

VISITS TO THE SHELDON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE IN 1989

In the Spring of 1989 my wife Bertha and I were invited by Harry and Joy Wilson to visit the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, which is located north of Winnemucca in northwestern Nevada just south of the Oregon state line. Created for the purpose of protecting pronghorn antelope, the Refuge comprises a huge area, somewhere around 460,000 acres. Harry wanted us to assess for ourselves the deteriorating range and environmental conditions, which Harry believed was being caused by agency mismanagement.

At that time US Fish and Wildlife Service personnel were nearing the end of a long effort to rid the Refuge of livestock permittees - Harry and Joy being among the last to be forced to leave. It had been a frustrating thing for Harry and Joy, as it had been for all the others as they were being forced from the refuge – having to witness the fallacy and injustice of the agencies action – not only from the stand point that they were losing their livelihoods, but also from the standpoint of having to watch the area they loved fall into a deteriorating condition.

Harry had spent his entire life there in the Virgin Valley, his father having purchased the property where Harry and Joy were then living, from homesteaders long before the Refuge was created. Now they were being forced to give up their rights to graze the lands surrounding their property, even though they had been assured by the government at the time when the refuge was being established, that their right to graze would forever be protected.

That left the Wilsons with their lands which were located within the heart of the refuge of being of small value now that they were losing their rights to graze their livestock on the surrounding refuge lands during summer.

Harry said that during his youth it had been a family tradition to count the antelope each Fall as they left the high country and headed for the Black Rock Desert for the Winter. He said at times antelope would come through the valley strung out in bunches of a thousand or more. He estimated that at that time there were at least ten thousand antelope summering on the Big Spring Table each year. (Big Spring Table being a high mesa that lay just North of where they lived). But now, after years of government management, there were few antelope left.

I related to what Harry was saying, for in Ruby Valley our family had similar experiences, only with us it was deer. Back in the 1940's and even up until the late 1960's, we would watch the foothills above the ranch as the deer migrated South in the Fall and North in the Spring. They too would migrate through in bunches of a thousand head or more if the weather caught them right. And like Harry, we too had seen the great herds diminish because of over harvest and reductions in predator control practices.

Harry explained their disappointment having to work with people who knew the truth about the true benefits of livestock grazing, yet were determined to follow political agendas for the complete removal of livestock from refuge lands.

Harry told us, that for most of his life, he and his father had summered their cattle on the Big Spring Table, but then in 1985, because the antelope were having their young in the same area that the Wilson's cattle were being grazed, the Refuge people decided that Big Spring Table was a natural kidding area, and that it needed to be protected. And so the following year they had Harry graze his cattle on further to the south on Gooch Table where there had no grazing of livestock allowed for some time. Not surprisingly, the following Spring, the antelope were found on the Gooch Table instead of the Big Springs Table where Harry had grazed his cattle previously.

Harry showed me a copy of a Refuge Memorandum concerning "Wilson – winter grazing", in which it was acknowledged, (when discussing a proposal to allow Winter grazing on the Gooch Table) that:

"In the spring of 1986, Gooch Table was grazed for the first time since the CRMP was implemented. Antelope use increased markedly the following year."

Within the same memorandum it is stated:

"The area north of highway 140 from Hazelton Lake to the Nevada-Oregon state Line has been in non-use since the early 1940's . . . (In the early years) Big Spring was one of the few waters on this major stock driveway between southeastern Oregon and the railhead at Winnemucca. After it was fenced, this area has had only occasional trespass grazing. The importance of this area lies in its educational value as a study area . . . Surprisingly little response from non-use has occurred since livestock exclusion."

Yet, as Harry explained, even with their acknowledgement of the benefits of livestock grazing, and the fact that the range did not improve when large areas of the Refuge were excluded from livestock use, the Refuge people went right on pressuring and harassing the permittees until they either gave up and moved off the Refuge or became willing sellers.

