Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly

January 2018

Black-capped Chickadee, November, 2017.

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Region 2, 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804, 406-542-5500

Find the Quarterly online at fwp.mt.gov/regions/r2/WildlifeQuarterly

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The Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly is a product of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 3201 Spurgin Road; Missoula 59804. Its intent is to provide an outlet for a depth of technical information that normally cannot be accommodated by commercial media, yet we hope to retain a readable product for a wide audience. While we strive for accuracy and integrity, this is not a peer-refereed outlet for original scientific research, and results are preliminary. October 2015 was the inaugural issue.

2017 Retrospective

We learn a lot by looking back. Take this hummingbird, for example. Back on June 18, when this picture was taken, there wasn't time for reflection, save for the brief moment's satisfaction in knowing that the shutter had snapped at just the right moment. A hummingbird always perches on that dead top in the dim light of dawn at Council Grove State Park, and that small preparedness had made all the difference. The further analysis of little dark birds in poor light would have to wait—until the Christmas holidays, as it turned out.

Now, in retrospect, we're taking some time to learn. And with the help of numerous online references we now know it was a male Calliope Hummingbird, doing what it's supposed to do: sit on the dead top of an isolated tree or shrub and look for intruders in its territory.

Strangely, it seems like there's a need to apologize for taking time out to reflect and in reflection learn. So, maybe there's some redemption to be had in sharing the rewards of our retrospective look at 2017 with you.

