

Pygmy Rabbit Occupancy and Habitat Relationships in Southwestern Montana Through Participation in Collaborative Research

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Pygmy rabbits are the smallest leporid in North America and are tied to sagebrush steppe ecosystems. Sagebrush comprises most of their diet throughout the year and offers concealment from predators. In Montana their range is limited to the southwestern corner of the state where they depend on relatively contiguous stretches of sagebrush, leading to their status as a species of greatest conservation need. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has joined a multi-partner project led by University of Idaho (U of I) researchers that are studying pygmy rabbit occupancy and habitat requirements across their range in Idaho and Montana. The U of I led project is incorporating genetic analysis of scat to improve certainty of species ID and a winter-based survey method to improve efficiency. Current pygmy rabbit research in Montana expands on prior work completed by FWP, Montana Natural Heritage Program, and Uof I, and it aims to develop a well distributed set of study sites to allow for surveys to be repeated in future years to detect changes in occupancy and distribution. Developing a better understanding of the current distribution and habitat use of pygmy rabbits in Montana will improve FWP's ability to manage for the species. Contributing to a project that involves multiple agencies and partners increases the potential for project results to inform management at broader scales. This research will yield information that FWP and partners will use to formulate clear objectives for managing a sagebrush specialist.