Idaho Watchable Wildlife

IDAHO FISH & GAME

WINTER 2023

Windows to Wildlife

Your support at work in Idaho's landscapes

In Otter News...

by Sandy Amdor*, Senior Wildlife Technician
Southwest Region, Idaho Department of Fish and Game

It was a beautiful autumn day in late October. Reflections of brightly colored leaves were scattered across the surface of the water; their patterns interrupted only by my kayak paddle. The air felt crisp on my face as I navigated shallow sections of the Boise River. Aside from a few duck hunters, I was the only one on the water which made for a quiet float. As I wound my way around each bend in the river, I marveled at how many kingfishers, species of waterfowl, and songbirds were out that morning. Birds, however, were not my focus that day. I had my sights set on a different critter of the mammalian variety, the river otter. This was the fourth river otter survey I had conducted in two months on three different rivers. With high flows diminishing and the weather rapidly changing, time was of the essence to complete my last survey. I was not the only one given this task. Several other biologists were out hiking, paddling, boating, or wading in other rivers and creeks throughout the region — all with the same goal of finding river otter sign within our selected survey sites.

The recovery of North American river otters (*Lontra canadensis*) is a conservation success story. By the early 1900s, otters were extirpated from 20 of the lower 48 states. Starting in the 1990s, multiple state wildlife agencies began otter translocation programs to their respective states. Today, river otters occupy all of their historic geographic distribution. Here in Idaho, the species was never fully extirpated and otters from Idaho have even been used to restore populations in other states.

IN THIS ISSUE

River otters are a species enjoyed by most all who get the chance to see one in the wild and they are harvested as a furbearer under a closely regulated season. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) has a management plan for river otters and other species of furbearing mammals. This plan prioritizes conservation and management needs for this suite of species and river otter monitoring was an item that rose to the top of the list.

Currently, river otter harvest is managed through a strict quota system, and we use the data collected from this harvest to monitor the status of the population. However, IDFG wanted to strengthen their management of river otters by developing a survey method that tracks the status and trends of river otter populations independent of harvest. Upon reviewing the scientific literature and discussion with subject matter experts, it was decided an occupancy monitoring approach (the change in the proportion of an area occupied by a species over time) was the most logical option.

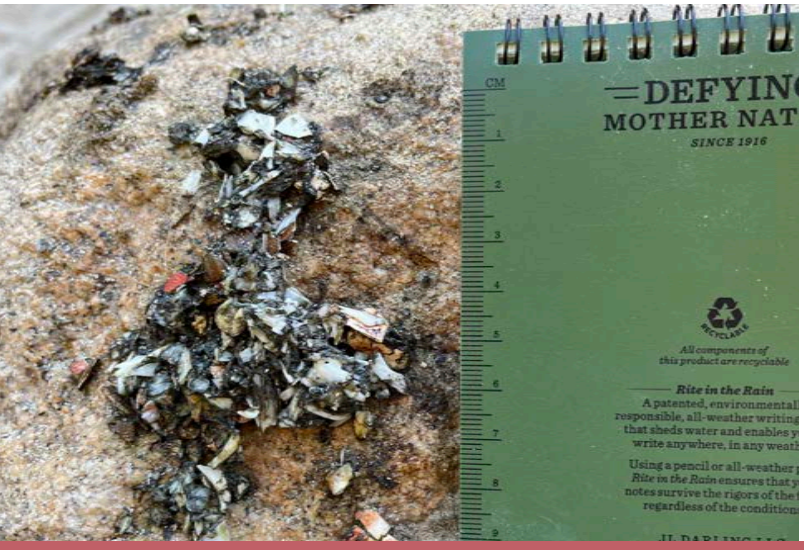
For the pilot season, the southwest region of Idaho was selected as the area to develop and test out the survey design. To develop the survey, IDFG staff identified all suitable river otter habitat in the region using GIS mapping tools. Within all this potentially suitable habitat, 12 kilometer (km) segments of stream were randomly selected to be surveyed in a random-spatially balanced selection process. Twelve kilometers was selected because this is the average home range of an adult female river otter in Idaho. When a 12 km segment of stream/lakeshore was selected, three-400 meter (m) sections within this 12 km segment where surveyed by walking both sides of the shore to look for river otter sign. These three survey efforts are then used to determine occupancy of river otter within the study area.