Harry and Joy then took us to see the old Kinney Camp Ranch. Kinney Camp had been purchased by the government but was soon abandoned shortly after the refuge was created. Much of the uniqueness of the old Kinney Camp Ranch was its buildings. The house, the barn and even the chicken house were made of native stone quarried right there in the Virgin Valley. There had been four small ranches purchased from the Dufurrena brothers when the Refuge was created, but the Kinney Camp Ranch empathized, more than the others, what had been lost after the government had taken management. Just below the old buildings was where the

meadows used to be. The Dufurrena Family had put up between 250 and 300 ton of hay there. Now the meadows were gone and a huge gully had formed. A gully that gets deeper each year as the Spring runoff rushes to the alkali flats below, only to evaporate in the desert sun.

The green meadows bordered by willow and rosebush that once provided so much benefit to both wildlife and cattle are now gone as well. The only thing left being a few remnants of dead willow along the ditches, Marge Dufurrena Stephens, whom Harry and Joy introduced us to later that day, said that as a girl she had spent many hours picking wild currants along those ditches so that her mother could make jams and jelly. Today the wild current bushes are gone, the willows are gone, as are the wildlife that one frequented the area.

Marge also told us of the great numbers of sage grouse that were all through that country when she was a girl. She said that the Dufurrena Family had relatives in Alturas, California, about 100 miles to the West across the high desert country. Every year her dad, Tom Dufurrena would load up the family and make their yearly trip to Alturas. The thing Marge remembered most of those trips were the great numbers of sage grouse that were seem along the way. She said that sage grouse would be in every draw, just thousands and thousands of sage grouse, all across the desert.

That evening, after we had returned to the ranch where we were to spend the night with Harry and Joy, Harry showed me a copy of a letter dated Nov. 5, 1981, concerning a “possible land exchange with the Wilsons”. In its contents a comparison was made between the “offered property” owned by Harry and Joy and that of the Virgin Ranch where Harry and Joy had been living, and also the 1000 Creek Ranch, one of the ranches that had been abandoned, as had been the Kinney Camp Ranch – which context lent much credit to what Harry was saying. We quote the language as follows:

“Management of the Virgin Ranch, historically and at present, has been under A Special Use Permit to the Wilson Family, first Harry’s Dad and now Harry. It is our belief that while not providing many wildlife benefits under existing conditions it is providing for some diversity and at the same time maintaining the integrity of the meadows themselves. One has only to look at Kinney Camp or 1000 Creek Ranch to witness the destruction of once productive meadow complexes through the management philosophy of “let nature take its course” as has been prescribed by some environmentalists that have toured the area. Gullies large enough to swallow a freight train are evident at 1000 Creek Ranch where all management was terminated some years ago.”

This statement does more to explain the reason for our frustration than anything a rancher could say. In the public’s mind the BLM, Forest Service and Wildlife folks have held the moral high-ground for years. Few people have wanted to believe that bureaucracy is destructive to

resources. As a consequence, agency personnel have been able to go on year after year subtly attacking ranching and mining for their own advantage while carefully ignoring the destruction caused by their own rank and file.

The agency people know livestock grazing is beneficial to resources and they know the best way of accomplishing successful grazing is via traditional practice. But they're also reminded that collectively they have other objectives, principally to gain absolute and complete control of the lands and resources. And they know too, that if they instigate certain policy, detrimental to private interest, it is only a matter of time until certain people will be forced to sell out, or trade their ranches for property in other areas.

After returning home I had time to reflect on all that Harry had shown us, and got to thinking, all during the time that Harry and Joy were showing us around the Refuge we hadn't seen any antelope. Nor had we seen sage grouse. That prompted me to write for a copy of the current "Season Recommendations" put out by the Nevada Department of Wildlife for that area. I was curious to see what kind of antelope numbers the wildlife agency was listing for the Sheldon. Not surprisingly, data found within the seasons recommendation booklet indicated that every management unit surrounding the Refuge had much better production than did the Wildlife Refuge.

Data within the booklet also indicated that in 1989 only 15 fawns were being raised for every 100 does on Sheldon as compared to 42 fawn per every 100 head of does for the remainder of the state. Fall composition counts for deer were little better. Mule deer production on the Sheldon was only 23 young for every 100 does as compared to 44 fawns for every 100 does for the remainder of Northern Nevada.

