Mule Deer Habitat: Restoration on the Uncompahgre Plateau

San Juan Corridors Coalition (www.sanjuancorridors.org) is continuing its monthly series on wildlife with *Restoration of Mule Deer Habitat on the Uncompahgre Plateau* presented by Eric Bergman, CDOW researcher, Thursday, August 14, 7 p.m., Ridgway Community Center, Railroad Avenue, Ridgway.

In the 1990s the mule deer population on the Plateau began to decline. Everyone had their own favorite explanation. One of the most popular, of course, was that predators were the problem, that coyotes and cougars were taking too many deer. Research by CDOW, however, discovered that the real answer was the decline of mule deer habitat quality through habitat succession into thick pinyon-juniper, resulting in a dramatic reduction in the browse on which deer depend. Fire suppression has also likely contributed to this result.

Fawns were not healthy and therefore not able to survive the rigors of the wild, including predators, because the diet of their mothers was inferior. Chad Bishop, CDOW mule deer researcher, conducted an experimental feeding project in which he demonstrated that adequate nutrition dramatically increased the survival rate of the fawns. This suggested that the problem could best be addressed by restoring the habitat on the Plateau to a condition better suited to mule deer.

A number of mitigation efforts have been implemented including removing large patches of pinyon juniper to encourage the resurgence of shrubs and meadow plants. Since a lot of clearing had to be done for safety reasons under the electric power line that runs across the Plateau, additional meadows were cleared intermittently along the power line to increase browse. Native plant research has also provided information about which plants to seed back into the cleared areas, and a small local industry has developed around producing this seed.

But restoring the ecology of a large area sufficient to make a difference for large numbers of wide ranging animals is a complex process requiring the cooperation of researchers, state and federal agencies, and private landowners.

Eric Bergman, who is continuing the research initiated by Chad Bishop, will explain the current mule deer research. His project is a multi-year, multi-area study to assess the impacts of landscape level winter range habitat improvement efforts on mule deer population performance. This study is occurring on the Uncompahgre Plateau and in adjacent valleys in southwestern Colorado. The researchers measure over-winter fawn survival and total deer density on all study areas and estimate body condition of does on two study areas. Compared to results from other research throughout the West, as well as on the Uncompahgre Plateau, survival estimates for 6-month old mule deer fawns have been quite high.

Eric Bergman is an ungulate researcher for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. His current work is focused on assessing the effectiveness of habitat management on mule deer population performance. He started working for the DOW in 2003 and began his current study in November of 2004. He has an M.S. from Montana State University and is currently working on a Ph.D. through Colorado State University.

Doors for this presentation will open at 6:30. Refreshments will include cookies, coffee provided by Mountain Market, and herbal tea provided by Garden Goddess Creations.

Subsequent sessions will feature bears, wild horses, bighorn sheep, and other wildlife topics of interest to the community.

For further information and to offer suggestions for this series, please contact Sara Coulter (626-4496, scoulter@towson.edu) or Shirley Jentsch (240-1319, sjentsch@montrose.net).