However, where moose density is high, twinning is still seen.

Asking Questions vs. Knowing the Answers

Sara Focht, Idaho Master Naturalist Program State Coordinator, IDFG

It is impressive to be out in the field with someone who knows all the birds or all the plants. But recently, I was reminded, that it is even more impressive to be in the field with someone who doesn't know everything, but knows how to ask questions.

I often have the pleasure of hiking around the forest with a four year old. The questions she asks really get me thinking. I have learned more by looking up the answers to questions posed by myself or others than I have by listening to a lecture or reading a book. I feel lucky that it is part of my job to ask and look up the answers to questions I have about nature.

While training others to give educational tours at the MK Nature Center, I often remind them that knowing the answers and having 2 hours of content in their brains is not the most important thing. Being enthusiastic about nature and modeling the art of asking good questions is probably most important.

So here's my challenge to each and every one of you: while reading this issue, formulate questions about what you read and see. Look up the answers...and learn!

Highway Mortality-A Naturalist Issue?

Larry Berens, Idaho Master Naturalist, Portneuf Chapter

Today, as a greater percentage of the population around the globe is becoming more ecologically conscious and environmentally aware, individuals from all walks of life are coming together to participate in a universal theme: learning to cohabitate with the natural world around us. Citizens the world over are taking a more active role in everything from the mundane issues of recycling and curbing personal consumption of our natural resources, to reducing their own carbon footprints. Still others are becoming equally involved in environmental and political activism in order to cultivate changes in attitudes and redefine our role as stewards. Idahoans are making significant contributions to that same goal of responsibility and accountability in order to assure a sustainable future, not only for ourselves, but for our fellow inhabitants of this amazing place we call Earth.

As a member of the newly formed Portneuf Chapter of the Idaho Master Naturalist

Program, I would like to say that I am excited about this opportunity and encouraged by the participation of all those involved, from the organizers and coordinators to the instructors and fellow students. My experience so far has made me even more aware of the fact that environmentalism is really a “grassroots” initiative, (no pun intended). Although the movement is certainly not new, and many notable and influential individuals have paved the way, it is still up to us to elevate the level of awareness, to learn, and to pass on that knowledge to those who follow us.

In that same spirit, I would like to share the following information with you, as I feel that it is a naturalist issue as well as an issue that affects everyone, either directly or indirectly.

Our nation’s highways are littered with the victims of vehicle/animal collisions. According to a report by Susan Hagwood of the Humane Society, over 1 million vertebrates are killed on U.S. highways daily. It is estimated that we kill more wild animals with our vehicles than by any other means, including hunting.

In Idaho, an IDFG estimate reports approximately 10,000 elk and deer are killed by vehicles every year. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, there were 725,000 to 1.5 million collisions between deer and automobiles in 2007.



Bighorn sheep on the highway near Challis Idaho. Despite the warning signs to motorists, nearly 6 sheep are killed on this stretch of road each year.

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The results of these crashes amount to over 1.1 billion dollars in insurance claims, with an estimated additional 7+ billion in associated costs annually in the U.S. alone. A significant reduction in these figures could amount to a sizable annual economic stimulus package. Not to mention, there are more than 200 human fatalities and over 27,000 injuries sustained by motorists, and these figures are rising yearly.

Many studies have been conducted, with still more in progress, to address this issue. Feasibility studies concerning design, application, effectiveness, and associated costs, etc., of wildlife fencing, underpasses, overpasses, and migration corridors, are providing some very positive results. These “ecoducts,” as they are called, are being incorporated into the construction costs of new roads in several areas and are slowly making their way into our landscapes. However, as with most, if not all, environmental issues, individual involvement is the key to implementation.

I have recently joined the Portneuf Valley Road Mortality Working Group, one of three groups in Idaho, the other two being in the Montpelier and the Nampa/Boise areas. Our group’s focus is to educate, communicate, and support solutions for reducing wildlife road mortality, while improving public safety and protecting our economic values. Jennifer Jackson with IDFG and a member of our group has managed to persuade the state to include a section, complete with video, in all of the Driver’s Education Programs throughout the state. While Sean Mottishaw, another member of our group, replied to my inquiries with this statement, “We are working to get the state to actually make a program that gets Wildlife/Vehicle Collisions a priority in the state. Hopefully, Road Mortality working groups in the future will be the ones working on how to implement the solutions to the problem hotspots that exist. Instead of beating up John Q. Public, we are working to find big monies that exist and working to solidify them.”

