ODFW Field Reports

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission
March 6, 2015

EAST REGION

Bruce Eddy, Region Manager

Eastern Oregon Big Game Radio Collaring

Historically big game management has relied on population estimates adjusted by periodic observations of over-winter fawn/calf survival and local biologist's knowledge of his District to estimate abundance. These estimates are used to allocate hunting opportunities within Wildlife Management Units (WMU's) each year.

To a large degree, this process is dependent on the impressions and experience of an individual District Biologist. In some cases more sophisticated marking studies allowed for better discrimination of the big game movements, but there are still gaps in our understanding of how a big game population used a range of habitats and associated WMUs.

The recently completed South-Central Oregon mule deer study taught us that seasonal distribution and movement was often more complicated than we thought and periodic adult survival estimates can improve population modeling. We've already used this knowledge to improve monitoring and population modeling in a number of WMUs.

Two efforts are underway in East Region this winter to help us better understand big game herd range and seasonal distribution. The first is the recent placement of 50 GPS collars on pronghorn does in the Beatys Butte WMU. Beatys Butte WMU winters approximately 5,000 pronghorn, the most of any Oregon WMU. The GPS collars will help us better understand their summer and winter habitats and associated migratory corridors. It will also help us understand the pronghorn movement between Sheldon/Hart National Antelope Refuges and the rest of the Beatys Butte WMU.

The second example is the upcoming GPS collaring of 500 mule deer in the southern Blue Mountains to better understand their range and seasonal movement. The results of smaller radio collaring efforts in this area have found that our assumptions about mule deer here are probably wrong. Most of these assumptions are based on work done in the 1960's and probably mischaracterize how mule deer currently use associated WMUs. A better understanding of how mule deer use this area should help department biologists better set tag numbers and seasons.

These two projects are being funded with federal Pittman-Robertson funds and Oregon hunter license dollars.

Blue Mountain Elk Initiative: 25 years of Making Oregon Better for Rocky Mountain Elk

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Blue Mountains Elk Initiative (BMEI) the first and

longest running elk initiative in North America. BMEI is a federal, private, state, and tribal partnership created to enhance elk in the Blue Mountains of Oregon and Washington.

Core BMEI partners are the Forest Service (Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman, Ochoco, and Malheur National Forests), Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

BMEI coordinated and funded more than 450 projects to enhance elk habitat on 2 million acres of the Blue Mountains since its creation. In addition BMEI has funded research on elk ecology and conservation education. Over 80 agencies, organizations, corporations and individuals have contributed more than $6 million to make this possible. In addition to the core partners, funding and support has come from private landowners, Counties, tribal governments, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon Hunters Association, Mule Deer Foundation, Ruffed Grouse Society, National Wild Turkey Federation, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Forest Foundation, Youth Groups, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

BMEI's Core Partners are organizing a two day celebration in early July to celebrate 25 years of successful elk management across the Blue Mountains

WEST REGION

Steve Marx, Region Manager

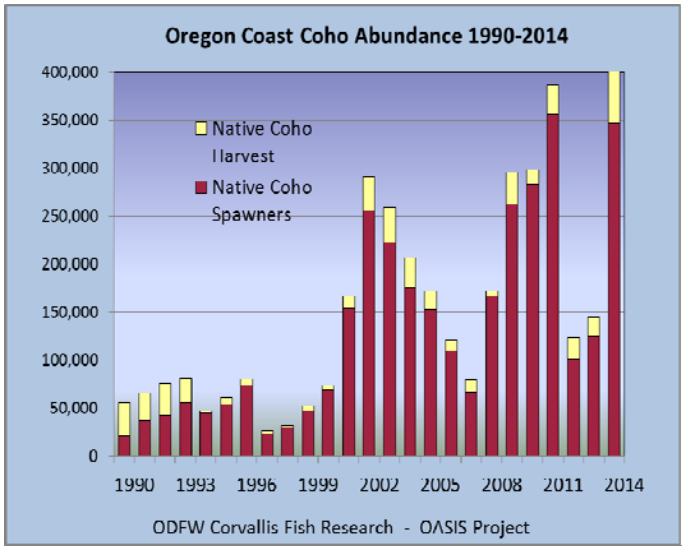
Strong Native Coho Returns in 2014

The number of native coho adults that returned to Oregon's natural spawning grounds in 2014 was at or near record highs. The preliminary 2014 estimate of 20,215 wild coho spawners in the Lower Columbia is nearly twice the prior record of 11,860 in 2009. The 345,094 wild coho spawning in Oregon coastal basins this year is the second highest since 1990, only surpassed by their 356,243 parents in 2011. Both of the 2014 estimates are preliminary and are likely to increase by the time the season is over. As of February 23, wild coho are still spawning in some coastal streams.

