

# **Ashley National Forest Assessment**

## **Species of Interest Report**

### **Public Draft**

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## Introduction

Wildlife, both terrestrial and aquatic species, are highly valued by the public for both consumptive and non-consumptive use. Healthy populations of wildlife species are enjoyed by many on the Ashley National Forest and are good indicators of the health and diversity of current habitat conditions. With an ever-increasing human population leading to more national forest users, the demand for wildlife opportunities continues to grow. This growth comes with the potential for habitat disturbance, as well as potential impacts to wildlife. It will be important as we move into the future that we are aware of these potential disturbances and do what it takes to minimize negative impacts to this popular resource on the Ashley National Forest.

## Social, Environmental, and Economic Benefits of Wildlife and Fish

Wildlife and fish habitat on the Ashley National Forest have many social, economic, recreational, spiritual and scientific benefits to people. Wildlife hunting, and to a lesser degree trapping, have a strong tradition in western culture and are a major economic driver in western states. Viewing and photography of wildlife also contribute greatly to local economies. Thousands of people travel to this region every year to visit the area. They often come to Dinosaur National Monument or to fish and whitewater raft on the Green River, and extend their visit to the Ashley National Forest. These visitors come for a variety of reasons, but the chance to see wildlife is generally on the list. Because of the Ashley National Forest's incredible wildlife diversity, Ashley wildlife resources are nationally recognized and cherished. These resources attract the attention of wildlife observers, professionals, and advocates nationwide.

## Directives and Management Challenges

The Forest Service's 2012 Planning Rule lists wildlife conservation as a priority. The Planning Rule states, "wildlife habitat shall be managed to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired nonnative vertebrate species." This directive is becoming more challenging because of changing factors, including rising recreational use, demand for services and amenities, local land development and a warming climate.

The Ashley National Forest plan contains goals, objectives, and standards for wildlife and habitat, including some that are directed at individual species, groups of species, and habitat conditions. The Ashley National Forest plan emphasizes forage and cover needs on big game winter ranges, managing vegetation to maintain or improve habitat, providing for plant diversity and protecting special habitats. The Ashley National Forest plan's focus is to actively manage habitat while minimizing harm from other resource activities and to give special consideration to threatened, endangered, and high-interest species. The plan also contains monitoring requirements.

Following are a few of the management concerns related to wildlife habitat on the Ashley.

- **Adjacent Private and Tribal Lands:** Nearby human land development can reduce management options and result in conflicts related to wildlife.
- **Climate Change:** A warming climate can cause increased frequency or severity of droughts, fires, wind, floods, insects, and diseases. These changes can alter habitat characteristics and force species to seek more suitable areas.
- **Habitat Fragmentation and Wildlife Corridors:** For various reasons, including human-caused land development, certain species are often stranded in isolated islands of suitable habitat. This can

restrict genetic diversity, seasonal movement, and the ability of a species to move to a more suitable habitat area.

- **Landscape Changes:** Wildfire, insect infestations, invasive plant species, historic fire suppression and a warming climate are among the many factors that can make habitats unsuitable for the species that live there.
- **Management Coordination:** Wildlife ignore and frequently cross national forest boundaries. As a result, habitat and wildlife management efforts must often be coordinated with other land management agencies, State fish and wildlife agencies, and private landowners.
- **Multiple Use:** Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, “multiple use” allows various recreational activities, commercial resource extraction, and other land uses. Because of this, multiple use can change habitat or disturb wildlife.
- **Protected Area Locations:** Although approximately one-third of the Ashley National Forest is designated as having some level of protected status (such as wilderness or national recreation areas), many of these areas are at elevations that are not suitable for all species on the Ashley.
- **Species Interactions and Environmental Impact:** Changes in species populations and locations can affect other species and overall habitats. Examples include mountain pine beetles, predatory species such as wolves, and “engineer” species such as beavers.
- **Wildfire:** In recent decades, wildfires in certain areas on the Ashley National Forest have been more severe, more frequent, or both. Following these large fires, vegetation that had become decadent (dormant, stagnant) was replaced by new vegetation with much more variety—a condition that improves habitat for certain kinds of wildlife while others may be impacted.

