

Keeping Wildlife Populations Connected Through Habitat Corridors

Maintaining the ecological connections, or wildlife movement corridors, between our major wildlands is one of the most pressing challenges for habitat and wildlife conservation in the Northern Rockies. Without these corridors, our national parks, refuges, wilderness and roadless areas tragically become a series of ‘habitat islands.’ These islands of habitats may eventually spell extinction for resident wildlife because of negative influences common amongst small, isolated wildlife populations—such as the effects of inbreeding, natural disasters, and lack of wildlife immigration.

American Wildlands’ *Corridors of Life* program focuses on keeping the large protected areas—the core habitats—ecologically connected to each other within the U.S. Northern Rockies for the benefit of wide-ranging or migratory animals. AWL works to restore and maintain these wildlife movement corridors as the ecologically necessary complement to the efforts of local, state, regional and national NGO’s that focus on core habitat conservation.

Major Accomplishments for FY 2007

In FY 2007, American Wildlands continued to address threats to habitat connectivity and wildlife movement corridors on public lands, private lands and across major highways for the benefit of bears, wolves, wolverines, lynx, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, antelope and other magnificent Rocky Mountain wildlife. Some of our many accomplishments include:

▼ To help focus and prioritize our work, in 2007 American Wildlands conducted a Priority Linkage Assessment for 20 millions acres of land in the central Northern Rockies—or 70% of the lands critical to maintaining regional and local habitat connectivity. We interviewed five dozen state, federal, tribal and independent



In the Ninemile Valley, Kim Davitt led AWL’s effort to provide financial, physical, and administrative support to the local wildlife working group. AWL photo library.

biologists in an expert opinion-based assessment, which identified more than 100 critical wildlife corridors and the threats to, and opportunities for, conserving these wildlife corridors. These results are the scientific foundation of American Wildlands' work for years to come.

▼ Regarding this Priority Linkage Assessment, AWL already knows that the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Idaho Fish and Game, Montana Department of Transportation, Idaho Department of Transportation, as well as numerous conservation NGOs, regional land trusts and community groups, are requesting these results to help inform, guide and strengthen their own work.

▼ AWL's campaign to mitigate, if not stop, a proposal to build a military training center on public lands in the key MacDonald Pass wildlife corridor west of Helena, Montana, has influenced the U.S. Forest Service to postpone its decision while it addresses the concerns of AWL and others. Specifically, we presented new data from field research we conducted last winter that confirmed the presence of sensitive wildlife in the area. AWL staff also organized local citizens and other conservation groups to voice their concerns—including meeting with representatives of Montana's governor and federal legislators, the local U.S. Forest Service Supervisor and the Adjutant General of the Montana's Army National Guard.

▼ With continued support from AWL, the citizen-led Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup (northwest of Missoula, Montana): [1] received a grant to help fund wildlife movement survey work and a student wildlife inventory project; [2] erected eight motorist road signs ("Watch for Wildlife") in key wildlife crossing locations on county roads; and [3] distributed bear-resistant garbage containers to residents to reduce human/wildlife conflicts (*see photos on previous page*).

2008 and Beyond

In 2008, American Wildlands will initiate a multi-year plan to provide strategic leadership and coordination amongst numerous conservation partners and local communities to ensure that more than 100 critical habitat connections, or "linkages," we recently identified are maintained or restored for wildlife movement. For each area, we will [1] develop the rationale why a specific linkage warrants increased conservation attention; [2] identify potential collaborative partners, such as other conservation NGOs, local community groups, and agencies; [3] work with partners to develop and implement a conservation plan that addresses the threats to, and opportunities for, conserving each linkage; and [4] provide AWL's expertise to other conservation partners regarding the latest science; GIS modeling, analysis and mapping; and land and wildlife management laws, policies and best management practices.

Ultimately, our success will be measured by the ability for wildlife to travel through these habitat linkage areas, as well as the ability for local people to make deliberate choices about managing their land in a manner that conserves the wildlife and rural landscapes of the region.



This past winter, funded by AWL, Wild Things Unlimited conducted field research to determine presence of lynx in the MacDonald Pass area.



April Johnston interviews Craig Jourdonnais of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks as one of 60 interviews for AWL's Priority Linkage Assessment. AWL photo library.