

Montana's Place for Big Game and Quiet Recreation

Motorized recreation threatens the wildlife of the Rocky Mountain Front¹

Background: Unparalleled wildlife values and a history of stewardship

Montana's wildlife professionals agree the Rocky Mountain Front is among the finest wildlife habitat in the lower 48 states. The 750,000 acres of the Lewis and Clark National Forest on the eastside of Continental Divide, which the forest manages as the Rocky Mountain Ranger District, sports the nation's largest bighorn sheep population, estimated at 600 to 700 animals. Concentrations of elk, totaling more than 3,000 animals, are second only to the herds of the Yellowstone region. The only remaining places where the grizzly bear roams into the prairies are found here. At least four of Montana's 14 wildlife species listed under the Endangered Species Act depend on the Front—including Canada lynx, piping plover and gray wolf—as well as numerous species of concern. "It would be a landscape as close to primitive America as can be found, a place of appreciation and contemplation of biodiversity on a scale found only in Alaska or the plains of East Africa," writes biologist Barrie Gilbert in an April 2003 report to the U.S. Forest Service.

Large carnivores and big game species thrive on the Front thanks to a century-old Montana-born tradition of stewardship that brought together ranchers, conservationists and sportsmen in a show of the unifying power of wildlife in American society. The future of this wildlife legacy is in question as new proposals emerge to open the Front to off-road vehicles and energy production. Unroaded areas comprise almost 85 percent of the Front's 397,030 national-forest acres that are not currently protected as wilderness. In 2002, Lewis and Clark officials resurrected a flawed travel plan—which the Forest Service itself overruled 13 years earlier because of the plan's failure to assess the impacts of motorized recreation—that proposes to motorize 281 of 496 miles of trails and allow snowmobiles into more than 200,000 acres.

Motorized recreation: A vast experiment on America's wildlife

There's no missing the physical marks of motorized recreation, the rutted, eroded trails, the smelly exhaust and the two-stroke scream of revving snowmobiles. These impacts are easy to document and quantify, but how does the motorized presence affect the four-footed and winged residents of the Front? Because motorized recreation is a relative newcomer to public land, studies have yet to fully assess its impact on wildlife. But there are plenty of preliminary findings and anecdotal evidence indicating motorized disturbances reduce habitat security and displace wildlife, according to the Gilbert report. Here are some examples:

- "The more roads you have, the less elk you have." Road densities as low as 1 mile per square mile reduce elk habitat effectiveness by 25 percent, and as much as 50 percent when densities increase to 2 miles, according to research by biologist Jack Lyon.
- It is well documented that most known grizzly bear mortality can be attributed to encounters with humans; bears also under-use habitat near roads. A 1989 study, for example, found that 69 percent of human-caused bear deaths on the Front occurred within one kilometer of a road. And a 2002 study found bears tended to avoid areas within 500 meters of ATV trails in the Badger-Two Medicine area.
- Biologists using motion-sensing cameras detected no wolverine activity in a part of Gallatin National Forest managed for logging, while in a nearby undisturbed area they recorded 14 wolverine detections despite using fewer cameras over fewer nights.

¹ This fact sheet and recommendations were adapted from scoping comments prepared by wildlife biologist Barrie Gilbert in April 2003 on behalf of the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front. A retired senior scientist with Utah State University, Dr. Gilbert has spent 25 years studying wildlife behavior and the effects of human activity on large mammals. The 35-page report, based on his review of existing studies and literature, is available on-line at www.wildmontana.org or by contacting peter_aengst@twc.org.

- A herd of elk cows and calves was recently observed swimming across the 8-mile width of Utah's Bear Lake. The animals were abandoning prime habitat in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest above the lake's west shore to escape the motorized chaos that erupts there on the opening of hunting season.

Big game and large carnivores, the very species for which the Front is so prized, are particularly sensitive to human disturbances. And motorized vehicles clearly magnify such disturbance. ORVs and snowmobiles cover a lot more ground than traditional recreationists and their noise, especially the whine of snow machines' two-stroke engines. Snowmobiles are of acute concern because Montana winters are hard enough on large animals. To survive some of the cruelest weather in the country, the Front's wildlife must contend with near starvation every winter. Snowmobile traffic could easily push many individuals over that edge into starvation or scare entire groups from their preferred habitat and denning sites. Bighorn sheep are the Front's most sensitive ungulate and yet the proposed travel plan envisions this creature's prime winter range being used as snowmobile play areas.

How to protect the Front's wildlife from motorized intrusions

Those promoting motorized recreation in our wildlands should bear the burden of demonstrating these non-traditional activities do not pose undue risks to wildlife survival. In the meantime, Forest planners should abide by the precautionary principal, that is, restrict access to sensitive areas until they can show that motorized use will not undermine wildlife populations. In other words, we must avoid trading some short-term fun for a priceless wildlife resource.

Recommendations:

- All Travel Plan alternatives should identify full protection of wildlife as a prime objective.
- Conduct density analyses of trail and road networks, factoring motorized trails as roads.
- In pursuit of a policy of zoned access, manage the Front for traditional, non-motorized recreation, since other parts of the Lewis and Clark National Forest currently opportunities for motorized recreation and exhibit lesser wildlife values.
- Keep snowmobilers out of cirques known to harbor denning wolverines.
- Bar all motorized travel through riparian areas.
- Over-snow travel through winter elk and mule deer range must be confined to designated routes.
- Unneeded routes are to be decommissioned and restored to a natural state.
- Conduct a "fragmentation analysis" for every trail deemed necessary in the travel plan and offer a range of alternative trail networks, assessing each by its potential to fragment habitat. Trails that harm wildlife should be excluded.
- Anticipate and plan for future recreational trends and developments in vehicle design.
- Designate core habitat areas for every species of concern and implement seasonal travel closures on these places should they be necessary to protect their productivity.

"Motorized use is contrary to historic, cultural and spiritual uses and compromises all of them—some irreparably," Dr. Gilbert writes. "It also threatens transboundary ecosystem connectivity and integrity, a link between the Banff-Jasper complex to the north and the Salmon-Selway and Yellowstone systems to the south." The Front's biological diversity comes from its merging of two great landscapes, the grassland communities of the Great Plains and the forested environments of the Rocky Mountains, and opens a window onto our continent's natural order before its disruption by white settlement. "Its most unique cultural value may be for education and study of the integral roles of each species in the forest's web of life," Dr. Gilbert continues. "On a grander scale, these lands contribute to the backbone of wild habitat linking Canada's continental crown to the American West for all the species present when the Lewis and Clark Expedition crossed the Rockies two hundred years ago."