## Habitat Conditions

**Flaming Gorge – Vernal Ranger District:** Habitat conditions on the Flaming Gorge –Vernal Ranger District can be characterized as generally in good to excellent condition. Unique to this geographical area, which is located on the north slope of Uinta Mountains, is the largest ponderosa pine forested area on the Ashley National Forest. This area has been extensively managed over the years and supports a wide array of wildlife species. Similar to other areas on the Ashley National Forest, lodgepole pine is a very common forest vegetation type on both the north and south slopes of the Uinta Mountains. Like the ponderosa pine forest area, lodgepole pine also supports a wide array of wildlife species. Mountain brush communities, such as mountain mahogany, are also found in this area. These communities provide an excellent habitat for many large and small terrestrial wildlife species.

**Roosevelt-Duchesne Ranger District:** Habitat conditions on the Roosevelt-Duchesne Ranger District are similar to the rest of the Ashley National Forest. Ponderosa and lodgepole pine are common, as well as mixed conifer (Douglas fir/spruce). These conifer areas provide excellent habitat for various life stages of many wildlife species on the district. The south unit of the Ashley National Forest - an area south of U.S. 40 - supports a large pinyon and juniper area, mixed with sagebrush, and supports some of the higher number of sage-grouse on the Ashley National Forest. Overall, habitat conditions are in good to excellent condition on this district.

## Species of Interest

Species of interest are those commonly enjoyed and used by the public for hunting, trapping, observing, or sustenance, including cultural or tribal uses. State fish and wildlife agencies manage many of these species through hunting regulations. The following species are of value for their social, cultural, and

economic benefits to visitors of the Ashley National Forest: mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, moose, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and sportfish (for example, rainbow, cutthroat, brown, and lake trout; kokanee salmon; and smallmouth bass).

## Information Sources and Gaps

The Ashley National Forest uses a number of sources to determine national forest distribution and occurrences. These include Forest Service corporate database, Natural Resource Manager (NRM), NatureServe, Utah Natural Heritage Database, and Wyoming Natural Heritage Database. Other sources of information were also used; for example, State-level species reports and wildlife action plans.

## Scale of Analysis

Because we are revising our Ashley National Forest management plan, we focused our analysis area primarily on the Ashley National Forest. The Ashley National Forest lies within the Duchesne and Upper Green River 4th order hydrologic units. We also related species distribution to Ashley National Forest land type associations to better understand and define the relationship between species and their habitat needs.

## Mule Deer

Mule deer are an iconic western big game species. Mule deer are one of the popular and most commonly hunted species on the Ashley National Forest. Mule deer hunting provides an important recreational activity on the Ashley, and brings in considerable economic activity to local communities during hunting season. Mule deer are found in wide range of habitats and can be found essentially at any elevation on the Ashley National Forest. Population trends vary with habitat conditions, and are primarily a result from annual precipitation and severity of winter snowpack. In addition to habitat conditions, pressure and harvest from hunting can have a meaningful impact on mule deer populations. Most recent trends for mule deer populations on the Ashley National Forest have been upwards.



**Mule Deer**

## Rocky Mountain Elk

Similar to mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk on the Ashley National Forest are a highly desirable species, enjoyed by many Ashley visitors. This species is commonly hunted and viewed, and provides an important recreational activity on the Ashley National Forest. Hunting brings in a considerable economic activity to local communities around the Ashley. Elk numbers on the Ashley National Forest have risen as the State fish and game agency has actively been trying to build the herd size. Because of their size, the elk are less affected by heavy snow pack during the winter months. Similar to deer, hunting pressure and harvest from hunting can have a meaningful impact on elk numbers.