Golden eagle over Hoover Creek, January 14, 2017

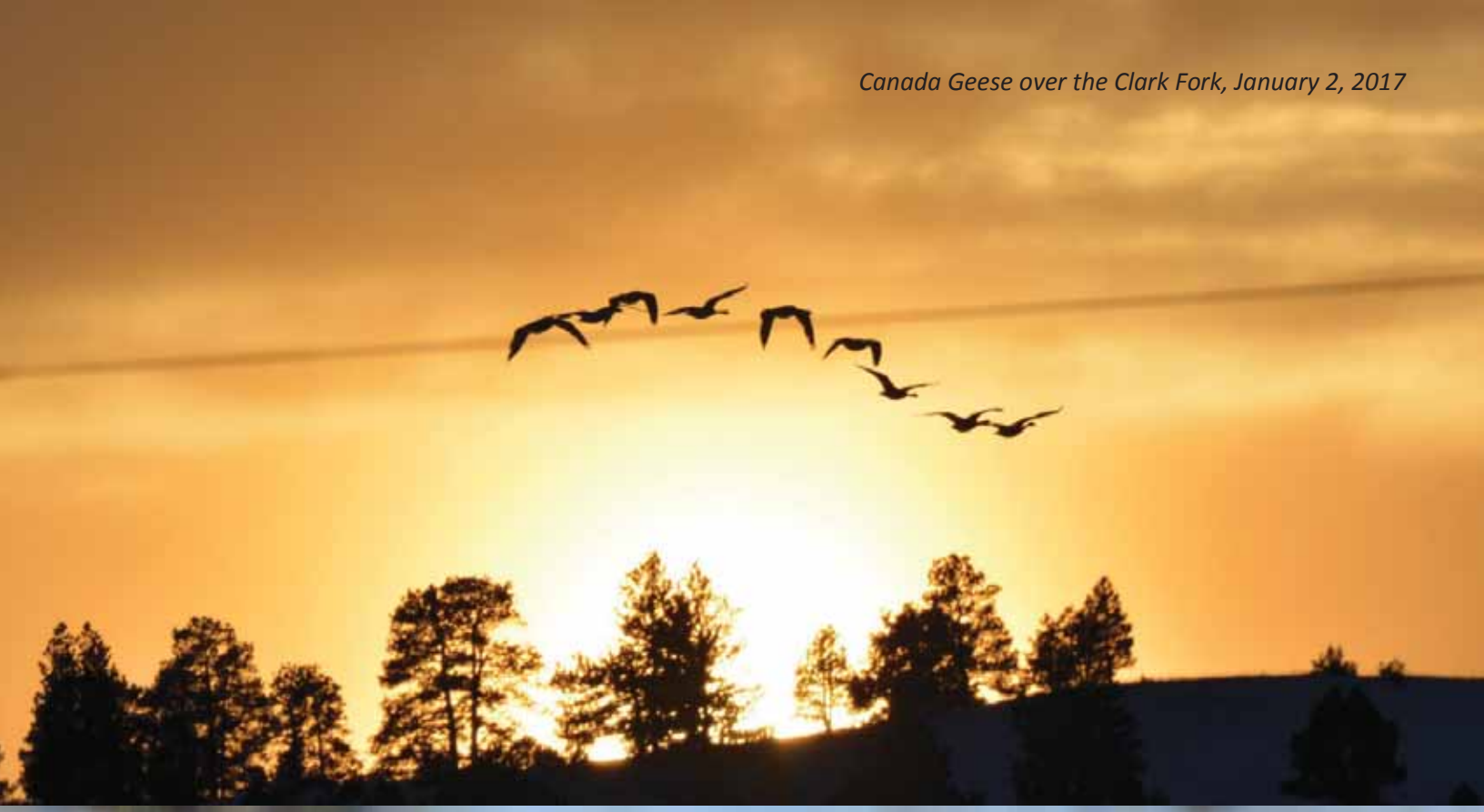
January 2017

January 2017 was 46% colder and 13% wetter than normal, based on climate data from Missoula. Temperatures in Missoula fell below zero on nine days in January, which likely translated into more than nine subzero days out by Drummond, where the Golden Eagle, Canada Geese, Rough-legged Hawk and mule deer were photographed. As winters go in this millennium, 2017 was off to a challenging start for wildlife.

Even so, Canada Geese remained. As recently as the 1980s and early 1990s, Canada geese were not abundant in west-central Montana, and with the help of volunteers, FWP was erecting nesting platforms to encourage goose production. FWP even attempted to translocate geese from the old Milltown Pond to Warm Springs Wildlife Management Area, where geese were not well established at that time. Certainly in those days, not long ago, it was uncommon to see many geese wintering in western Montana. Nowadays they are common winter residents.

The Golden Eagle is designated as a Species of Concern in Montana. While the I-90 corridor from Drummond to Garrison offers eagles a smorgasbord of wintering deer, elk, antelope and birds killed or injured by collisions with vehicles, trains, fences and powerlines, such hazards threaten the survival of individual eagles as well, especially when heavy after a big meal. The rough-legged hawk pictured (at right) barely avoided our windshield when it suddenly appeared from a ditch alongside a frontage road

Mule Deer above Morris Creek, January 14, 2017



Canada Geese over the Clark Fork, January 2, 2017

Rough-legged Hawk near Drummond, January 29, 2017

February 2017

February 2017 was slightly colder than normal, but three times the normal precipitation fell, based on climate data from Missoula. Subzero readings were recorded on two days in the month, with single digit lows on two additional days. High temperatures fluctuated above and below freezing, causing layers of crust to form in the snowpack.

Golden Eagle and elk above Rock Creek near Garrison, February 5, 2017.

"The American Dipper is the only truly aquatic songbird in North America."

