

# Windows to *Wildlife*

## **Wings Over Lake Coeur d'Alene**

Celebrating 50 Years of counting Bald Eagles

## **Idaho's First Wildlife Overpass**

Connecting habitats and saving lives

## **On the Idaho Birding Trail**

Winter birding at Niagara Springs Wildlife Management Area

## **Pygmy Rabbits**

Monitoring North America's  
smallest rabbit



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On the Idaho Birding Trail at Niagara Springs Wildlife Management Area

PHOTO: Tempe Regan/IDFG



Species of  
Greatest  
Conservation  
Need

# Pygmy Rabbits

## *A Sagebrush Connection*

PHOTO: Tom Koerner/USFWS

## Eyes on the Burrow: Monitoring Pygmy Rabbits in Idaho's Sagebrush Sea

by Lyn Snoddy\*, Regional Wildlife Diversity Biologist  
and Michelle Commons Kemner\*, Wildlife Ecologist  
Idaho Department of Fish and Game



In March 2023, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was petitioned to list pygmy rabbits (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The University of Idaho, Bureau of Land Management and Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), among other agencies and states, are conducting surveys to better inform the FWS's listing decision.

Pygmy rabbits are small rabbits native to the western US. They are difficult to detect, only growing to about the size of a large grapefruit. Adult pygmy rabbits are often mistaken for young cottontail rabbits. Pygmy rabbits have buffy-gray coats, buffy brown tails (one key identification feature is that you won't see a white tail when they run away from you) and short, slightly rounded ears with light-colored edges. They can be so well-camouflaged that Idahoans who've spent their whole lives in the sagebrush may have never seen one, or even heard of them.

Pygmy rabbits are the smallest rabbit species in North America and are highly adapted to sagebrush ecosystems. They are skilled diggers and create complex burrow systems beneath the sagebrush for protection against predators and extreme weather conditions.

PHOTO: Tempe Regan/IDFG

They are sagebrush specialists. They eat shrubs, grasses, and forbs in the summer, but their winter diet is exclusively sagebrush (they do not hibernate). They're found only in areas with mature sagebrush and deep soils that allow them to dig lots of underground tunnels, where they can hide.

Pygmy rabbits were previously petitioned for ESA listing in the early 2000s, but listing was not warranted, in large part due to data gathered by IDFG and other agencies that showed the species was stable. Similar to those prior efforts, our current survey is designed to document where pygmy rabbits occur in Idaho.

Surveys are being conducted at up to 800 sites statewide this winter and next winter. IDFG biologists will walk, ski, or snowshoe around each 247-acre survey site for two hours looking for pygmy rabbit tracks, burrows, and pellets. We will pick up the pellets we think are from pygmy rabbits and send to a lab for genetic confirmation. Pygmy rabbit tracks are easiest to find when fresh snow is on the ground, so we'll aim to survey two to five days after snowfall. Stay tuned for future updates from this field season!



PHOTO: Public Domain

# Fast Facts

## Habitat and Range:

- sagebrush and sagebrush-steppe regions in ID, MT, UT, WY, NV, CA, OR, and WA
- prefers tall, dense sagebrush

## Physical Characteristics:

- 9-12 inches long, about 1 pound
- gray to brown fur
- short ears and a stubby tail (that isn't white)

## Behavior and Diet:

- skilled diggers known for burrowing behavior
- eats sagebrush and is able to extract nutrients from the leaves

## Conservation Challenges:

- habitat loss and fragmentation

A pygmy rabbit ventures through the snow-covered sagebrush. Its silver-gray fur blends into the winter landscape, creating a natural camouflage. PHOTO: Public Domain



# IDAHO NONGAME WILDLIFE FUND

Species of Greatest Conservation Need, like this American Pika, are on the decline. We're working hard to give them a fighting chance so they'll last for generations to come.



**Check It and Protect It!**

Idaho Tax Form 40, Line 34

**DONATE TODAY!**

# Winter Wings Over Lake Coeur d'Alene

December 2023 was a record year for Bald Eagles visiting Lake Coeur d'Alene for the annual kokanee spawn. For the last 14 years, Bureau of Land Management biologists have been counting the majestic raptors weekly from mid-November through early January. Until this year, the highest number of eagles counted on a 12-mile route was 372 in 2017. But this year, 409 were tallied on December 20th!

