

Saving a Space for Wildlife

Improving the Natural Resource Overlay tool is key to habitat protection.

Wildlife needs unbroken, connected habitat on both public and private lands to survive. And even though privately owned lands make up only 3 percent of Teton County, many are located in the best areas for wildlife (see sidebar on Page 3). So development activities on private lands have both direct impacts on native species, such as habitat loss and fragmentation, and indirect impacts, such as the effects of increased noise and pets. To balance both human and wildlife needs, it's critical to identify where to steer future development.

This starts with having good information about which areas are most important for wildlife, so the Conservation Alliance has teamed up with the Conservation Research Center of Teton Science Schools, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and others to compile the best available scientific data on wildlife habitat in the county. These data on species like moose, elk, mule deer, trumpeter swans, bald eagles and trout include crucial

winter ranges, migration corridors, year-round ranges, nesting sites and spawning grounds. Through this project, we are reassessing the Natural Resource Overlay zone (NRO), which was established in 1994 but hasn't been reviewed since then (see box below). Our project aims to determine if the NRO still encompasses Jackson Hole's most critical wildlife habitat and corridors. Just as important, we're identifying information gaps, such as understudied geographic locations and species.

Our community is fortunate to have the NRO as a planning tool. That said, the extent to which it can actually curb development and its impacts is limited. For this reason, the Alliance has also undertaken research to determine if the NRO has been effective in limiting development in crucial areas for wildlife, and whether development trends, in terms of location and intensity, have put species at risk. In the months ahead, we'll also analyze to what extent the NRO addresses

critical conservation issues, such as landscape connectivity and cumulative impacts. Our community needs more protection for functional, contiguous, long-term wildlife habitat than what our current NRO provides, so the Conservation Alliance will advocate for complementary policies and planning tools to achieve this goal.

Making sure that we know the right places to prioritize for protection – and that we implement the most effective policies and planning tools to achieve that protection – are critical steps to take as part of our community's Comprehensive Plan update. The first phase of our NRO project reconfirmed that what happens on privately owned lands in Teton County definitely matters to wildlife. Stay tuned for news on the next phase later this year. ■

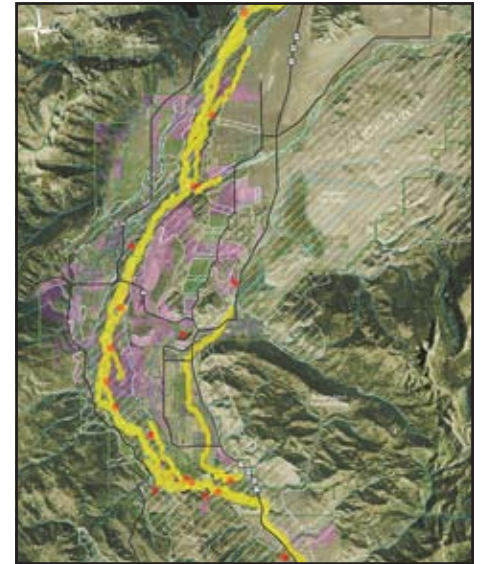
We'd like to thank the Community Foundation of Jackson Hole, the Wyoming Community Foundation, and individual donors for making this NRO project possible.

What's the NRO?

Preserving the diversity and abundance of Jackson Hole's wildlife is one of the goals of the 1994 Comprehensive Plan, and the Natural Resource Overlay is a planning tool to help accomplish that goal. The NRO is a designation on town and county zoning maps that shows the location of lands with special wildlife values. Regulations require the developer of a property in the NRO to do an analysis of the potential environmental impacts of the development. Also, if developers disturb private lands that the county has determined are critical wildlife habitat, they're required to mitigate by improving habitat on other private land in the county on a basis of two acres of habitat enhancement for every one acre of disturbed NRO land.

Since so much of Teton County's privately owned land is crucial for wildlife (see sidebar on Page 3), it's probably time to consider requiring an environmental analysis as part of the application process for *any* development proposal that asks for a major upzone, whether it's in the NRO or not.

To survive, wildlife needs year-round access to food and water, large areas undisturbed by humans and pets, and corridors to be able to move between summer and winter habitat. We've mapped the best data on wildlife habitat in Teton County; the one at right shows bald eagle nesting areas. The maps will be available at www.jhalliance.org/maps.htm in April.



The number of plant and animal species listed as either threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act has topped 1,300. For the vast majority of these species – almost 85 percent – habitat loss and fragmentation are the major causes of their imperilment as well as the most significant threats to their conservation. There is no doubt that the number of imperiled species will continue to grow as more habitat is converted for, and fragmented by, human development and use. Moreover, across North America, even many non-imperiled species are finding their habitats impaired, their ranges diminished, and their numbers in retreat. The time to act is now, before additional species populations begin to decline precipitously.

– *Lasting Landscapes: Reflections on the Role of Conservation Science in Land Use Planning, Environmental Law Institute, 2007*

Our generation faces the greatest challenge of all. The Greater Yellowstone region is growing at two times – and habitat loss at six times – the national rate.... At the current rate of permanent habitat loss, the extraordinary wildlife that characterizes this region will not be maintained for future generations.

– *Paul Hansen, Director of the Nature Conservancy's Greater Yellowstone Program, Jackson Hole News&Guide Guest Shot, Feb. 27, 2008*