

## Whitefish Range Wildlife

### ***Background***

The Whitefish Range harbors one of the most outstanding, remaining, large mammal assemblages in North America, including 16 carnivore and six ungulate species (John Weaver (2001) states,

*“A unique community of carnivore species resides in the transboundary Flathead region that appears unmatched in North America for its variety, completeness, use of valley bottom lands, and density of species which are rare elsewhere. Due to these unique characteristics and its strategic position as a linkage between National Parks in both countries, the transboundary Flathead may be the single most important basin for carnivores in the Rocky Mountains.”*

The Whitefish Range also provides critical habitat for bull trout and is recognized as a genetic refuge for west slope cutthroat trout (as noted in the Partnership’s document on fisheries).

Several reasons stand out as the basis for this remarkable diversity of wildlife. Perhaps first in importance is the productivity of the land, which receives enough moisture in snow and rain to provide a diversity of habitat conditions including a very high diversity of plant species and plant communities (Kuijt, 1982). Second, the accident of geography places the Whitefish Range at the southern extent the Canadian Rockies where, historically, carnivore species have persisted longer and with greater success than in the U.S. This connectivity with Canada has played and will continue play a key role in the persistence of some species into the future. (Apps, et al. 2007). Third, large blocks of contiguous habitat remain available and provide secure habitat relatively free from human disturbance. And fourth, the emphasis placed since 1975 on the recovery of the grizzly bear has resulted in greater acreage of secure habitat becoming available to ungulates and carnivores in particular, in large part due to the reduction in road densities and associated industrial and human activity.

All of the ungulate and carnivore populations in the Whitefish Range are ‘international’; they either migrate seasonally across the international border or are connected genetically. Weaver (2001) stated, “All of these wildlife move across the international border making the Flathead River basin truly a transboundary landscape that must be managed as one integral, ecological unit.”

Weaver’s 2011 and 2013 reports provide an analysis and assessment of the most valuable wildlife habitat for six species (grizzly, wolverine, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, west slope cutthroat trout, bull trout) and advocates for the protection of the most secure habitat.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) reports that the Whitefish Range produces some of the biggest trophy mule deer bucks in Montana. The department attributes this phenomenon once again to the large blocks of secure, roadless land, and the ruggedness of the terrain. The furbearer carnivores are also noteworthy in the Whitefish Range, with the pine marten in particular noted for its exceptionally high quality. Wolverine maternal habitat appears to be abundant, but population numbers or estimates are unavailable at

this time.

FWP also note that elk and moose numbers are declining in the Whitefish Range. Also, spruce grouse are abundant and a quality hunting opportunity. FWP is interested in a citizen science program for wildlife sightings to help bolster observational data on species of management interest.

### **Goal**

**Future Generations:** Pass on to the next generations the same high quality and diversity of wildlife species found in the Whitefish Range and transboundary Flathead.

### **Management Recommendations**

1. **Maintain the Core of Secure Habitat** by conserving the existing large blocks of intact, secure roadless lands, especially in the northern part of the North Fork subunit as required by law.
2. **Maintain Habitat Quality and Diversity** for the full range of wildlife in the 'suitable' and 'non-suitable' timber base through the spectrum of management tools. Avoid single species management.
3. **Maintain Habitat Connectivity** between adjacent management jurisdictions – including to Canada and Glacier National Park - using the best available, current science to identify movement corridors and trends.
4. **Identify the High Diversity and High Value Habitats** in the Whitefish Range based on species range and meet the diversity of habitat needs across the landscape (e.g. respond to declining habitat needs of moose).
5. **Maintain a Quality Hunting Experience** for key species such as moose, mule deer, and elk.
6. **Coordinate with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks** and other government agencies where appropriate to incorporate their plans and multi-agency strategies into Flathead National Forest projects and activities. Work jointly to meet habitat and population goals for a variety of species.
7. **Anticipate the Impacts of Climate Change** using the best available science and where appropriate by modifying habitats in the 'suitable' and 'non-suitable' timber base using the full spectrum of management tools.
8. **Continue to Move Listed Species Toward Recovery and De-listing.**
9. **Look for Opportunities for Wildlife Conservation Education Programs**, including a citizen science program, and media that would be used to promote conservation practices for threatened and endangered species and species of concern.

### **Citations**

Kuijt, Job. 1982. The *Flora of Waterton*. University of Alberta Press. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/ref/collection/herbarium/id/4548>

Weaver, John L. 2001. **The Transboundary Flathead: A Critical Landscape for Carnivores in the Rocky Mountains.** WCS Working Papers No. 18. 2001. <http://wcscanada.org/Portals/42/Publications/WeaverBookComplete1.pdf>

Apps, Clayton D., John L. Weaver, Paul C. Paquet, Bryce Bateman, Bruce N. McLellan. 2007. **Carnivores in the Southern Canadian Rockies: Core Areas and Connectivity Across the Crowsnest Highway.** WCS Canada Conservation Report No. 3, September 2007. [http://wcscanada.org/Portals/42/media/file/crowsnest\\_web.pdf](http://wcscanada.org/Portals/42/media/file/crowsnest_web.pdf)

John L. Weaver. 2011. **Conservation Value of Roadless Areas for Vulnerable Fish and Wildlife Species in the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem, Montana.** Working Paper No. 40, April 2011. <http://wcscanada.org/Portals/42/Publications/no40-april27-condensed.pdf>

Weaver, John L. 2013. **Safe Havens, Safe Passages for Vulnerable Fish and Wildlife: Critical Landscapes in the Southern Canadian Rockies, British Columbia and Montana** WCS Canada Conservation Report No. 6 | March 2013 <http://wcscanada.org/Portals/42/Publications/safe%20haven%20final%20web.pdf>

### **Committee Members**

Larry Wilson, Robbie Holman, Dave Hadden, Frank Vitale, Paul McKenzie, John Larsen, Steve Gnaidek (observer).

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 05/13/2013.**