Good ocean conditions on top of solid freshwater survival meant that the 2014 run of ESA listed Oregon Coast Coho posted several major milestones. The total run in 2014 of over 400,000 fish came from a parent stock of about 356,000, indicating remarkable productive capacity even at high spawner abundance. This is an excellent indicator of population viability and the overall condition of freshwater habitat.

Coho Run in 2014 and Forecast for 2015

The Annual Oregon Production Index Technical Team meeting was held February 5th. The team includes State, Federal and Tribal staff, and summarized the 2014 coho salmon run and forecast the 2015 run. The Oregon Production Index (OPI) includes all hatchery and wild coho stocks from the Columbia River and coastal rivers of Oregon and California. Catch and escapement (returns to hatcheries and spawning grounds) of OPI coho in 2014 was nearly 1.7 million, which was well above the forecast of 1.2 million. The 2015 forecast is over 1.0 million fish, composed of 808K hatchery and 207K wild coho.



Habitat Restoration - Fern Ridge Wildlife Area

A unique annual habitat restoration effort continues on Gibson Island during a narrow window of access opportunity. The island is a 67 acre parcel located in Fern Ridge Lake that was created with the construction of Fern Ridge dam in 1940. Several years ago an old roadbed was restored that allows equipment access to the island during winter "low pool" level. During the summer months the roadbed is submerged under 5 feet of water. Prior to this it had been 70 years since equipment was on the island for habitat management. As a result the property that was previously upland grassland and farmland was overtaken with an impenetrable jungle of untreated invasive vegetation. A thick wall of blackberries, Scotch broom, Hawthorne and a tangle of thorny woody vegetation covered every square foot of the island. An experimental project to start clearing the brush was initiated in 2010 with use of powerful front-mounted mowers on skid-steer machines. This proved to be an effective way to cut trails and provide initial access to the property for assessment.

During the past five years during a narrow window of time in the winter, FRWA crew utilized Fecon grinder mounted on skid-steer to pulverize the brush followed by tree shear, grapple rake and tractor with mower to continue the brush clearing. Approximately 20 acres have been cleared and work will continue this winter as long as water levels permit. The objective is to remove invasive vegetation and restore native upland prairie habitat that will in turn support a diverse array of native plant and wildlife species. Access is difficult but worth the trip for those who walk out to the island in the winter or boat out in the summer.

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Rick Hargrave, Administrator

New ODFW Website

ODFW has entered into contract with Travel Oregon (TO) to begin the initial stages of creating a companion website to the current site. The goal is to create a site that inspires hunting, fishing and viewing participation and provides dynamic, engaging content to support participation.

The initial stage of the project is the discovery phase. This consists of analyzing the data and interviewing web users, both staff and customers, to determine how the site is currently is used and how it can be improved. The result of the discovery process is a detailed plan to develop the new site

OCEAN SALMON/COLUMBIA RIVER PROGRAM

Tom Rien, Acting Ocean Salmon and Columbia River Program Manager

Background

The Northern Pikeminnow Management Program (NPMP), first implemented in 1991, is a collaborative effort between the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, with funding from the Bonneville Power Administration. The primary goal of the program is to reduce predation by northern pikeminnow on juvenile salmon and steelhead emigrating through the Columbia and Snake rivers while maintaining a viable population of the native northern pikeminnow.

Studies in the 1980's indicated that large, older pikeminnow (≥ 11 inches) were the primary predators of juvenile salmon and steelhead and made up a significant proportion of the pikeminnow population. Modeling indicated that harvesting these large fish would shift the population structure to consist predominantly of small, younger individuals, which were shown to consume few juvenile salmon and steelhead.

Research indicated that an annual harvest rate of 10-20% of the larger individuals could reduce pikeminnow predation by up to 50%. Further, pikeminnow populations would remain viable in the short and long terms.

