Jackrabbits and Insects

It's interesting that the agency people make such an issue of overgrazing, yet fail to acknowledge destruction of vegetation by natural phenomenon. My Dad said he could remember going with his father "camptending" across on the east side of the Valley when the jackrabbits were so thick "it seemed like there were two rabbits for every sagebrush". He related how the rabbits had so destroyed the vegetation above ground they were digging down around the crowns of the brush in order to get something to eat.

Such an occurrence is not rare. Irene Walther said that in 1958, rabbits were so bad in the lower Lamoille Valley that they killed a crested wheat seeding of theirs. "There were so many rabbits, they dug the roots right out of the ground. "We had to go back in and reseed the field."

The problem with jackrabbits is their population never remains constant. There is either a "jillion of them" or almost none at all. But when they do increase, which can take no more than a year or two, they can destroy a tremendous amount of vegetation in a very short time. If you ever have an opportunity to be in an area that has been heavily impacted by jackrabbits, get out of your car and take a close look at the grass and sagebrush. What you will find is a lot of stems of grass and brush scattered all over the ground.

What jackrabbits do is bite off a stem of grass or brush but only eat a very small part of it, and then they go about biting off another and another. Consequently they destroy a great deal more vegetation than they eat. And when the majority of usable vegetation has been destroyed above ground, they then start in on the crowns of the plants. Over the years I have seen complete stands of white sage disappear during heavy rabbit infestations.

Dad also talked a lot of the grasshopper infestations that occurred in the 1920's. He said that "for three or four years, about the only hay they put up was enough to feed the saddle and work horses". He said the grasshoppers were so thick during some of those years there were places where they "cleaned the meadows off as slick as a board". The only thing they didn't eat was the wiregrass, everything else was gone".

Willis Packer, who spent most of his life in the Independence Valley, north of Elko told me of almost identical circumstances. Willis said "there were times that you couldn't drive a team of horses the grasshoppers were so thick". He said the grasshoppers would fly up, hitting the horses in the face in such mass that the horses just refused to move.

Then in the 1930's came the Mormon crickets. And of course they not only destroyed the grass, they ate nearly everything else as well. The way it was explained to me by my father and mother, my Uncle Raymond, and Frank Temoke, the crickets would come in waves, climbing every bush and tree, eating every leaf as they went. The way Frank Temoke told it, the crickets would climb the trees as they came to them, dozens at a time, eating as they went and when they would reach the tip of a branch, they would just fall to the ground and keep right on, all traveling in the same direction. Frank said that "about the only thing the crickets didn't eat was the sage brush".

When a close look is taken it's not hard to understand why there was so little useable feed in the West prior to settlement. Everything was against it. Take wildfire as an example. Wildfire can be one of the most destructive things that can happen to a rangeland. Unfortunately most wild fires occur during the hottest and driest time of the year, in mid-Summer, with such intensity that the heat kills the most important vegetation. Consequently, when the white man began suppressing wildfire in the late 1800's bitterbrush and most species of bunchgrass began to increase. That's why mule deer have done so well in the recent past. The white man, with his predator control and range management created a near perfect climate for deer.