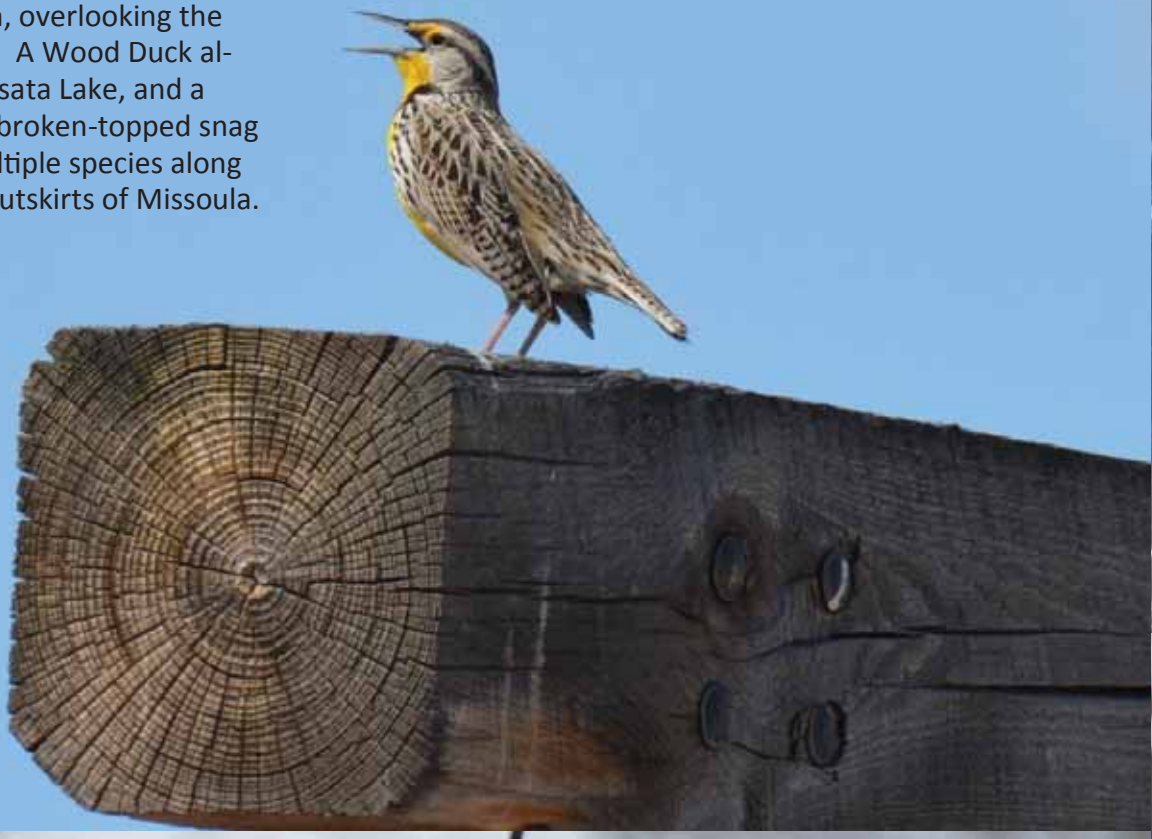
- Marks, Hendricks and Casey. 2016. Birds of Montana, Buteo Books, Page 416.