Thinking further I concluded that I would call Rich Capurro. Rich was as familiar with the Sheldon as anyone I knew – he and his family, beginning with his uncle and his father, had hunted on the Sheldon for years. When I got Rich on the phone I told him of my recent trip to the Sheldon and ask why it might be that we were not seeing sage grouse there on the refuge. After thinking a moment Rich said, "Well, if you really want to find sage grouse you shouldn't even go hunting on the Refuge. You should go down on Buster Dufurrena's range, that's where all the sage grouse are."

That is when it first began to dawn on me, - what Rich was saying was correct . Wherever sheepmen were still operating in the state was where we were finding the most wildlife. Of course there would be a great many sage grouse found on Buster Dufurrena's range - he was one of the last remaining sheepmen left operating in that part of the country. And why not, isn't it the sheepmen that keep the predators down?

Then I began thinking of all the things my parents had told me over the years – about how and why effective predator programs were brought into being, and what it had been like in the years leading up to the time when effective predator control were put in place. My Mother had talked a lot of growing up in Diamond Valley – of the time when she was 3 or 4 years old, or in 1912 or so, when there had been a major outbreak of rabies – and how her father had put up a fence around the yard to keep she and her younger brother and the ranch dogs from being bitten – and of the problems they had with the rabid coyotes biting their cattle – and how it seemed that every few days the family would hear a mad cow begin to bawl down in the field, and of her father getting his gun to go put the poor animal out of its misery. She said that on the worst year of the outbreak her father had lost 40 head cattle out of the 300 or so cattle he owned at the time, to rabies.

And so began the spread of rabies, into California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and all across the West – resulting in Congress budgeting \$125,000 to the National Biological Survey in 1914 for a predator control program to be initiated throughout a major portion of the country. In the years that followed many young men supplemented their incomes by working as government trappers, my Mother's uncles being some of them. Later the program was expanded to include the use of toxins and airplanes. The effect was dramatic. Not only did the use of toxins reduce the numbers of coyotes and bobcats, but it kept the numbers of crows, skunks and badgers down as well.

Dad too, told of what it was like during that period. He told of the great numbers of crows (ravens) that were in Ruby Valley when he was a boy. He said the crows were so thick they were just like blackbirds. He remembers the crows being so hungry that they were turning over cowpies so they could get at the bugs.

After a number of years of effective predator control the numbers of coyotes, crows, skunks and other predators began to dwindle however. And as they did, more and more song birds were seen. The same was true with deer and sage grouse. Where once deer had been so scarce that when someone did find a track they would follow it for days, now they were being seen everywhere. Sage grouse it was said, had become so thick they could be killed by the gunny sack full.

The dramatic increase in mule deer that occurred between 1920 and 1940 is well recorded. In a special publication put out in 1964 by the Nevada Fish and Game Commission, titled *Nevada Wildlife Centennial Issue*, it is mentioned that the Forest Service's population estimates for mule deer for the Ruby Mountains, were only 10 animals in 1921 and 1922, 30 in 1923 and 1924, and 45 in 1925. In 1926 there was an estimated 115 animals; in 1927, 125; no estimates were made for 1928 and 29. Then in 1930 there was an estimate of 500 deer. In 1932, 750 – in 1933, 1000 – in 1934, 1,250 – in 1935, 1,325 – in 1936, 1,500 – in 1937, 1,600 – in 1938, 1,750;

and in 1939, 3,000 deer. By the mid 1940's the number of deer on the Rubys was incredible. No one knew for sure how many deer there were, but there were thousands upon thousands.

On the Toiyabes', deer populations seemed to increase a bit sooner than they did on the Rubys. Many residents believed that by the mid 1930's, the mule deer population in the Toiyabes' had reached incredible proportions. Some Austin residents claimed that when the Toiyabe deer herd reached its peak, 500 to 1,000 deer could be counted on almost any Summer evening in Kingston Canyon alone. During the first Spring deer ride, conducted by the US Forest Service in 1938, along the foothills of the East side of the Toiyabe Range, 1,299 deer were counted in a distance of seven miles.