**Rocky Mountain Elk**

## Moose

Moose, while not readily seen, are not uncommon on the Ashley. The Ashley National Forest provides an abundance of suitable habitat for this species. Moose are hunted on the Ashley, but only a few permits are issued each year, as moose are considered a “once in a lifetime” species to hunt. Overall moose numbers on the Ashley National Forest, as well as on regional scale, are trending downward and this trend is being studied to determine the cause. Moose are the largest big game species on the Ashley National Forest, having an average weight of about 1,000 pounds.



**Moose**

## Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

The Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep is the largest wild sheep inhabiting North America. A large ram may weigh more than 300 pounds and stand over 42 inches tall at the shoulder. The sheep generally have a dark brown to gray/brown color with a white rump patch, muzzle, and back of legs. The bighorn sheep’s coat may appear considerably lighter in spring, before the winter coat is shed, revealing the darker summer coat beneath. Rams have horns that are massive and tightly curled close to the face. A ewe (a female sheep) will have smaller, shorter horns that curve only slightly. Ewes typically weigh 125 to 150 pounds. Similar to moose, Rocky Mountain bighorns are hunted on the Ashley National Forest, but just a few permits are issued each year.



**Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep**

## Sportfish

The Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam is a fly fisherman's dream. Since completion of the Dam in 1962, the Green River below the dam has become a premier trout fishery. Anglers can float the river in dories, rafts or kick boats, and there is foot access to the river from the Little Hole National Recreation Trail, which runs between the Spillway and Little Hole boat launch sites. Species present in the river are rainbow, brook, and cutthroat trout.

Flaming Gorge Reservoir is 91 miles long with 350 miles of shoreline. The Utah section of the reservoir winds through colorful, narrow canyons; the Wyoming portion is wider and surrounded by high sagebrush deserts and rock mesas. In addition to wonderful views and vistas, Flaming Gorge Reservoir offers outstanding world-famous fishing. World and state record trout have been caught here in these cold waters. There are numerous fishing derbies to participate in throughout the summer and winters seasons and ice fishing is becoming increasingly popular. Species present in the reservoir include rainbow, cutthroat, brown, and lake trout, kokanee salmon, smallmouth bass, channel catfish, and most recently burbot.

In addition to Flaming Gorge Reservoir and the Green River, the Uinta Mountains offer outstanding stream and lake fishing for many of the species listed above. There are literally hundreds of lakes in the Uinta Mountains, including the High Uinta Wilderness area that offer hike-in or horseback in opportunities for anglers to experience an outstanding fishing experience with the solitude of the Wilderness. For quicker and easier access by automobile, stream fishing on rivers such as the North Fork of Duchesne, Lake Fork, Uinta, and Whiterocks Rivers is readily available. Sportfish typically caught in these rivers are rainbow, brook, brown, and cutthroat trout.

## Key Findings

Generally, current habitat conditions for wildlife and fish species of interest on the Ashley National Forest are suitable for all or most life history needs. Some of the animal species do migrate or have seasonal movements off the Ashley National Forest to adapt to seasonal changes. However, others species spend their entire life on the Ashley National Forest. Conifer tree encroachment continues to threaten sagebrush and grassland communities. However, habitat improvement projects in these areas are helping offset this invasion. Even with large-scale beetle epidemics, drought, fire, wind events, invasive plants, and other natural drivers, habitat is still supporting a wide array of species on the Ashley National Forest.

Species present on the Ashley National Forest today are essentially the same species prior to European settlement. Some species have declined in numbers while others have remained stable or increased. Overall, there has been an increase in the knowledge base of species distribution and numbers on the

Ashley National Forest. This increased knowledge is due to an increased focus on species inventory, monitoring, and management from both the state wildlife management agencies and the Forest Service.

The findings of this assessment suggest existing management plans are generally adequate to sustain suitable habitat to support the species discussed. However, predicted changes in climate, combined with new science and technology, will make the future management of wildlife and fish on the Ashley National Forest more challenging.

A more detailed description of the evaluation process is available in the Forest Service Handbook for conducting assessments, as well as the 2012 Planning Rule. Both are available on our web site ([www.fs.usda.gov/goto/AshleyForestPlan](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/AshleyForestPlan)).

## References

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