



**Wildlife
Management**

Wildlife Management

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 chartered BLM with the responsibility of maintaining or enhancing the fish and wildlife habitats that occur on the public lands.

Resource Objectives and Planned Actions

The Billings Resource Area operates under a number of general wildlife habitat management objectives which are utilized Bureauwide. Each objective is mandated and/or supported by specific Federal regulation or legislation. The BLM wildlife habitat management program places special emphasis on, but is not limited to the protection, maintenance and enhancement of:

- Crucial habitats for big game, upland game birds and waterfowl.

- Crucial habitats for nongame species of special interest and concern to state or other Federal agencies.

- Wetland and riparian habitats.

- Existing or potential fisheries habitat.

- Habitat for state or federally listed threatened and/or endangered species.

These commitments to the wildlife resources may vary by the level of effort devoted to each element within the program. The level of effort undertaken annually is dependent upon national priorities, Washington Office direction and the availability of funding and manpower to effectively complete the workload.

The level and intensity of wildlife habitat management activities presented in this action have been selected based on feasibility, opportunity, need and associated impacts by other resource programs.

Wildlife Improvements

Five upland game bird watering devices will be installed in areas where watering sources are unavailable and no other watering facilities are planned for development. Fifty waterfowl nesting islands will be constructed in existing reservoirs in Musselshell and Yellowstone Counties. Seven existing reservoirs will be fenced to achieve desirable aquatic habitat for waterfowl and shore birds. Of these seven, three reservoirs will be fenced completely with alternative watering facilities installed and the other four reservoirs will be fenced on the upper 1/3 to include approximately 50 upland acres per reservoir. Twenty-five acres of dense nesting cover will be planted adjacent to Big Lake. Twenty raptor nest sites will be installed adjacent to 10 prairie dog colonies and at selected locations within the Yellowstone River Valley. If suitable locations are found, three fisheries reservoirs will be constructed near urban communities. With the use of acceptable grazing systems, 80 percent of the woody floodplain type of vegetative composition totalling approximately 41 miles within the "I" category allotments will be maintained or improved to good or excellent range condition.

The maintenance of existing facilities will be completed as needed and will receive priority for available funding over the construction of the above mentioned new project developments.

Habitat Management Plans

A habitat management plan will be developed for chukar partridge. In the long-term, consideration will also be given to developing habitat management plans for such species as mule deer, Pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, sharptail grouse, waterfowl, raptors, prairie dogs and fisheries. These species have been selected due to their uniqueness in the resource area, obvious opportunities for enhancement or public demands for increased availability. Completion of these plans will be dependent upon need, availability of funding and manpower.

Upon identification of an occupied habitat area for any T&E species, or pursuant to any relocation efforts for a T&E species, priority will be given to the development of a habitat management plan for that species.

Land Acquisition

A program to identify a limited amount of non-Bureau lands desirable for fish and wildlife habitat will be initiated. Attention will be focused on waterfowl nesting areas such as Halfbreed and Big Lake, big game winter ranges, high value upland game bird habitat, active and/or potential fisheries habitats and important nongame and threatened and endangered species habitats. Future acquisition of these lands will occur predominately through land exchange.

Coordination

All major wildlife habitat enhancement projects will be coordinated with regional personnel of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MDFW&P). As mandated in a joint memorandum of understanding with the MDFW&P, all projects involving vegetative manipulation will be presented to the regional personnel for comments and recommendations in advance of project initiation.

Informal and formal consultation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will be initiated on all proposed actions which may affect any Federally listed threatened or endangered species. Consultation will be done in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, as amended.

A state-federal interagency team of wildlife biologists has been established to review and make final recommendations on the application of the Federal coal program wildlife unsuitability criteria for the Bull Mountain area. This effort will be continued in consultation with the USFWS and the MDFWP.

Implementation Costs

It is estimated that the total cost of improvements to implement this action is \$75,000 (see Appendix 2.2 for a summary of estimated costs for each type of improvement).

Rationale

The level of surveys and monitoring will allow a 3 year cycle for intensive studies on all crucial big game and upland game bird habitats and all existing fisheries habitats. Annual waterfowl surveys will be conducted in major concentration areas. Threatened and endangered species habitat, or potential habitat will be surveyed annually. Inventories needed to fully apply the Federal coal wildlife unsuitability criteria numbers 9 through 15 will also be completed prior to leasing any Federal coal.