Many people argue that the large numbers of wildlife that were present on the Sheldon Refuge in the 1920's, 30's and 40's were typical of what existed prior to the coming of the white man, but no evidence exists in support of such theory. When John Fremont passed through that country in 1843, his cartographer, Charles Preuss described a harsh and inhospitable land. On December 23, he wrote; Grass is poor; God knows how the animals will get through.

On December 31, (while traveling somewhere near the Black Rock Desert) Preuss wrote that on that day: ". . . they had found nothing but dry, shallow basins, their way "broken by gullies and impeded by sage, and sandy on the hills, where there is not a blade of grass"

And on January 5, Charles Preuss wrote; The animals are dying one after another.

The only game the party had seen since leaving Fort Vancouver some months before were "vast numbers of rabbits near Summer Lake". But then, as they proceeded through the country between the Black Rock Desert and Pyramid Lake they saw mountain sheep "bounding across some high cliffs, but the sheep were too quick for the men to get a shot". This was the only game that the Fremont party has seen on their entire trip from Fort Vancouver. It was not until after they crossed the Sierra somewhere to the South of the Truckee that they found their first real game.

In the book *The Clever Coyote*, by S.P. Young and H.H.T. Jackson (1951) Stockpole Co. Harrisbury, PA and Wildl. Inst., Washington DC p 411 and also in a paper, "*Predator Control and Wildlife Management.*" Transactions of the sixth North American Wildlife Conference (1941) pp 294 – 298, reference is made to the effects of a predator control program that was conducted in the 1920's involving the area that was later to become the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge.

"In 1920 recognition was given to those involved in the predator control program that is referenced above. Estimated antelope numbers that year in South-Central Oregon and North-western Nevada were 500 animals. Between 1921 and 1934, 7,500 coyotes and bobcats were systematically removed. In 1935 it was estimated that antelope number had increased to more

than 10,000 animals.” This was the first major predator control program ever to be initiated in the West. Its effectiveness speaks for its self. Pronghorn antelope became so numerous, interest in the species led to the creation of the Sheldon Antelope shortly thereafter.

All and all, there is no mystery why it was that the Wilsons and Dufurrenas were seeing so many antelope and sage grouse in the 1930’s and 40’s. It was not because these species had been there forever. It was because of the effects of grazing and predator control.

There is no question that the Sheldon is one of the best possible examples showing the fallacy of allegations of resource destruction at the hands of private interest. The Sheldon is an area that once supported hundreds and hundreds of cattle – where sheep were run by the thousands – an area that was right on the historical stock driveway between Southern Oregon and the railhead at Winnemucca – an area that not only supported thousands of livestock but thousands and thousands of antelope as well – an area where sage grouse could be seen in every draw – where livestock use has been systematically reduced and now eliminated – where the government has had absolute and complete control – where there has never been pesticides or herbicides used – Yet after over 50 years of governmental control and management, with the agency people accomplishing everything they have ever wanted including the removal of all private interest from the land - they produce fewer wildlife than any other area in Northern Nevada.

On our last trip to the Sheldon, Harry gave me an additional document that is quite interesting. The document, which is titled CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY: HART MOUNTAIN NATIONAL ANTELOPE REFUGE, SHELDON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, states in its abstract; “This report describes the results of an intensive survey and inventory of eight historic resources located on Hart Mountain Refuge and Sheldon Refuge”.

On page 44 of the report, there is an assessment of the Kinney Camp Ranch which discusses the importance of the old rock structures from a historical perspective. The discussion is quite interesting as well, wherein it states:

“The area adjacent to the ranch was once an irrigated, productive wet Meadow, supplying hay for ranchers’ livestock, and providing habitat for a variety of wildlife species. Now it is an inhospitable greasewood flat with gaping gully running through it rapidly undercutting the road. The area is used little by wildlife. The site provides a good illustration of the effects of man’s activities on the environment especially when compared to other areas on the Refuges where ongoing irrigation and haying is providing wild-life habitat and historic buildings are still in use.

Need we say more?