Program Implementation

Because pikeminnow are not a desirable gamefish, an incentive is provided in the form of a "sport-reward". Anglers who register to participate in the sport-reward fishery from May through September are paid to harvest pikeminnow ≥9". Since 2004 anglers have been paid a progressively larger reward per fish as they harvest greater numbers of northern pikeminnow. Due to waning participation by anglers in recent years and reduced total harvest, the tier structure was adjusted for 2015 to create greater incentives. During the 2015 sport-reward fishery, the first 25 pikeminnow harvested will earn an angler $5 per fish, between 26 and 200 fish will be paid at a rate of $6 per fish, and all pikeminnow harvested beyond 200 will be worth $8 per fish. These are liberalizations over the prior progression, which increased payments at 100 and 400 fish. It is believed that bolstered participation resulting from this shift, along with continued harvest by agency personnel at dams where pikeminnow congregate seasonally, will allow the NPMP to meet its annual goal of 10-20% exploitation well into the future.

Each year, beginning in April field teams from ODFW tag and release pikeminnow throughout the Columbia and Snake rivers. A proportion of these tagged fish are subsequently recaptured by anglers in the sport-reward fishery and by agency personnel fishing from the dams. These tag recoveries allow managers to estimate harvest rates and track changes in population abundance and size and age structure. Anglers participating in the sport-reward fishery are paid $500 for each tagged pikeminnow they harvest. In each of the last four years, the top angler has harvested over 9,000 pikeminnow and made over $70,000 in rewards. From 1991 through 2013, close to 5 million large pikeminnow have been harvested as a result of the program. The annual harvest rate of large, older pikeminnow has averaged just under 14%, which is within the 10-20% target range. This harvest rate and the restructuring of the population toward small, younger fish is estimated to have reduced pikeminnow predation on juvenile salmon and steelhead by 32%. Although other predators may fill the "predatory gap", monitoring indicates there has been no significant change in consumption rates of other fish predators.

OREGON STATE POLICE

Captain Jeff Samuels, Fish & Wildlife Division

Commercial Fish

OSP Fish and Wildlife Troopers from The Dalles Fish and Wildlife team were on a boat patrol on the Columbia River when they came across a boat tied to the Washington bank near the town of Wishram. They discovered seven sturgeons in the boat, five of which were undersized. They had a good idea of who the commercial fisherman was and along with Washington Fish & Wildlife officers conducted surveillance on the boat. After about 24 hours with no activity, surveillance was stopped and the undersized fish were seized. On Friday Feb. 20th the Troopers received information the suspect was on his boat checking gill nets. Several members of The Dalles OSP Fish & Wildlife team deployed their boat and contacted the suspect while checking a net. He was taken into custody without incident on two outstanding warrants. While enroute to the jail, the subject confessed to possessing the five undersized sturgeons. In addition to the two warrants, the subject was charged with five counts of unlawful possession of undersized sturgeon.

Angling

A Bend OSP Fish and Wildlife Trooper worked with the Bend OSP Fish and Wildlife pilot to conduct an enforcement flight over the high lakes and streams which were closed to angling. The OSP pilot located a camp with a canoe on Wickiup Reservoir and radioed the information to the Fish and Wildlife Trooper on the ground. The Fish and Wildlife Trooper later located and observed three male subjects angling from the shore and canoe. All three were cited for No Angling License and Angling Closed Season. They were warned for having No Personal Flotation Devices in the canoe.

Shellfish
A Fish and Wildlife Trooper from the Astoria Fish and Wildlife team was observing a razor clam digger on Clatsop Beach digging by himself. The Trooper left the location, but later returned and contacted the subject as he was returning to his vehicle. The subject had an armful of razor clams and the Trooper noticed a clam gun stuck in the sand a short distance away. The subject had his limit of 15 clams, but claimed that the clam gun was not his. The Trooper pulled the clam gun out of the sand and found six razor clams inside of it. The subject finally admitted that the clams were his, and was issued a citation for Exceeding the Daily Bag Limit of Razor Clams.

Wildlife
Fish and Wildlife Troopers from the Bend Fish and Wildlife Team conducted a night operation within the east Mule Deer winter range priority zone. Members were placed on and around Pine Mountain where they had extensive views of the area. During the operation, five vehicles were observed and contacted. At approximately 2030 hours, a vehicle was observed actively spotlighting within the area. Troopers were able to overtake the vehicle and stop it near Hwy 20. Two citations were issued for casting a light from a motor vehicle while armed, and two citations were issued for hunting without a license.

END OF FIELD REPORTS FOR
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