Bald Eagles pass through Idaho on their way south from the interior portions of British Columbia where winter weather freezes the lakes and rivers they depend on for food. Lake Pend Oreille and Lake Coeur d'Alene are annual stop-overs where eagles can bulk up on nutrient-rich spawning kokanee.

Kokanee are land-locked sockeye salmon that spawn in the gravelly shores of Lake Pend Oreille and Lake Coeur d'Alene. In mid-November, the small (about 10 inches long) salmon start moving towards undeveloped shoreline where the gravel is suitable for laying their eggs. In a good spawning year, the edges of the lake in Wolf Lodge Bay will be littered with dead kokanee that have completed their life cycle and successfully laid the eggs that will become spawning adults in three to four years.

How many, when, and where eagles stop is largely related to winter weather conditions in Canada and the vigor of the kokanee spawn in the two largest north Idaho lakes. While this year's event is largely over (only 37 eagles were counted on January 17th), plan to visit one of two sites for premiere eagle viewing in future years: Bayview on Lake Pend Oreille or Wolf Lodge Bay on the northeast shore of Lake Coeur d'Alene.

Text/photos by Carrie Hugo\*, BLM Idaho Biologist



# Idaho's First *Wildlife Overpass*



PHOTO: ITD

## **Cervidae Peak Overpass - Connecting Habitats and Saving Lives**



Completed in November 2023, Idaho's first wildlife overpass is allowing animals to safely find their way over State Highway 21. Wildlife overpasses are structures built over roads to allow animals to safely cross from one side to another. The overpass at Cervidae Peak, located between Lucky Peak and Idaho City, hopes to significantly reduce wildlife-vehicle crashes along this busy section of the highway.

The overpass features fencing that parallels the highway for about one mile to guide animals to the overpass. The goal for this new overpass is to work in conjunction with an existing wildlife underpass structure to further reduce the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions and maintain habitat connectivity for big game.

To learn more, visit Cervidae Peak Wildlife Overpass's social media page: [www.facebook.com/cervidaepeakwildlifeoverpass](https://www.facebook.com/cervidaepeakwildlifeoverpass)



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Game cameras installed along the overpass capture some of the very first visitors to use the overpass. Deer, elk, and other wildlife will need to learn how to use the overpass, as it is an unfamiliar structure for them. PHOTOS: IDFG

# The best part of **wildlife viewing.**



[idahobirdingtrail.com](http://idahobirdingtrail.com)



# Idaho Birding Trail



IDAHO BIRDING TRAIL

Site SW#35

## Niagara Springs

## Wildlife Management Area

Niagara Springs Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is nestled between the rim of the Snake River Canyon and the banks of the Snake River, just south of Wendell, Idaho. The water, wetlands, and natural areas of the WMA make it a destination for numerous bird species and for high quality wildlife-based recreational opportunities.

Over 5,000 ducks and geese winter along this portion of the Snake River annually. Look for wintering sparrow flocks which may have Harris's or White-throated in the mix. The WMA is a great place for owls in the early spring, starting late February/early March.

Spring-nesting waterfowl include Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal, and Wood Ducks.

A viewing blind allows a more intimate viewing opportunity.



### WILDLIFE VIEWING

A wildlife viewing blind provides visitors with a unique opportunity to get up close to a variety of wildlife species that inhabit one of the ponds at Niagara Springs WMA.

The blind is accessed by either a seasonal road (Sept. 15 - Jan. 31; 1/4 mile walk) or via the main road (Feb. 1 - Sept. 14; 2/3 mile walk).

Nesting Red-winged Blackbirds, Mallards, and American Coots can be seen from the blind during the spring and summer.

# Thank You

Thank you to those who made direct donations, purchased or renewed a specialty wildlife license plate, or contributed to the Idaho Nongame Wildlife Fund when completing their taxes.

Your contribution provides important funding for wildlife and habitat conservation, research, and outreach in Idaho.



## Windows to Wildlife

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAM

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