One positive result of our group’s existence is the collaboration of efforts to install a total of 17 miles of wildlife fencing between Pocatello and Inkom. Construction is slated to begin on July 6, 2009. Funding to this point has been provided by the Department of Transportation with a contribution of \$50,000, the Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation with \$20,000, and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game with a \$10,000 donation. There is also a plan in place to repair and upgrade the wildlife fencing on Fish Creek Pass, east of Lava Hot Springs.

While wildlife/vehicle collisions are an escalating problem, there are some real solutions. You may find it possible to join a group or get one started in your area. If not, it may still provide some opportunities to get in some of the volunteer hours needed to stay certified as a Master Naturalist every year, as these projects will rely on a lot of volunteer support.

The Aspens are Falling!

Bren Dismuke, Certified Idaho Master Naturalist, Henry's Fork Chapter

The Aspens are Falling! The Aspens are Falling! What? Yes, it is true. Over the past several decades, the number and quality of Aspen stands have been declining rapidly. Aspens certainly are beautiful, but in areas like Island Park, Idaho, they are also a real tourist attraction. Especially in the fall when they go through their stunning array of yellow, orange, and sometimes red color changes. They bring income to our area from the many visitors who come from miles around just to see the foliage change. But more important than the issue of tourism, Aspens create a diverse ecosystem. On a landscape

level, more diversity means more habitat for a wider variety of animals. It is all about biodiversity. A greater diversity of trees and plants in an area provides an assortment of vegetation for many species of wildlife to use in many ways.



For example: Did you know that many species of grouse use the Aspen stands as nesting sites, and they also feed on the Aspen leaves? In addition, many species of ungulates also prefer the cover that Aspen stands provide and enjoy Aspen leaf salads on a regular basis as part of their diet. These are only a very few of the benefits that a healthy Aspen stand can provide.

In recent years, many of our country's most knowledgeable forestry scientists have studied and researched the declining Aspen population. Although, the work is still in progress, the current thinking is that this unfortunate turn of events for Aspen stands has been largely caused by fire suppression. We have become so good at stamping out those forest fires that we have actually disrupted the cycle of succession. Aspen trees are an early seral species. Meaning that they sprout first after a disturbance (fire, logging, landslide). Slowly, conifers encroach on an Aspen stand, eventually becoming dominant. Some Aspens remain in the conifer grove and the underground parts of the Aspen trees are still alive. Then, disturbance occurs again and aspens sprout. Putting out those forest fires basically eliminates the disturbance part of the cycle. This stops the natural cycle. When disturbance finally occurs in a place where the conifers have dominated for a long time, the Aspen clones can be all gone, unable to sprout, and gone from that location forever.



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So, what is being done about it? Here in the Island Park Caldera, there is restoration work going on. We have a real leader in our area that has recognized the problem and is willing to act to prevent further loss of valuable Aspen stands. Harriman State Park has known for sometime that they are losing their Aspen stands. Last year, they began their own research project and implementation of restorative measures. Since Harriman State Park has numerous valuable historic buildings, a prescribed fire would not be a safe option. However, selective removal of lodgepole pines is a safe and effective way to restore Aspen stands.

Many of the Henry's Fork Chapter of Idaho Master Naturalists got in on the ground floor of this effort. Last summer, we assisted Wildlife Biologist Bob Hirnyck, in the process of surveying Aspen stands in the park using an approved Aspen Risk Assessment (RA) tool that has been sanctioned by the scientists. Most stands that we surveyed were found to be at highest risk of loss if treatment was not implemented soon. So far, treatment has been in areas of the park that are close to the road where it is easy to see what is happening. When the RAs are completed, photos are taken at each site, and a photo journal is developed for each site. Then a few years out, the previously selected treatment sites will again be surveyed and photographed to compare with the original shots to review the level of success of the treatment.

