

JOINT PLENARY INVITED ABSTRACTS

MONTANA'S WILDLIFE LEGACY – DECIMATION TO RESTORATION

Harold Picton, Emeritus Professor of Wildlife Management, Department of Ecology, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59717

Terry Lonner, Chief of Wildlife Research - Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (retired); Media Works - Multimedia Producer, Bozeman, Montana 59715

The main intent of the Montana Wildlife Legacy Project was to pay tribute to the generations of Montanans who made our current wildlife resources possible and for public education, especially in junior high and high schools and hunter safety classes. Use of the wildlife resources for the settlement of Montana produced a catastrophe by the end of the 19th century, but by the end of the 20th century wildlife was more abundant than at any time during the previous 130 years. Passage of protective laws during the latter 19th century, coupled with gradually increasing efforts to enforce those laws, accounted for a portion of this resource restoration. The remainder of the story is largely untold and is the subject of the DVD, "Back from the Brink - Montana's Wildlife Legacy" produced in 2005 and the companion book, "Montana's Wildlife Legacy - Decimation to Restoration" published in 2008. Game bird resources were heavily affected by the "cow and the plow." Few agricultural lands provided new habitats unsuited for native species. Pheasant introductions began before 1895 by private individuals and became a state bird farm program in 1929. Over 0.80 million pheasants were planted by the time the state discontinued this program in the early 1980s. At the beginning of the 20th century elk occurred only in the Sun River-South Fork of the Flathead and Yellowstone National Park areas. Rod and Gun clubs held fund-raising events and paid \$5/ elk to have the Northern Pacific Railroad deliver rail car loads of elk trapped near Gardiner, Montana just north of Yellowstone National Park, to areas near their towns. The transplants began in 1910 with releases near Butte, Hamilton and in the Glacier Park area. Transplants of elk continued until 1997 when the last of 11,364 were trapped and released. Similar programs for other species were developed after the Pitman-Robertson funds were accepted by the Montana Legislature in 1939 with the Wildlife Restoration Division of the Montana State Fish and Game Department established in 1940. For example, almost 4000 pronghorn antelope were trapped and transplanted, 1000 more than existed in the entire state in the 1920s. Significant, but regulated hunter harvests of the biological surplus and habitat preservation programs became prominent in the last third of the 20th century. This resurrection of Montana's wildlife resource was an epic effort extending through six generations, five wars, an economic collapse, and the greatest North American climate disaster of the 20th century. Citizen leadership arose in generation after generation and melded with the leadership and science furnished by the state, federal agencies, and universities to bring about a successful restoration effort. Wildlife resources that we enjoy today were a gift of the people from the 20th century to the people of the 21st century. They come with a message to care for and cherish them, to value and maintain them. Resources that are not valued tend to end up on the trash heaps of human history. For more information go to: www.montanawildlifelegacy.com.