March 2017

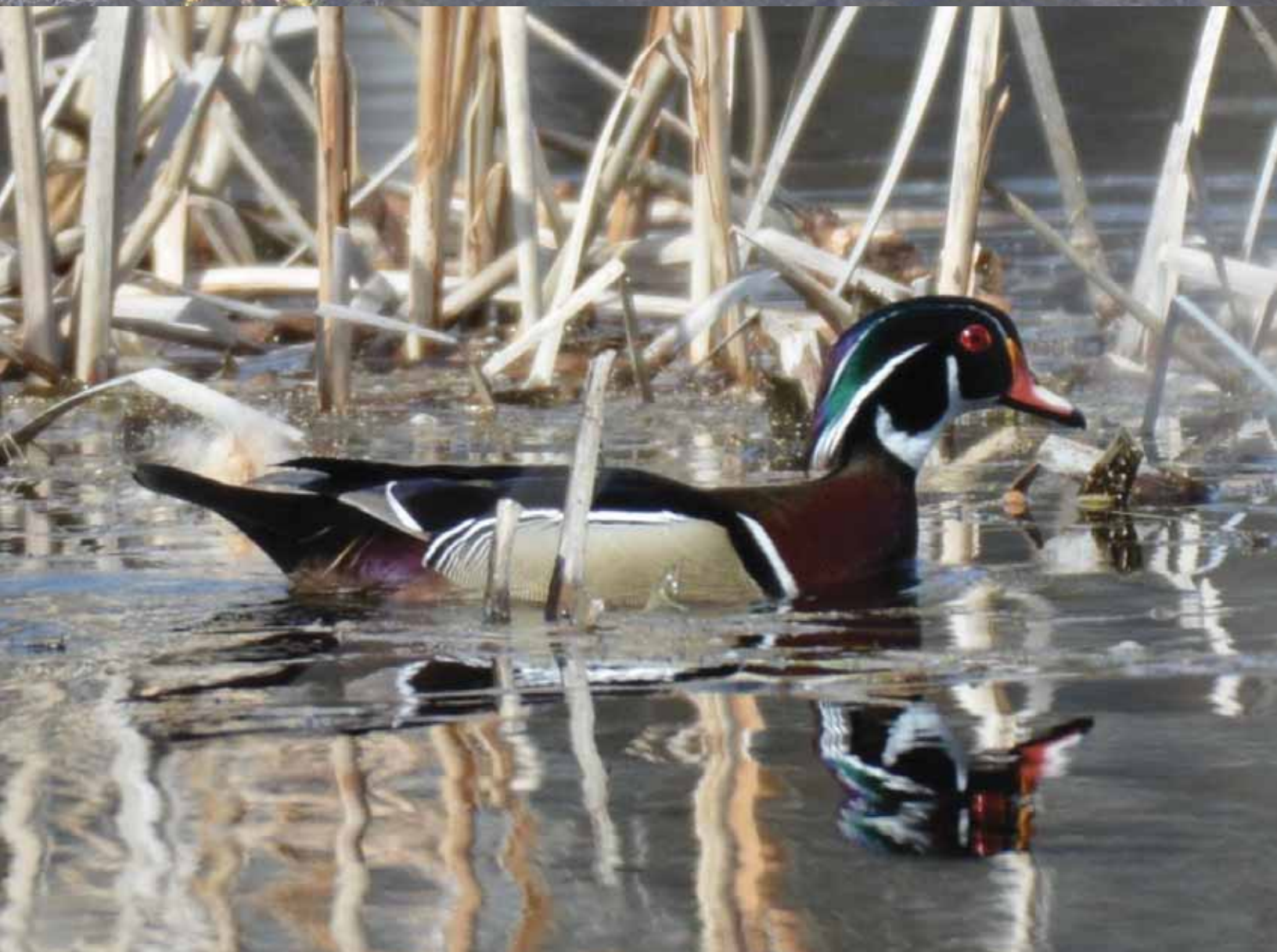
For a great overview of the natural history of the American Dipper, surf yourself to: *http://fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/articles/portraits/dipper.htm*

American Dippers put on a show in Rock Creek on March 5, 2017. Clockwise from top right: A dipper wets its head preparatory to a dive. This bird submerged completely and then body surfed to the top of a rock with a bite of food. Dippers use their wings in the water like swimmers use their arms. The coincidence of two birds together made us check nesting dates for dippers, which Marks et al. (2016) report as late March through July.

A Western Meadowlark heralded April from atop the archway over the East Entrance to the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area. A bighorn ram approaches its ninth birthday in apparently good condition, overlooking the Blackfoot River near Bonner. A Wood Duck allows its photograph near Upsata Lake, and a Canada Goose perches on a broken-topped snag that provides habitat for multiple species along the Clark Fork River on the outskirts of Missoula.



April 2017



Snowpack was visible above Rainy Lake on May 29, 2017. At this point in the season, the snow water equivalent measurement on the nearby North Fork Jocko Snotel site was above the median value for this date across 1981-2010.

May 2017

Vesper Sparrow atop Rocky Ridge, on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.

A Western Tanager on the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area.

Canada Goose goslings and adults tumble to the Clark Fork River at Erskine Fishing Access Site on May 6, 2017.