The decision to complete a habitat management plan (HMP) for chukar partridge was made because of the uniqueness of the species to the Billings Resource Area. The major portion of year around chukar partridge habitat within the resource area is on public lands. Upon completion of the coordinated management plans for grazing management, species such as mule deer, black bear, Pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, sharptail grouse, waterfowl, raptors, prairie dogs and fisheries will receive priority consideration for HMP development where the coordinated management plans do not meet the overall objectives for the individual species.

All improvements were selected based on feasibility, compatibility with other actions and the level of development which has been historically funded. The levels chosen will also allow for annual maintenance of all existing facilities.

Nonstructural improvements were chosen pursuant to BLM's mandate under Executive Orders 11988 and 11990 to preserve, protect and if necessary, restore floodplains and wetlands to their natural function.

Monitoring

The wildlife program will focus on completing 60,000 acres of terrestrial habitat monitoring yearly. This will allow a 3 year cyclic collection and update of habitat condition on all big game winter concentration areas, upland game bird nesting areas, the PMWHR, the 24 implemented AMPs and those "I" and "M" allotments in which potential habitat conflicts exist. Surveys will be conducted in 12 selected waterfowl concentration areas to collect utilization and average annual brood numbers. Approximately 300 acres of known prairie dog colonies will be surveyed annually for the occurrence of black-footed ferrets and to update colony size data. Due to the relatively small acreages of prairie dog towns occurring on public lands, this intensity will provide a minimum of a 3 year cyclic update of all colonies.

Approximately 10 miles of streams with active fisheries will be surveyed per year to collect species occurrence and habitat condition data. This effort will concentrate on the Musselshell, Clarks Fork, Yellowstone, Sage Creek, Crooked Creek and Bad Canyon Creek drainages. Three reservoirs will be surveyed annually to determine their suitability for fisheries stocking. A very limited number of existing reservoirs have fisheries potential and at this intensity, all those possessing potential can be evaluated in the short term.

Implementation Priorities

1. Monitor, maintain or improve sensitive habitats for threatened or endangered species (bald eagle, black-footed ferret, peregrine falcon). Upon identification of an occupied habitat area or introduction of any T&E species into an area, a Habitat Management Plan would be initiated immediately.

Monitor, maintain or improve crucial winter ranges for Pronghorn antelope and mule deer focusing initially on the "I" and "M" category allotments. Within the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range monitor, maintain or improve crucial habitat area for mule deer, black bear and Bighorn Sheep.

Monitor, maintain or improve upland game bird nesting sites (sage grouse, chukar partridge, sharp-tail grouse). This effort will focus initially on the "I" and "M" category allotments.

Monitor, maintain or improve waterfowl nesting habitat. This effort will focus initially on the Big Lake complex and 12 concentration areas located in Musselshell County, Montana.

Monitor, maintain or improve known, active fisheries habitat. This effort will focus initially on Crooked Creek and Bad Canyon Creek.

2. Maintain all existing wildlife habitat improvement facilities. This effort will focus on guzzlers, exclosures, waterfowl nesting islands and antelope passes.

3. Maintain or improve 80 percent of 41 miles of woody floodplain riparian habitat to good or excellent range condition, utilizing acceptable grazing systems and fencing where needed.

4. Initiate development of new wildlife habitat enhancement projects. Over the long term, these would include 5 upland game bird watering devices, 50 waterfowl nesting islands, fencing of 7 existing reservoirs to protect aquatic vegetation, planting 25 acres of dense nesting cover, installing 20 raptor perches and building 3 fisheries reservoirs.

5. Develop a Habitat Management Plan for chukar partridge. This plan would set forth management actions aimed at the south central portion of the resource area, Carbon County, Montana.

6. Identify lands suitable for acquisition as high value wildlife habitat. Attention would be focused on Threatened and Endangered species habitat, waterfowl nesting/resting habitat and crucial big game and upland game bird habitats.

Support

Monitoring for all wildlife species will be closely coordinated with the MDFW&P. Any action having an effect on T&E species habitat will be brought to the attention of the FWS, who will be consulted to render an opinion in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

Project development will require input from all resource programs to assess impacts through the EAR process. Additionally, purchasing support, contracting, survey and design and project inspection support will be required.

The development of an HMP for chukar partridge will require support from all resource programs to assess potential impacts. Input from the MDFW&P will also be requested.

As lands are identified for acquisition, the realty program will be given the lead to identify lands available for exchange and develop the feasibility report/land report. Input from such agencies as FWS, MDFW&P and Ducks Unlimited may be requested.

