

Wildlife, Habitat and the Wallow Fire

Some stood around the edges of their nests watching over their young while some hunkered down digesting their morning meal. Still others continued feeding at the lake.

It was the last week of June of this year and I was looking at the great blue heron rookery of Luna Lake. They were still there. They survived. Despite the wildfire bearing down on their rookery, and the smoke that accompanied it; despite the fire suppression activity at their feeding ground (helicopters dipping water and heavy fire engine traffic); and despite the burn-out operations through their rookery, they survived. And they hatched young.

This is a success story. A wildlife success story. But not just a wildlife success story. For it also involves proactive forest management, and a community.

The Luna Lake great blue heron rookery on the Alpine Ranger District of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests stands within one of the White Mountain Stewardship Projects, specifically the Alpine Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) project. The purpose of these “WUI” treatments is to reduce ground fuels and thin trees to create more space between their crowns, thereby helping to prevent fast moving crown fires that are extremely difficult to control. Beginning in 2002, a WUI treatment was implemented for the community of Alpine, Arizona.

The rookery abuts private land within the Alpine WUI project. It was the adjacent landowner who had come to know and treasure the nesting herons over the years and who notified the Forest Service of their presence. In 2008, Alpine Ranger District personnel, with field assistance from Mrs. Karen Santa Maria, adjusted the WUI treatment slightly in the rookery to meet the needs of the birds *and* meet the WUI thinning objective (see “Wildlife Habitat, Great Blue Herons”, White Mountain Outdoors, Winter 2009/2010). Instead of thinning around each tree or just a few trees, the heron rookery was treated as “one stand” or a “single tree unit” meaning open spacing was created around the cluster of larger tree crowns forming the nest stand. In addition, all the small trees within the stand were removed to reduce the chance that fire could be carried upward into the crowns supporting the heron nests.

The Wallow Fire started on 5/29/2011 in the Bear Wallow Wilderness on the Alpine Ranger District, approximately 22 miles southwest of Alpine. The forest was dry and the winds were extremely persistent and unseasonably high. On June 2nd, the community of Alpine was evacuated; at that time the fire was over 200,000 acres. That evening, the fire crested South Mountain and the rim bounding the south side of Alpine. Fire spotted over the rim, making runs back up it. As the fire continued to burn, it encountered the Alpine WUI thinning treatments. “The fire dropped to the ground when it hit the WUI treatments going from a crown fire to a ground fire” states Alpine District Fire Management Officer Jim Aylor. Under those circumstances, fire crews were able to manage the fire and help protect homes and property.

This same type of proactive forest management also helped with the fire suppression efforts around the communities of Nutrioso, Eagar and Springerville where White Mountain Stewardship projects have occurred. Thinned, open ponderosa pine forests resembling those long ago are demonstrating that they can handle fire as they have in centuries past. While the Wallow Fire has gone on to become Arizona's largest wildfire in history, the Alpine community and its Luna Lake great blue herons are . . . alive and well.

By Deb Brewster and Linda WhiteTrifaro, Wildlife, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests



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