

Windows to Wildlife



FALL 2014

A PUBLICATION OF THE IDAHO WATCHABLE WILDLIFE PROGRAM AND IDAHO'S WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAM

Reel In & Recycle: Keeping Idaho's Waterways Tangle-free

by Beth Waterbury*
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Idaho is truly an angler's paradise, with over 26,000 miles of streams and rivers, more than 3,000 natural lakes, and a quarter-million acres of ponds and reservoirs. Idaho's waterways provide fishing opportunities for nearly 500,000 resident and nonresident anglers each year! With fishing such a popular activity in the Gem State, stewardship of our waterways through proper disposal of discarded fishing line keeps our shorelines clean and, importantly, helps to prevent wildlife injuries and deaths from entanglement.

Most anglers use monofilament, a type of single-strand, high-tensile nylon fishing line that is virtually invisible underwater. The very features that make it so popular with anglers make it especially hazardous to wildlife. Discarded monofilament can last up to 600 years in the environment and can harm wildlife that become entangled, causing restricted movement, entrapment in vegetation, strangulation, and drowning. Wildlife can also be injured by swallowing fishing line, which can obstruct digestion and lead to starvation.



Great blue heron entangled in fishing line © William James on dpreview.com



Monofilament recycling bin. © IDFG.

Wildlife whose habitats overlap recreational fishing waters are most susceptible to monofilament entanglement. Ospreys are particularly vulnerable due to their habit of gathering scraps of stringy material to line their nests. Adult and nestling ospreys can get feet, legs, wings, and beaks so entangled in fishing line that birds cannot stand, fly, or eat. Across the state, Idaho Fish and Game has logged many wildlife rescues, injuries, and deaths attributed to monofilament entanglement for species including ducks, great blue heron, sandhill crane, bald eagle, belted kingfisher, bats – even a river otter in the Salmon Region, which was safely cut free from a tangle of monofilament and tackle.

Wildlife entanglement in fishing line is a global concern for animal conservation. However, awareness of the issue, and steps to address the problem, begin at the local level. In early 2013, the Idaho Bird Conservation Partnership identified monofilament entanglement as 1 of the top 5 pressing issues impacting birds in Idaho. The partnership developed an action plan for the issue which called for developing fishing line recovery and recycling programs at key fishing sites in Idaho.

My "beat" as a wildlife biologist for Idaho Fish and Game is the upper Salmon River in east-central Idaho. The upper Salmon is a premier destination for salmon and steelhead anglers and fishing pressure can be seasonally heavy. Inevitably, fishing line enters the river when blown from boats or when anglers snag and break fishing lines. Reports of wildlife entangled in fishing line were becoming too routine. With resounding support from partners including Salmon Valley Stewardship, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Sport Fish Restoration Program, NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Idaho Fishery Resource Office, and the BoatUS Foundation, Idaho Fish and Game launched the *Reel In & Recycle Program* to promote the proper disposal of monofilament fishing line.

Fishing line recycling bins are now stationed at 20 popular boat access and family fishing sites along the upper Salmon River from North Fork to Jimmy Smith Lake. Idaho Fish and Game staff and

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volunteers periodically collect the monofilament, which is then shipped to Berkley Conservation Institute in Iowa where it is recycled into artificial, underwater habitat structures called Fish-Habs.

Salmon Valley Stewardship is a proud *Reel In & Recycle* partner. "This project is a perfect fit for our organization," said SVS executive director Gina Knudson. "*Reel In & Recycle* offers a community-based solution to help steward our beautiful rivers and lakes."

Initiating a monofilament recovery and recycling program is not an expensive venture, but does require time and continued maintenance. *Reel In & Recycle*, the BoatUS Foundation program (<http://www.boatus.org/monofilament/>), offers a wealth of information and resources to initiate your own local program. An expanded statewide effort to encourage fishing line recycling through a network of line recycling bins will help to ensure that Idaho's wildlife remain tangle-free and our prized waterways are well stewarded.



Dead osprey and fishing line. A death that could have easily been prevented. © Doug MacCarter.



An accidental hanging; belted kingfisher. © Erick Greene.



American coot chick & fishing line. © (CC-BY-SA) Nick Chill on Flickr.

FROM THE FIELD

Wildlife Resorts- Snags

by Terry Thomas*
Regional Habitat Manager, Idaho Department of Fish & Game

A female mountain bluebird tugged at something about 20 feet away. I thought she might have captured a worm and brought up the binoculars for a closer look. She didn't have a worm; instead she was ripping up pieces of bark from an aspen log. When she was satisfied with her effort, she darted off with a bill full of bark shards. I watched her land on a nearby dead standing aspen, then she disappeared. It was as if the tree had swallowed her up. Which it did—sort of. She had disappeared into a hole in the trunk where she and her mate were constructing a nest.



This aspen tree, long dead and broken off about half way up, wasn't much to look at. Old bark, dry and brittle, flaked away from the trunk in large chunks. Perhaps a branch had once protruded from the cavity the bluebird was appropriating for a nest but there were no branches now. Another hole, further up the tree, had clearly been excavated, likely by a woodpecker chasing a meal. Indeed, it was a sad looking specimen.

Looks can be deceiving though. This dead standing tree, called a snag, and others like it, is high value wildlife habitat, far more beneficial than simply another tree in the big woods. A dead or dying tree is a beautiful thing to wildlife.

