

Some wildlife survives, some thrives in fire's wake

by Don Seabrook | Feb. 27, 2015, 10:06 a.m. | Comment
Outdoors

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A bald eagle sits in a burned tree along the Methow River on Feb. 13, the scene of the Carlton Complex Fire last summer.



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NCW — People who have been exploring the burned areas of the Carlton Complex Fire are seeing signs that some animals died, and others survived the largest wildfire in Washington's history last summer.

Skeletons of everything from bears and cougars to deer and even a wolf pup have been discovered in areas blackened by the 256,000-acre blaze.

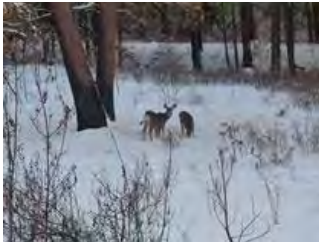
But people are also catching glimpses of animals, or their tracks, in both partly-burned areas and places where the fire burned left nothing but blackened trees and ash. Despite a setback to their habitat, the fire's footprint is by no means void of wildlife.

"There are lots of tracks. Bobcats, cougars, bears, deer, gray squirrels, red squirrels, chipmunks — everybody's out there in the burn," said George Wooten, a botanist for the Pacific Biodiversity Institute.

Along with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Winthrop-based nonprofit group is monitoring nature's recovery from the fire.



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Both say it's too soon yet to determine the potential survival of animal species that once thrived in this vast area that stretches from Brewster to Winthrop and ranges from hillsides of sage and bitterbrush to mid-elevation forests.

Scott Fitkin, wildlife biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said he's anxious to go out, as he does every spring, and count the deer in specific areas, comparing numbers to previous years, and to percentages of bucks, does and fawns.

"After the spring deer survey, I'll know a lot more at that point," he said.



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State officials are worried about the fire's impact on one of the state's largest mule deer herds. Prime winter habitat was lost in the fire, and may not recover for decades.

But in their first winter after the fire, deer may have caught a lucky break, Fitkin said. The Methow Valley got some snow this winter, but the ground wasn't covered for long. "We had more fall green-up than I can ever remember, so we were fortunate in that regard. And things are greening up now," he added.

Still, large swaths of bitterbrush — their main winter forage — are gone, so even a mild winter was likely tough on the population, he said.

The Methow Valley's wolf population, known as the Lookout Pack, also lost at least one member, possibly more, Fitkin said. He said a pup's carcass was found near the pack's den site, although since the fire, a remote camera has captured evidence that at least one pup remains. That pack may also have three or four adults, but information on their numbers is still sketchy. Fitkin said they've gotten reports of wolves east of the Methow River, but it's unclear if

a new pack is forming, or if the Lookout Pack has moved east.

One other population — the threatened Western gray squirrel — may also face serious troubles as a result of the fire.

The fire burned through the squirrel's core habitat, said Kim Romain-Bondi, wildlife biologist for the Pacific Biodiversity Institute. Since the fire, squirrels have been seen in some of their old stomping grounds, and they've been documented where they hadn't been seen before. "They've been moving around a lot," Romain-Bondi said — possibly finding new habitat that hasn't burned.

But in the winter, the squirrels are very dependent on their caches, where they hide food for the winter. "It'll be interesting to see if they were able to cache enough food to make it through the winter," she said.

Even as some animals aren't making it through the winter, others are thriving because of it.

Eagles eat many things, but in the winter tend to rely on animals that have recently died, Fitkin said. Some have mentioned seeing a lot of bald eagles this winter, the biologist said. "Even before the burn, there were always a number of eagles," he said. "The question is, are there more eagles this year than an average year? And I don't know the answer to that."

Romain-Bondi said there are a whole slew of other animals that could impact the bigger picture of recovery — from the songbirds that will return this spring to find the shrub steppe habitat they utilize gone, to the moles and voles and many rodents that feed everything from raptors to bobcats and coyotes.

"We can only keep our fingers crossed," she said. "And when the spring comes, and wildflowers and grasses emerge, hopefully we'll have some vegetation that might be great for wildlife."

But it could take 30 years for some of the larger shrubs and trees to begin regenerating.

"It's a temporary setback," he said, but that still may be too long for some animal populations, unless they're able to move on to new areas.

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