May 2017

A female Northern Harrier skimmed a sagebrush bench bordering the North Fork of the Blackfoot River on May 6, 2017. (Females are brown and males are gray.) Harriers eat voles and other small mammals, insects and other small prey. They nest on the ground in wetlands, often on a raised mat of grasses in dense vegetation. They are associated with native sagebrush grasslands, and while the Northern Harrier is quite

common, its relative abundance in systematic surveys has declined in some areas as native grasslands have been increasingly developed. The Northern Harrier is an example of many other species that have benefitted from the preferences and foresight of Montana land-owners who have protected their native grasslands with conservation easements.

Northern Flicker feeding young in an aspen snag on the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area on June 17, 2017.

June 2017

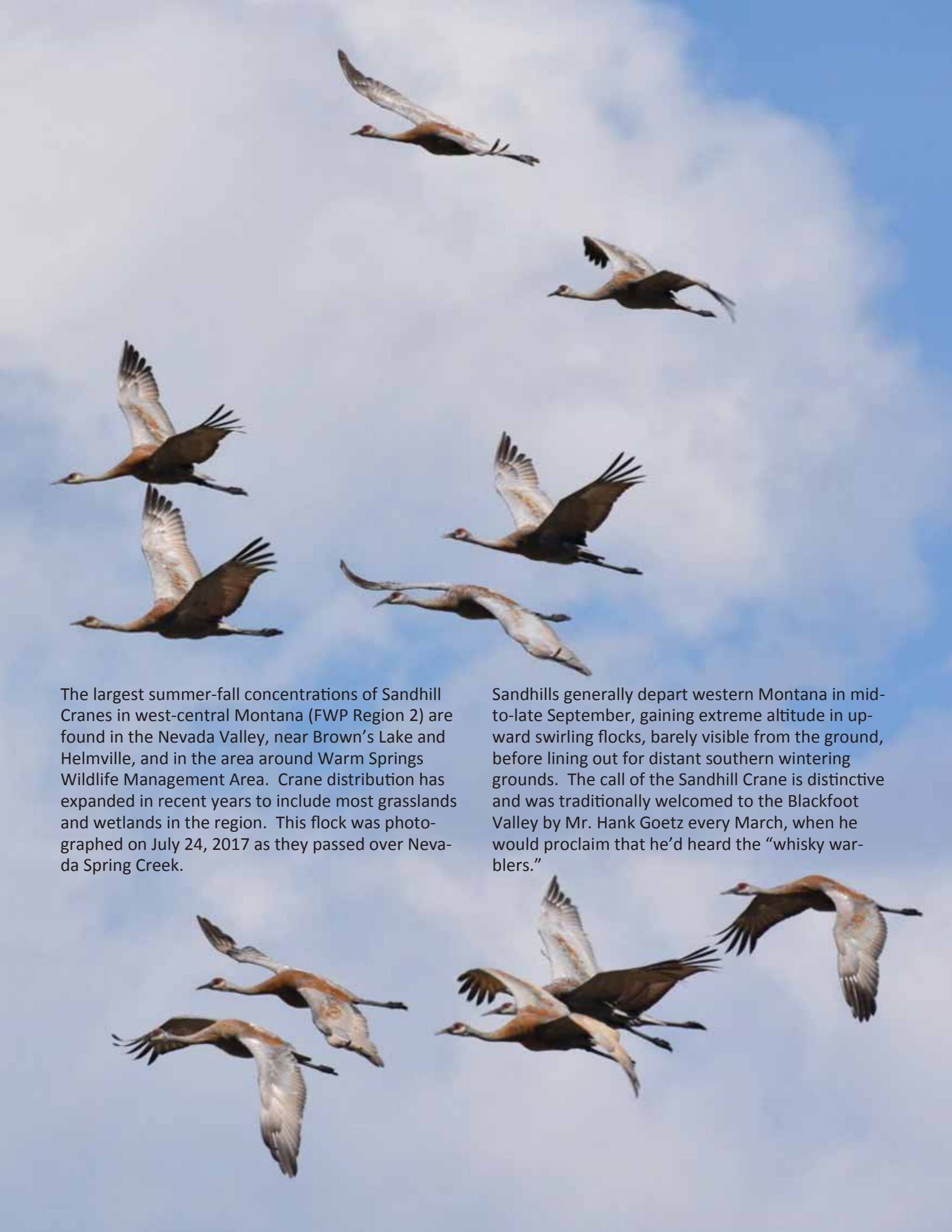
Mule deer doe with a fawn on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area on June 20, 2017.

