

A TOUR OF MARY'S RIVER – LOSS OF WILDLIFE – AND THE POLITICS OF IT ALL

I had heard a great deal about Jon Marvel and Katie Fite – how tough they were making it for everyone - but had never seen or been exposed to them, so when I learned that Katie Fite was to be given a tour of an allotment north of Deeth here a couple years ago, I thought maybe I would go along – maybe I would learn something. So at the appointed time, after meeting at Deeth, away we all went, up past the old Cross Ranch, headed for Stag Mountain. When we got up to where Allen Creek runs along the foothills, everyone stopped and got out to look at maps and discuss what we would be seeing during the day.

Just as I was getting out of the pickup I was riding in, I noticed that we had stopped right next to a stock pond. One of those areas – you have all seen them – where the ground has been all churned up by cattle coming and going – a regular loafing area – with very little vegetation showing of any kind – with cow-pies everywhere – with a lot of insects and bugs in evidence. What interested me however, was all the birds that were flying off and leaving the area. There must have been 150 to 200 birds there on the pond when we first drove up. There were brewers blackbirds, yellow headed blackbirds, killdeer, avocets, willets, phalaropes, two or three kinds of ducks, including a brood or two, several ravens and a hawk, and I don't know what else.

I thought it quite a phenomenon, - that many birds all in one area – but when I looked back to see what everyone was doing, I found that no one seemed to have noticed. They were all huddled around the hood of one of the pickups looking at the maps they had brought along. I thought to myself, my gosh, this is odd - all these people that are supposed to be so interested in wildlife and no-one seemed to notice what was going on. There were a number of BLM folks there, several Department of Wildlife folks, and of course there was Katie Fite and a friend of hers representing Western Water Sheds, yet no one said a thing about the birds, or how badly abused the area was.

Anyway, after a bit, we all climbed back into our vehicles and away we went again, up over Stag Mountain and into Hanks Creek Basin where we were to assess range condition. And sure enough, everything looked wonderful; livestock numbers had been cut to a fraction of what they had once been; cattle were being moved from place to place at intervals insuring only slight impact on riparian areas; no abuse areas anywhere; things looked great. Yet, something seemed to be missing. We were not seeing any wildlife. From the time we left Allen Creek and for the remainder of the day I saw only four birds. One snipe, and later a crow being ushered along by two blackbirds. That was all I saw – no deer, no sage grouse, no evidence of badgers or squirrels - in an area where not so many years ago there had been thousands of sheep and cattle, where there had been hundreds of deer, and where sage grouse seemed to be everywhere. Yet no one seemed concerned about the absence of wildlife – not the BLM folks, not the NDOW folks, not Katie Fite, no one.

The wildlife situation in Nevada has gotten that bad. Why, I can remember traveling over Stag Mountain along in the 1960's, during deer season, you would never be out of sight of a deer camp - and every camp would have one or two deer hanging. Now days, you can drive from Deeth to Jarbidge during deer season, and you will be lucky to see two or three camps the whole way. Pinky Herzog told me just the other day, that he and Joanne and another couple drove to

Wildhorse and spent two days on four wheelers, traveling all the roads they could find from Gold Creek, over Merritt Mountain, up the Bruneau River, out on the Diamond A, and on over to Jarbidge and they never saw a deer. Mike Laughlin was telling me a while back, he remembers flying over Stage Mountain in the 1980's – it seemed there were sage grouse everywhere. Now days if you see two or three deer or a bunch of sage grouse during a day's travel through the county, you're doing good.

But it's not just our deer and sage grouse we're losing. The same can be said of the loss of song birds, rodents and other small animals. I can remember as a boy, my folks gave me an old single shot twenty-two rifle my dad had used when he was a boy. I was only eight or nine at the time – but they took the time and taught me the important things about handling a gun – how to keep from shooting myself or others and so forth - then I was on my own. I'd get up before dawn, and by day-brake I would be out in the sage brush, or tramping a creek bottom somewhere. And I can remember along in the winter, after a fresh snow had fallen, it would only be a day or so - there were so many small animals - all along the creek bottoms, the snow would be packed with their tracks. Now days, a person can drive along a creek bottom, four, five or six days after a storm and you will see very few tracks in the snow. It doesn't matter if you are in Idaho or Utah or Colorado, there just isn't the wildlife there used to be.