Very few of us were lucky enough to see river otters during our surveys so it was important to know how to find otter sign. We walked along our 400 m sections of carefully selected sandbars and muddy banks and searched for river otter tracks, and more importantly, latrine sites. Latrine sites are communal restrooms for river otters that are members of the same group and they serve as an important communication tool. They can often be identified as small piles of scat, which typically contain fish scales or parts of crayfish. They are mostly found near the water's edge on landscape features, such as a log over the water or a large boulder, which helps to broadcast their scent farther.

River otters, like other social animals, must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of hanging out in large groups. A big group makes it easier to catch fish, which seems like a good idea, but there's a downside to social life too. More otters mean more chances for disease transmission or for aggressive conflict. Otters balance these pressures by constantly splitting and joining groups. By investigating latrine sites, an otter can tell how many otters are in an area and who they might be.

Finding river otter tracks, while still valuable, does not give us as much information as a latrine site does with regard to how many otters might be in the area, and they can often be difficult to distinguish between those of a raccoon in certain circumstances. We did, however, record any tracks we observed during the survey period.

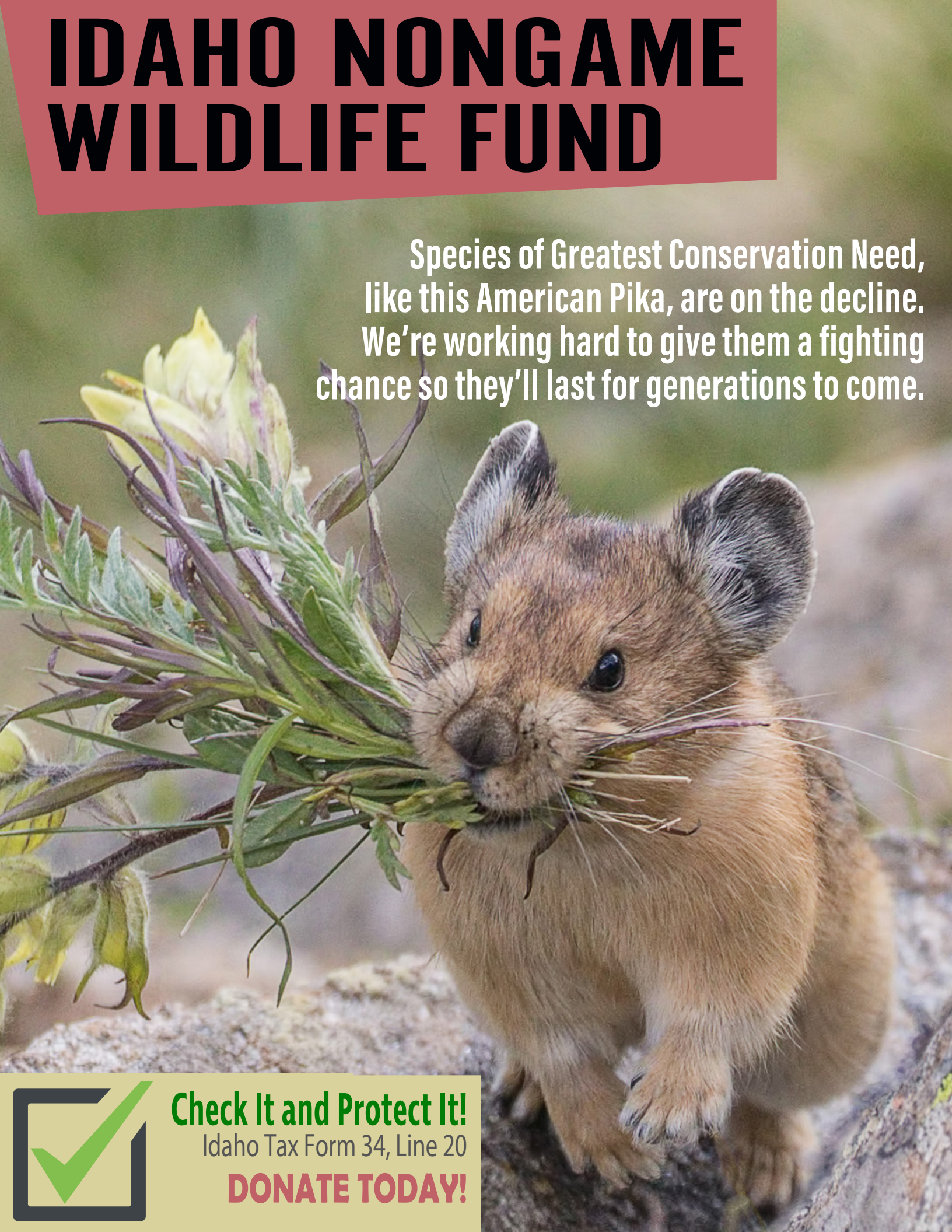
Overall, our pilot season was successful. We determined that 91% of suitable habitat for river otters in the southwest region of Idaho is occupied. We also established how large of a sample size is needed to track river otter populations. This collaborative effort provided us with some valuable information and gave us another tool in our toolbox for responsibly managing the river otter population in Idaho.