In Idaho, about 50 species of wildlife use snags. Bats roost underneath the loose bark. With a customary hammering, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, flickers, Lewis's, black-backed and pileated woodpeckers and more carve out hollows as they search for insects that are having their way with the dead tree. Bluebirds, wood ducks, wrens, chickadees, great gray, saw-whet, elf and flammulated owls, kestrels and finches all find cozy nesting accommodations when the woodpeckers are through. Besides bats, seventeen other species of mammals, up to and including the black bear if the snag is large enough, have been documented denning in snags. The wide variety of wildlife benefits makes it easy to understand why a program of installing nesting boxes, while valuable, cannot replace snags.

A healthy forest will have many snags of different sizes, from a variety of species and with a range of stages of decomposition. This is one reason why a forest that is managed for multiple benefits, one of which is wildlife, cannot be managed in a monoculture of even-aged trees. That is a plantation, not a forest.

Generally, the larger the snag, the more valuable it is to wildlife. Larger snags attract and accommodate multiple species. Big snags can only come from forests where trees are allowed to grow to maturity and die. This isn't wasteful, it is thoughtful planning for wildlife.

One day, that beautiful snag will tumble to the ground. There, as it makes the final transition to soil, it will provide habitat for salamanders and invertebrates. Bears will tear away at it looking for treasures of grubs. Small mammals may den inside the cavities carved by woodpeckers and occupied by bluebirds. Seeds from nearby plants will take root in its decaying wood, generating the next cycle of forest. And somewhere nearby, another tree will die, becoming the next wildlife resort.



Lewis's woodpecker © (CC-BY-SA) Tatiana Gettelman on Flickr CC.

"Alone" © (CC-BY-SA) ICK9S [M.H. Stephens] on Flickr CC.

The Silver Lining

by Heidi Ware*
Outreach & Education Director, Intermountain Bird Observatory

The long-billed curlew population in the Long-billed Curlew Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) was originally studied from 1977-1979 by University of Montana. The Idaho Department of Fish & Game (IDFG) started/resumed monitoring this population in 2005. The Intermountain Bird Observatory (IBO) began collaborating with IDFG in 2009 and this spring was their 6th field season of reproductive success and population monitoring. This includes a continued, intensive abundance survey as well as nest monitoring efforts. The ACEC is approximately 61,000 acres ranging from 20-40 miles northwest of Boise, Idaho. The ACEC is located between the Boise, Payette, and Snake River valleys characterized by rolling hills of cheatgrass and open sage communities sprinkled with agricultural fields. Long-billed curlews are identified as a 'Species of Greatest Conservation Need' in the Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan and as 'Watch List Species' by BLM, and are thus of particular interest to wildlife management agencies. Results from three years of research indicate that the ACEC curlew population continues to decline and the combination of human traffic, dumping of materials that are potentially toxic, and the prevalence of ground squirrel shooting in these areas all present significant hazards to nesting curlews. In early May, IBO put a transmitter on a female curlew (named Venus) in the ACEC to track her nesting behavior and migration. Below is her story.

HER STORY

Toward the end of May, we began to get a signal that Venus's transmitter had not moved. As always we were concerned, but because we were out of town attaching transmitters on other curlews, we were not able to go check on her right away. We became even more worried upon learning that the crew had last seen her with recently hatched chicks but hadn't found her on the last couple visits to her territory. In 2013 we strongly suspected that one of our curlews was shot, just days after his chicks hatched – when curlews are the most defensive of their territory, most visible, and most likely to loudly approach humans that are near their chicks. With her risk of being shot elevated, we feared the worst. This was not just a transmitter glitch.

When we finally made it to the ACEC in June, we found what we had expected: Venus was dead. There was no sign of her mate or chicks anywhere in the area. Since chicks of a young age are not very mobile, we assume that her chicks died and her mate fled (he did not have a transmitter, so we will never know, but it's possible that the male continued to care for the chicks).

Because of the hot summer weather, there wasn't much left of her, but thankfully we were able to recover Venus's transmitter unharmed. After some debate, we decided it would be worth it to collect what was left of her body to investigate the cause of death; though we were not hopeful that any evidence remained so long after her death. We contacted Mark Drew from the IDFG Wildlife Health Laboratory, who kindly offered to do an autopsy for us. After rigorous testing, x-rays, and a careful necropsy report, we have the results.

Venus was killed by a gunshot wound to her upper chest.



Not much was left of Venus by the time she was found.

© Intermountain Bird Observatory.

THE SILVER LINING

While we never wish for any of the curlews we study to die, we are thankful for a few reasons:

In the past, we have seen several shot curlews on the ACEC and several others where we suspected foul play. By having a transmitter on Venus, we were able to find her body relatively quickly and retrieve the necessary evidence to show that she had been shot.

We hope that, because of her 'fame' as a part of our study, that her death will bring this issue to the attention of the public, so that something can be done to prevent these deaths in the future.

Her death highlights a gap in community awareness that needs to be filled. While shooting of ground squirrels and some other species is legal on the ACEC, long-billed curlews (along with many other bird species on the ACEC) are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This means that the person who shot Venus committed a federal crime.

Many who use the ACEC do not realize that it is an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, or that it is illegal to shoot curlews and other migratory birds that live there. Our hope is that we can develop a partnership to change this through education and outreach – to the recreationalists who visit this area, to the communities surrounding the ACEC, and in other places in Idaho where illegal shooting of wildlife occurs.

Thank You
for Your Support!



Thank you to those who made direct donations, purchased or renewed a wildlife license plate, or let us know of a tax check-off donation between July 1- Sept. 31, 2014.

Idaho's nongame wildlife thanks you ALL!

Mountain goat © Mike Morrison

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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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