Harriman State Park and the Master Naturalists here are excited about this work and will continue to follow this leading edge work to help Save the Aspen!



Aspen stand in fall, photo by IDFG

Teaching Kids about Lewis and Clark's Plant Descriptions

Susan Birnbaum, Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

My first love (besides my husband) is wilderness and nature. Since I have been working in the physical therapy field for 24 years, I decided it was time to learn more about what I enjoy in the wilderness. The Master Naturalist training was a good place to start. I was impressed with the knowledge that my fellow Master Naturalists had about different subjects, as well as the professionals we met through the program.

I recently got to volunteer at Meridian Middle School on behalf of Idaho Botanical Gardens. Elizabeth Dickey, one of our chapter leaders, had great information about the plants that Lewis and Clark described on their expedition, and Kris Barrash, a fellow Master Naturalist, was a great resource for learning about the plants. We had a fun time teaching kids about these plants. I'm looking forward to the varied volunteer activities this summer and fall.



Lewis and Clark described many plants on their expedition. To name just a few, from left to right, syringa (photo by Lisa Hahn), wild blue flax (photo by IDFG) and golden current (photo by Susan Ziebarth).

Kris Barrash, Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

I'm finding the volunteer experiences as a Master Naturalist volunteer very rewarding. At the Meridian School District annual outdoor Rendezvous for 4th graders, four of us staffed the Lewis & Clark plant table where we told stories about the plants and described how they were used by the expedition members and Native Americans.

After one such presentation, a 4th grade boy came up to me. With his eyes shining brightly, he eagerly asked "Is that plant [he was pointing to the Arrowleaf Balsamroot] the same as the Arrowroot plant in the Redwall books?" Having read all the Redwall books to my son as he was growing up, his question brought back wonderful memories of the books' animal characters (mice, otters, moles, ferrets). Alas, Arrowleaf and Arrowroot are not the same plant. But I did not know that at the time and was able to give the boy the answer "it might be!"

This Place Matters

Deborah Harrison, Idaho Master Naturalist, Portneuf Chapter

As part of MN training, we visited several water quality monitoring sites on the Portneuf River. One site was Sacagawea Park in Pocatello. The park is a constructed wetland that helps to decrease the sediment load (TMDL) in the Portneuf River from storm water runoff. The water from one of the largest storm drainage pipes is diverted into a basin system using old oxbows of the former Portneuf River channel to settle out the sediment. Reducing the sediment load to the Portneuf River will improve water quality and create better habitat for fish and animals.

The wetlands are the functional component of the park, but Sacagawea Park struck another more expansive nerve for me. I had expected a tour of an industrial looking area with a chain link fence, massive concrete and maybe even concertina wire. However, rather than restricting the public, this project that supports the federally mandated task of decreasing the TMDL in the Portneuf is a public space...a park.

Sacagawea Park is still new and obviously unfinished, but *it is a remarkable vision of what is possible*. I found, as a Master Naturalist, the vision of Sacagawea Park inspiring. It's easy to love and care about pristine wild places, but I hadn't considered how to bring what is closer to home into everyone's daily life and appreciation. How do we encourage appreciation of the beavers, the fish habitat, the native grasses and the Portneuf River itself? How do you create a greater community awareness of the impacts that the Portneuf River is suffering? How do you mobilize people to be concerned about the Portneuf River?

The community adjacent to Sacagawea Park is a poorer neighborhood. The land that is now the park was an old railroad wasteland, and before the park was created, the neighborhood did not have easy access to the Portneuf River. The wetland now has trails around it leading to the river. The evening we visited, people from the neighboring mobile home park were out in droves. Little boys were riding their bikes on the trails; you could feel their swagger — their ownership of the park. Moms were out walking and enjoying one of the first warm evenings of spring. Teenage boys were heading down to the river with their fishing poles — looking like Opie on the Andy Griffith show, except for their tough-guy skate clothing. Cyclists zipped across the bridge tying the park to the rest of the city. The park was alive with activity.