(Left) Latrine sites, collections of scat and scent mounds near the water's edge, are a river otter's social hub; much of their social life centers on a shared bathroom area. **PHOTO:** Sandy Amdor/IDFG. **(Right)** River otter poking its head out from the water. **PHOTO:** Shutterstock.

River otter tracks along a survey area in southwestern Idaho. **PHOTO:** Sandy Amdor/IDFG.

IDAHO NONGAME WILDLIFE FUND



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Western Toad

Species of Greatest Conservation Need

Adapted from the *Wildlife Express* newsletter, Volume 35, Issue 9

Description
Western toads (*Anaxyrus boreas*) are a medium-sized to large toad (they may be up to five inches in length) with short legs, a stocky body, blunt nose, and "warty" skin. Their bodies are covered with a mixture of tan, gray, green, brown, or black colors. Although each toad may have its own special blend of colors, there is one thing they all have in common — a cream-colored line running down their backs from their heads to their tails.

Their bumpy skin is covered with poison (parotoid) glands for protection. These glands are on adult toads, not tadpoles. Western toads taste awful to most predators. Since western toads taste bad, they are preyed upon by animals that don't have a lot of taste buds. Birds, like ravens and crows, eat quite a few adult western toads. Tadpoles are commonly eaten by garter snakes, fish, small mammals, and even other amphibians.

Range and Habitat
Western toads are found all across Idaho from mountain meadows to brushy deserts. They spend most of their time on land, but need to be near water to lay their eggs. Females lay about 12,000 eggs in a double-stranded string, which they attach to vegetation in the water. The eggs hatch in about 10 days. Once the female lays her eggs, she leaves. She is not there to protect her eggs and tadpoles or show them where to find food. Tadpoles are often seen swimming in large swarms. It is hard to miss hundreds or thousands of tadpoles swimming along the shore of a pond or lake. Once the tadpoles grow into tiny toadlets, they must move out of the water onto land to eat.

Western toads seek shelter in burrows or under rocks or logs. They dig burrows in loose soil or use the burrows of small mammals. Toads need to avoid the cold of winter and escape the heat in summer. They hibernate all winter.

Diet and Habits
The main diet of western toads are invertebrates (mainly insects), but also worms. During hot summer days, they stay safe in the burrow and come out at night to eat insects, spiders, roly-polies, and earthworms. During the cooler months of fall and spring, they are active during the day. Western toad tadpoles are herbivores, eating aquatic plants and algae. Western toads have a chirping, duck-like call that is unlike a typical frog's croak.

Conservation and Importance
In some places, western toads are becoming harder to find. In Idaho, they are a species of greatest conservation need. Biologists do not know all the threats that western toads face. Changing habitats, predators, disease, and parasites may all contribute to their decline. Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologists are working to conserve western toads so they will always remain part of Idaho.