Bighorn lamb on cliffs above lower Rock Creek on June 11, 2017.

Yellow-bellied marmot in rocks above Rock Creek Road on June 11, 2017.

The unusual occurrence of nesting Burrowing Owls with young was documented in Ravalli County. This photo was taken on July 30, 2017 as the Lolo Peak Fire blew up across the valley behind them. Burrowing Owls nest in holes excavated by badgers, red fox and other burrowing mammals. This particular site was occupied and well used by cattle in a pasture that has a long history of cattle use. The Burrowing Owl is designated as a Species of Concern in Montana. Their diet is comprised mostly of grasshoppers and beetles, though they will prey on small mammals and birds as well. Burrowing Owls generally migrate out of Montana for the winter by October.

July 2017



The largest summer-fall concentrations of Sandhill Cranes in west-central Montana (FWP Region 2) are found in the Nevada Valley, near Brown's Lake and Helmville, and in the area around Warm Springs Wildlife Management Area. Crane distribution has expanded in recent years to include most grasslands and wetlands in the region. This flock was photographed on July 24, 2017 as they passed over Nevada Spring Creek.

Sandhills generally depart western Montana in mid-to-late September, gaining extreme altitude in upward swirling flocks, barely visible from the ground, before lining out for distant southern wintering grounds. The call of the Sandhill Crane is distinctive and was traditionally welcomed to the Blackfoot Valley by Mr. Hank Goetz every March, when he would proclaim that he'd heard the "whisky warblers."

Belted Kingfisher fishing the Big Blackfoot.

August 2017

Sandhill Cranes and Canada Geese on a ranch near Helmville.

Savannah Sparrow with the trifecta of damsel-fly, grasshopper and caterpillar.

Yellowlegs and Sandpipers skimming a marsh in the Blackfoot Valley.

An adult sparrow feeds a juvenile cowbird—the juvenile being the larger of the two birds. This is the result of a cowbird laying its eggs in a sparrow's nest.

Black bear on snowberry along Rock Creek.

September 2017

Antelope bordering Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.

Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area in the foreground as the Rice Ridge Fire makes a big run on September 2, 2017.

Black bear up Elk Creek in the Garnets.

Yellow-pine chipmunk on a bluebird house at the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area.

October 2017

Bald Eagles and Raven interacting at Georgetown Lake.

