
25 YEARS OF ASPEN WILDLIFE HABITAT RESTORATION ON THE BEARTOOTH RANGER DISTRICT, CUSTER GALLATIN NATIONAL FOREST

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Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the Intermountain West. Aspen is an important wildlife habitat, providing forage, cover, shade, and nesting for birds, small mammals, big game, and forest carnivores. Upland game birds, particularly ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), are associated with aspen. Ruffed grouse are a habitat indicator species for aspen communities in the Custer National Forest Plan. Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (2005) identified aspen as a community type of greatest conservation need due to altered natural fire regimes. Although aspen is a rare vegetation component on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, the Beartooth

Ranger District supports relatively large expanses of aspen along the Beartooth Mountain Face. Many of these aspen communities had converted to conifers, or were declining in health. In recognition of this opportunity to restore wildlife habitat, a management plan was developed in 1990, featuring ruffed grouse. Since 1990, crews have treated about 141 aspen stands on about 400 acres. Methods included prescribed burning and using chainsaws and other hand tools, resulting in the creation of a mosaic of aspen size and age classes and drumming logs that fulfill the yearlong habitat needs of ruffed grouse. Funding for these treatments came largely from a partnership between the Beartooth Ranger District and Montana's Upland Bird Program. Wildlife observed using treated aspen stands included a diverse array of cavity and non-cavity nesting birds, including ruffed grouse, small mammals and big game, especially moose (*Alces alces*).