Scan to Hear a Western Toad Call

On The Idaho Birding Trail

C.J. Strike Wildlife Management Area

IDAHO BIRDING TRAIL
Site# SW 24

42874 ID78, Bruneau • (208) 845-2324
idfg.idaho.gov/wma/cj-strike

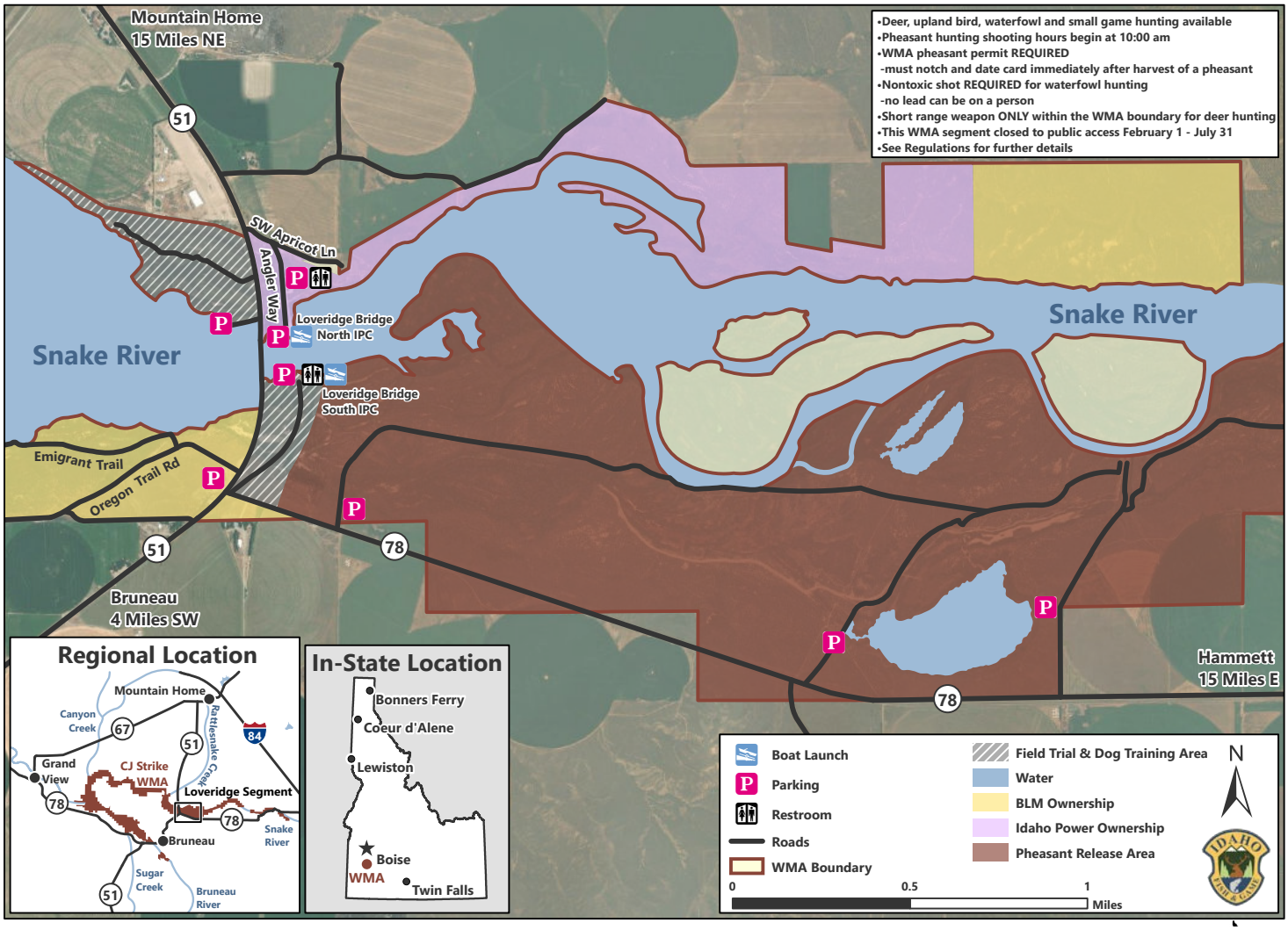
eBird
ebird.org/hotspot/L717614
ebird.org/hotspot/L1017258
ebird.org/hotspot/L867430

LAT/LONG: 42.8996097,-115.8592415
42.91169,-115.88489
42.9375431,-115.9673882

DIRECTIONS: *From Mountain Home, S on ID 51 for 15 mi; cross river; follow ID 51/78 for 6.5 mi SW; W on ID 78 for 2.5 mi to WMA headquarters.*

Over two hundred species of birds are known to use the C.J. Strike area annually. Large numbers of passerines pass through this area during the spring migration. Long-billed Curlew, Western Screech-, Northern Saw-whet and Burrowing Owls breed in the area. During spring and summer, many other waterfowl and waterbird species, including rails, terns, gulls, sandpipers, and herons can be found here. The reservoir is also a nursery for several hundred Western and Clark's Grebes. Approximately 100,000 waterfowl, including Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, use the area during migration and winter. The largest number of waterfowl usually arrive in November and leave by early February.

Loveridge Segment at CJ Strike Wildlife Management Area



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Dark-eyed Junco.
Photo: Courtesy of Macaulay Library

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Windows to Wildlife

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

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Deniz Aygen — Editor

deniz.aygen@idfg.idaho.gov
208•287•2750

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