Sacagawea Park is creating a sense of place and a sense of pride in the neighborhood. It is the cohesive anchor of the community. John Sigler told a story about a plan to do a prescribed burn at the wetland, and community members showed up at the meeting to protest what was planned for their park. Community activism signals an aware and engaged community — a community speaking up for what they care about and find important in their lives.

A local high school, New Horizons, has taken on the wetland as its community outreach project and is planting native grasses and trimming trees to make the river accessible. University folks are teaching high school students about wetland plantings and riparian stream restoration.

Sacagawea Park has reached far beyond its functional realm. The park has taken on a life of its own. The park opens the door to the Portneuf River so the river beckons and beguiles. It is transforming. It teaches. It reminds us that this place matters.

Planting Trees and a Whole Lot More

Elaine Walker, Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

For the past few years, the U.S. Forest Service and Idaho Department of Fish & Game have been restoring the old Stibnite mine site east of the town of Yellow Pine. On Saturday, June 6, 2009, fourteen volunteers, one 7-month-old baby and two big dogs romped around the old mine site and planted 2,500 lodgepole pine trees and about 50 riparian shrubs along the banks of the rerouted creek. About the time we finished planting, the heavens opened and the downpour did a good job of settling the plants into their new home.

We saw a flock of bluebirds, tracks of small nocturnal animals, and heard a lot more animals in the night. One of the Forest Service employees told us lots of stories about the town of Stibnite, which is now nothing more than a few bare foundations. He also told us that the creek had been rerouted because of mine tailings that caused harm to the fish and sent the poisons down the watershed.

On the five-hour trip home on Sunday, we saw several deer along the road. One doe had a fawn with her. The fawn hunkered down and disappeared into the grass before I could get a picture.

In spite of the rain and the snow still at that elevation, it was a great trip, and I can't wait to do it again next year.



*The Mountain Bluebird, (*Sialia currucoides*) Idaho's State bird, begins migrating into Idaho as early as late February. Males arrive first and find a nesting cavity. When the male has attracted a female, the female constructs the nest. During migration, these birds may be seen in groups of up to 50.*



Master Naturalist Elaine Walker digs away planting lodgepole pine trees. Photo courtesy, Michael Young, IDFG.

Photo Gallery

To submit a photo for the photo gallery, send to:
sara.focht@idfg.idaho.gov.

Please include the photographer's name, the location where the photo was taken, and a short description of the photo.



Wolf's Milk? Lycogala epidendrum? This small pink fungus was found near the base of a dead lodgepole pine tree in Stanley, Idaho. Photo courtesy, Sara Focht.



Henry's Fork Master Naturalist, Laura Sass, counts and measures fish moving through the Buffalo River Fish Trap near the Island Park Dam. Photo courtesy of Mary Van Fleet.

Photo Gallery



Mary Van Fleet, a Henry's Fork Master Naturalist, found this pronghorn fawn hunkered down in the grass while surveying vegetation at Red Rock Lakes. Photo courtesy, Mary Van Fleet.

Have Lunch with a Naturalist

Glenn Mouser, Certified Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

I just cannot imagine what life would be like without being part of the Master Naturalist training. My life is so much more complete. (They say a man is not complete until he is married... then he is finished.)

I clearly remember that first meeting. Other than the staff instructors, few knew each other. We were oriented by Sara, and we sat at tables. Sara had us pair up with the person next to us and spend several minutes learning about them. I learned about Scott. Each of you learned about someone else. Very interesting and fun.

Sara then had each of us tell about the person we just learned about. What a great way to break the ice. Part of what we learned was who we would like to have lunch with tomorrow if we could have lunch with anyone in the world. Living or dead. There were some great answers.

In retrospect and after pondering this question for several months I would like to have lunch with someone else other than Euell Gibbons.

I would like to have lunch with myself of the future. Say, 30 years from now. I would be in my eighties. I would be able to encourage myself to continue to be a naturalist. Learn, share, educate and have an enjoyable life. I would be able to compliment myself on how I stayed so handsome (maybe).

But best of all would be to know that I lived a long, great life in relative good health. It sounds kind of self-centered but it really would be interesting and revealing. Think about it.