

DETERIORATION OF WILDLIFE HABITAT
ON RUBY LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

In Ruby Valley there are two marsh type lakes, Ruby Lake and Franklin Lake. In the 1870's, pioneer families settled on the lands surrounding these lakes and developed grain fields and pasture lands.

The irrigated meadows and grain fields seemed to compliment the adjacent marshes. By the mid 1930's it was said that at times the sky seemed to be filled with waterfowl.

Many Ranchers of that era, tell of birds so thick that in the fall, you could shoot a duck off the lakes by simply pointing a gun at a pond and firing without aiming.

Then in 1938 the Federal Government bought out the pioneer families surrounding Ruby Lake and created the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

For a few years farming and ranching practices on the Refuge changed little. Local ranchers were encouraged to run livestock, raise grain and continue to irrigate as they had in the past.

But as time passed, meadows were allowed to revert back to sagebrush. The native Willows, and rosebush that had become abundant as meadows were developed also began to disappear.

Then in the early 1970's, attitudes seemed to change all across America. All of a sudden Free Enterprise, Individualism, even the very beliefs this Nation was founded on began to come under attack. It was during this time that management on the Refuge began to systematically reduce people orientated activities.

Water-skiing was eliminated, fishing and camping was discouraged. On many areas livestock use was completely eliminated, while grazing in other areas was cut in half.

During the following years changes on the Refuge have been dramatic. Today dead and decadent vegetation is every where. Plant communities have changed, insect production is now minimal, and rodents have become non-evident. If there are such things as delicate ecosystems, as the modern environmentalists maintain, the one on the Refuge is being destroyed.

The abundance and variety of wildlife, found on the Refuge in the 30's is nearly gone, while on Franklin Lake where lands have remained in private hands, the health and vitality of plants and wildlife remain.

Yet, to the complete flustration of ranching families in Ruby Valley, it is they, the Ranchers that are being painted as the destroyers of Wildlife habitat.

Why is all this happening?

Why is it that Government cannot, or will not manage wildlife as it should be managed?

Why is ranching and Free Enterprise being attacked as they are?

Several years ago I began to notice that beneath many of the stack yard fences there was but one species of grass growing. Nebraska Sedge or Cut Grass as we ranchers call it, dominated - whereas next to the fence where the hay was cut each summer, there was a great deal of diversity, or a variety of grasses or grass like plants growing. I also noticed that within two of our pastures (the Milk Cow pasture and Horse Pasture) we had a similar situation, wherein Nebraska Sedge seemed to dominate in most places.

Thinking about what I was seeing, it finally came to me what was going on. Traditionally, during my lifetime, my Father had always used these two pasture sparingly during the summer, saving the majority of the feed to be used in the Fall. And so, since I was taking over the management of the ranch at the time, I began managing these two pastures in a manner which required that these two pastures were either fully grazed or hayed in mid season (July or early August) each year - and sure enough, after two or three years we began to see other, more palatable plants working their way back into these pastures. Since that time, I have found studies which explain why such a phenomenon occurs. In simple terms, whenever grasses are allowed to grow to maturity without interruption for a succession of years, many of the grasses and forbs are lost due to lack of solar reception. In other words, they cannot compete when they are shaded out by over-story or other more dominate vegetation.

My family had a grazing permit on the Ruby Lake Wildlife Refuge for a great many years after the refuge was created in 1938. As a consequence, I have spent a good deal of time on the refuge, riding, fixing fence and checking on our cattle. During those years, I was as well acquainted with our use area on the refuge as I was our own private lands. And of course, a number of changes *were* made in the way things were done there over the years - and not all for the good I must say.

Originally, the entire Gardner permit was for 3200 a.u.m.s. Early on, our use extended over the entire eastern side of the refuge, and from the refuge headquarters to the North. Originally, our use area was fenced into only two pastures. By the late 1970's, our use area had been fenced into ten pastures. Some were rested for two years while others were rested for one. There was one pasture where we were allowed only three days use. And of course our permitted numbers were cut as well. My Uncle's use, which constituted 50% of the original permit, was canceled all together, while my father and my use was cut 50%. In total, the original Gardner permit was cut 75%. But that was not the worst of it. Getting along with the personal who were then working on the refuge became almost impossible. It was obvious, our cattle were no longer welcome.

For a while I thought that maybe they were right - that maybe our cattle were harmful to wildlife, but when I looked into it, I found the opposite to be true. I found that the best research that had been done over the years showed that wildlife benefit from livestock grazing in nearly all ways. But it didn't matter. These people had their minds made up. No science, no studies, no discussion, no on site tours, nothing could sway them. Even though it was obvious that water fowl and shore birds and so forth were using the lands less and less it did not matter to them. Finally, I simply gave up the permit. It was not worth it. There was so much dead and decadent feed, the cattle simply could not do well. In order to obtain a little green feed they had to take a whole mouth-full of old dead plant matter.

Cliff Gardner

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