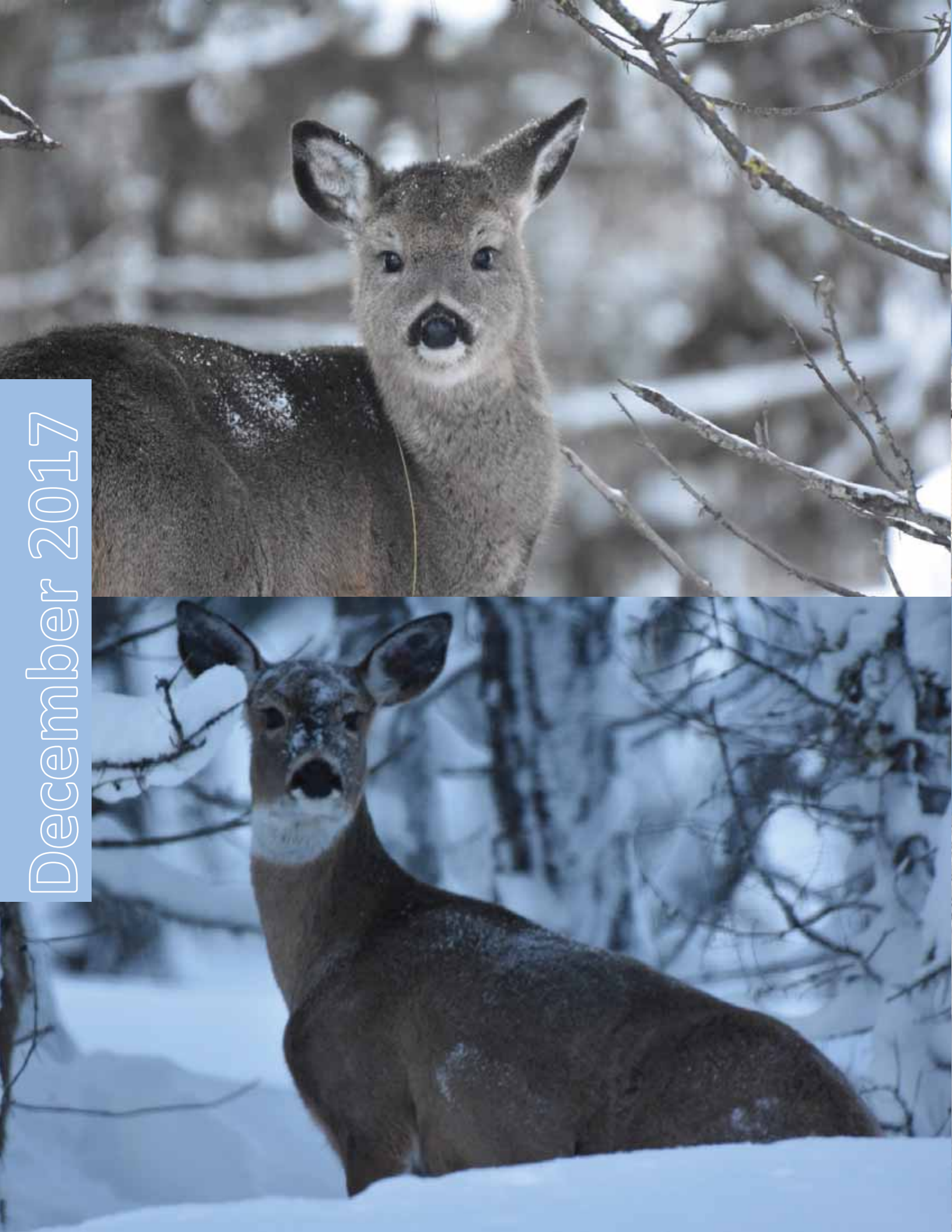
Looking to the Flint Creek Range from Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.

Muskrat swimming near Ovando.

It seemed like an unusually good fall for hearing and seeing waves of migrating Snow Geese, day and night, as they passed through western Montana. We witnessed this particular scene, involving roughly a thousand birds, on November 5th, as the flock swirled down to rest in a field between the old Stone Container facility and Frenchtown.

According to Marks et al. (2016): "Snow Geese are of high conservation concern not because there are too few of them, but because there are far too many. Improved survival from increased food availability on the wintering grounds has resulted in vast numbers of mid-continent Lesser Snow Geese that are damaging habitat on the nesting grounds and causing population declines of tundra-nesting shorebirds . . ."

November 2017



December 2017

The difference between Christmas Eve (top photos) and New Year's Eve (bottom photos) was significant for white-tailed deer wintering on and near the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area. While the two landscape photographs were not purposely and precisely replicated to show the difference in snow conditions, by chance they paint a fairly representative picture of the changing conditions from one week to the next. Most notably, the pillars of drifted snow are not encouraging for species that rely on movement through the snow. So many species gain or lose their survival advantages depending on varying local snow conditions, whether grouse, raptors, small mammals, carnivores or ungulates.

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"Super wolf moon" over the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area

December 31, 2017