This is not just me talking about what I have been seeing and hearing – studies are showing the same thing. Doing research this past winter I came across a comparison study that had been completed at Great Basin National Park for the purpose of determining bird population trends over a 20 year period. Total numbers of birds counted during 2002, at seven different study plots, ranging from the valley floor, all the way to the upper levels of the mountain, indicated that there had been a 62 percent reduction in bird numbers between 1981 and 2002. .

Recent research shows small mammal populations are dropping as well. In 1927, 1928 and 1929, Adrey Borell censused small animal populations at 15 sites in the Ruby Mountains. In 2006, 2007 and 2008 Rebecca Rowe repeated the survey, placing traps at 22 sites. Borell's original survey found 1,408 animals of 19 species, including mice, voles, shrews, chipmunks, woodrats and others. Rowe's re-survey found 592 animals of 17 species, from a similar number of set traps – a loss of more than 50 percent over a 76 year period.

People within the Nevada Department of Wildlife want to blame losses of this kind on mining, ranching and other human activity. They seem to dislike everything human related. They don't like ranching, they don't like predator control, they dislike mining, they dislike roads and power lines. Never do they admit that the greatest losses to have occurred during recent decades, have not been on private lands or within active grazing allotments, but on governmentally protected lands.

In a study completed in 1975, comparing wildlife production on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to that of privately held lands situated on the Silvies Flood Plain, in southern Oregon, it was found that the privately held lands produced four times as many ducks and geese as did the Malheur Refuge, and experienced thirteen times as much use by curlews, willets, stilts, phalaropes, avocets and other wading birds. Even the eagles and hawks and other predators were

found to be more numerous on the privately held lands, simply because that is where the most prey were. When are people going to realize that locking up large tracts of lands under governmental management is the absolute worst thing that can be done for wildlife.

Three years ago, Bertha and I took two of our grand children for a short trip to see parts of the Mary's River country. The BLM had created a number of enclosures in the area, the largest being a fourteen thousand acre enclosure on Mary's River itself, where all livestock were removed 15 years before. I was curious and wanted to see what effect these exclusions were having on habitat conditions. It was an interesting trip. The first thing I noticed was how decadent the vegetation had become within the area. Much of the sage brush had become so overgrown there were no longer any trails or open areas between the brush where sage grouse could feed. What grass there was, had become wolfy for the most part. Many of the small meadows that are often found along streams and waterways were no longer green and lush as they might have been. Dead plant material left from previous years growth had caused the loss of plant diversity. Plants such as clover, dandelion or yarrow were non evident. But what was the most striking was the lack of wildlife seen. During two different trips to the area, driving up the river to Chalk Basin and then down river past the old and abandoned Greggs Place, the only animal we saw was one flicker - no squirrels, no rabbits, no birds, no bird nest in the trees, nothing. Down along the river, close to the road, someone had put up a sign which read "special bird area". Included on the sign was a picture of four swallows. I commented to Bertha that we saw more birds on the sign than we had seen along the remainder of the river.

Recently, I was made aware that many within the Department of Wildlife are becoming disgruntled with my near constant barrage of information questioning much of their policy. Scott Rain, chairman of the State Board of Wildlife Commissioners had invited me to make a presentation before the Board of Wildlife Commissioners on Aug. 13th. As it turned out, while in route to the meeting, I received a telephone call telling me that I needn't proceed any further for my presentation had been struck from the agenda. Apparently, two new members had been seated on the board that very morning, a new chairman had been elected, and my appearance was "postponed" until the board had an opportunity to review the material that was to be presented.

It all seems strange to me that this should be happening here in America. All I'm wanting to do, is to get a discussion going - to get to the truth. I hope in the future, we do not become like other nations, where persons like myself are not allowed to speak up at all. It's something all of us should be thinking about.