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FEATURED

Deer holding their own after fire

Biologists: No serious problems, yet

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A mule deer is photographed on Jan. 11 on Hayward Hill north of Ellensburg. Wildlife officials say the deer are in fairly good condition, a state wildlife biologist said.

Mule deer spotted late last week in the Taylor Bridge wildfire burn area were in fairly good condition, a state wildlife biologist said.

"We're not seeing widespread problems with the deer (in the burned area) at this time," said William Moore, an assistant district wildlife biologist with the state Fish and Wildlife Department. "On the average, they're in fairly decent condition."

He said he, obviously, can't evaluate the condition of all the deer in an exact way, and certain numbers of animals may be in worse shape.

"I'm looking at them as a whole, from what I can see," Moore said.

The wildfire burned 37-square miles between Cle Elum and Ellensburg in August. This fall, some residents were concerned the deer wouldn't have enough brush and grass in early fall through early winter to fatten up before harsh winter weather.

Time to fatten

The deer build up fat in summer through late fall that helps them get through the winter's time of sparse food caused by hard and deep snow cover.

Whether they have these good reserves on their bodies often means the difference between survival or dying from exhaustion, hunger, cold or disease.

State wildlife officials have taken extra trips into the 23,500-acre wildfire footprint to monitor the condition of mule deer. So far the deer are looking about the way they do during a normal winter.

Moore cautioned the more than 1,000 deer that usually winter in the Taylor Bridge burn area between Cle Elum and rural Ellensburg still have more winter to get through and their most challenging survival time is still ahead.

"It's still early in the winter; who knows what kind of weather might hit down the road," Moore said. "But for now, they're looking about what we expect them to look like."

Longtime outdoorsman Bill Essman, a former state wildlife enforcement officer for 28 years, said he's not heard from other outdoor recreationists or rural property owners about significant numbers of deer looking like they're not going to survive.

"I'm certain I would have heard something by now if the deer were in real trouble," Essman said.

He added he's seen some areas of the county where snow was deep between Christmas and New Year's, but it now looks like 90 percent of the snow has melted and some plants have grown a little.

"That's all got to help the deer and elk," Essman said.

Helping the deer

Factors that have apparently helped mule deer so far this winter season include relatively mild late fall and early winter temperatures accompanied by rain that allowed brush and grass to sprout before the snow fell.

This includes extra growth on bitter brush, favored by the deer, and some kinds of wild grasses that the deer are eating.

Snowfall in the burn area is about 8 to 10 inches in some areas, not so deep that it significantly restricts deer movement in their browsing for winter food or keeps them from getting down to older vegetation growth under the snow, Moore said.

The snow also isn't hard-crusting over, which could cause browsing problems.

This all saves deer from having to overly exert themselves in their search for food at a time when they can't afford to waste any fat reserves they have, he said.

Some areas have had significant melting of snow with a few sites completely devoid of snow, making new plant growth easily available, Moore added.

"They're not making a great living on the green up (plants), but it's there and it's helping sustain them at some level."

The deer are here, in Thorp

Kittitas County Field and Stream Club President Lee Davis said he's received reports from residents of the greater Thorp area that they are seeing more mule deer than usual coming at night into their yards and fields.

Davis believes the higher numbers are those deer dispersed by the Taylor Bridge fire to more outlying areas.

"In the last five years or so their (deer) numbers have been going up, and those wandering into Thorp look relatively healthy at this time," Davis said earlier this week.

Davis said his relatives in the Thorp area had their arborvitae plants significantly munched on by deer. He helped put up flagging and other plant hangings to discourage deer from helping themselves.

"It's still a bad idea to start feeding deer, even if they look like they're hungry and looking for food," Davis said. "If it's not done right with the right feed and you don't have experience, you're likely doing more harm than good."