



55

Number of state parks in Montana (compared to 30 in Idaho, 40 in Wyoming, and 44 in Colorado)



PARK-NERSHIPS

In mid-January, Governor Steve Bullock announced creation of the Montana Parks in Focus Commission. The 12-member advisory panel's task is to identify new "public-private partnerships" that will provide additional funding and stewardship for the FWP Parks Division.

Visits to Montana's 55 state parks have doubled in the past 10 years. Yet revenue has not kept up with costs for infrastructure repair, maintenance, staffing, and day-to-day operations.

Bullock said the new commission will conduct public hearings across Montana throughout 2018 to solicit funding and partnership ideas.

Working with the five-person FWP Parks and Recreation Board, the new commission will then prepare and deliver final recommendations to the governor in December. ■

WEATHER

Drought, winter may have hurt prairie game populations

Don't be surprised if you see fewer deer and upland birds in eastern Montana this spring. Though biologists have yet to finish computing winter aerial surveys and other population monitoring, the combination of last year's parched summer followed by a harsh winter no doubt took its toll.

"Some effects of the drought were immediate last summer, like low chick survival for pheasants and sharptails," says Melissa Foster, FWP wildlife biologist in Baker. "The lack of moisture meant fewer bugs, which provide the protein that's critical for chicks during the first few weeks of life."

Foster says drought takes a bit longer to affect deer. "It left many in poorer-than-average condition going in to winter. Fawns were noticeably smaller than normal." Because deer make it through the cold months mainly on fat reserves, Foster says the skinniest animals often don't survive. Though snow depth was not severe, winter temperatures plummeted to -30 F and lower in parts of eastern Montana this past winter. "That causes deer to burn up precious calories at a much faster rate," Foster says. "Because of

poor grazing conditions in 2017, some had nothing to spare."

An added blow was the emergency haying and grazing allowed on federal Conservation Reserve Program grasslands. "That was necessary to help ranchers stay afloat, but it reduced cover for wildlife," Foster says. "Without adequate cover, ground-nesting birds are vulnerable to predators. It's the same with newborn fawns. They need to hide from coyotes and other predators by holding still in thick stands of grass."

Foster is keeping her fingers crossed for a wet 2018. "Prairie species bounce back quickly," she says. "An early spring and good nesting and brood conditions could mean lots of young upland birds and deer next fall." ■



Eastern Montana upland bird populations took a beating during last summer's drought. But they could bounce back with ample water this spring.

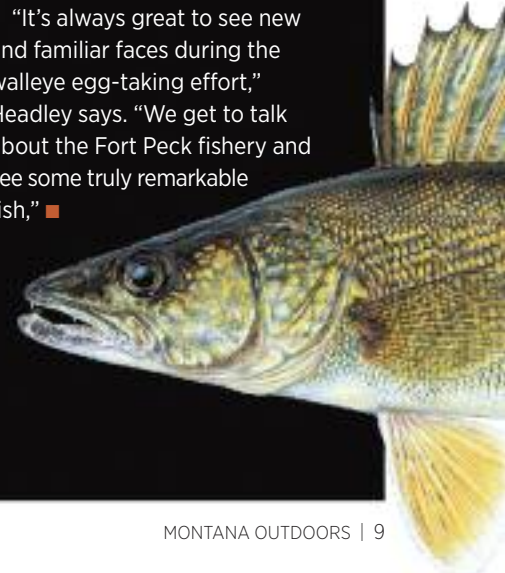
HELPING HARVEST WALLEYE EGGS



Up to 100 volunteers pitch in this time of year to help FWP fisheries and hatchery crews collect eggs from walleye at Fort Peck Reservoir. The egg-taking operation, which harvests up to 90 million eggs, requires months of planning. "It's a big operation that takes lots of teamwork," says Heath Headley, Fort Peck Reservoir fisheries biologist.

In early spring, walleye move to shallow water to spawn. Because Fort Peck contains little spawning habitat, FWP crews and volunteers give the fish a helping hand. The volunteers—who range in age from school kids to retirees—help set trap nets and then separate out captured "nontarget species" such as catfish and freshwater drum. FWP biologists and technicians squeeze eggs from the female walleye—which can top 14 pounds—then mix the eggs with milt from male fish. The fertilized eggs are incubated at the Fort Peck and Miles City Fish Hatcheries. Tiny walleye are then stocked in lakes and reservoirs that lack natural reproduction.

"It's always great to see new and familiar faces during the walleye egg-taking effort," Headley says. "We get to talk about the Fort Peck fishery and see some truly remarkable fish." ■



POPULATION MONITORING

EYES in the SKY

If you see an FWP airplane or helicopter flying overhead this time of year, give the pilot and biologist up there a wave. They are counting elk, deer, waterfowl, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, moose, and other game species.

Airplanes work best for open areas where wildlife is spread out. Helicopters are preferred for thick forest, where pilots have to hover or quickly maneuver so they and biol-

ogists can see and identify animals.

FWP crews count the ratio of calves per 100 adult cow elk or moose. This indicates population status and helps biologists determine how many animals can be harvested the following hunting season.

To monitor mule deer, biologists conduct aerial surveys in late winter and early spring. Because it's impossible to tally every deer, biologists count muleys in the same specific "trend areas" each year. "That helps us determine whether the overall mule deer population trend from year to year is increasing, decreasing, or staying stable," says John Vore, FWP Game Management Bureau chief. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: CARTOON ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MORAN; USDA; PAUL N. QUENEAU; SHUTTERSTOCK; JOSEPH TOMELLERI; DAVID R. ARMER; STEVE MULLER