



ROCKY MOUNTAIN WILD

Protecting Wildlands for Wildlife

2019 Annual Program Accomplishments

Rocky Mountain Wild (RMW) is pleased to report on the following major program accomplishments during fiscal year 2019 (January 1, 2019 – December 31, 2019).

Southern Rockies Conservation Vision

The goal of our Southern Rockies Conservation Vision campaign is to work with the broader conservation community to develop a science-based shared vision and plan for landscape level conservation in the Southern Rockies Ecoregion. This project was designed to update the 20-year-old Southern Rockies Wildlands Network Vision with the newest science and mapping techniques.

We are focusing on specific priority landscapes and working with local conservation organizations to take a closer look at those landscapes to identify the habitats and other areas that are most important to protect in the face of climate change. This approach allows us to incorporate the specific needs of local communities and to work closely with individual conservation organizations to help them reach their goals.

In 2019 we piloted this new approach with our partners at Wild Connections. Using a flexible geospatial planning methodology, and datasets on climate resiliency, we have developed a model that allows Wild Connections to identify current and future climate corridors and refugia for wildlife in the South Platte and Arkansas river watersheds. This model will provide the foundation for a plan for protecting habitat and maintaining biodiversity within this 6.7 million acre landscape.

Wildlife Movement Corridors

Habitat loss and fragmentation is a leading cause of species declines world-wide. Here in Colorado we are in a race to protect the last remaining intact landscapes as our population continues to grow and spread into once rural areas. Housing complexes, roads, power lines, and even recreational trails divide large habitats into smaller, more isolated remnants. In 2019 we worked to reduce the impacts fragmentation by protecting and reconnecting two of Colorado's most important wildlife movement corridors.

Wolf Creek Pass – Wolf Creek Pass is recognized as one of the 10 most important wildlife linkages in the United States, yet it continues to be threatened by the development of a 10,000 person “village.” In 2019 our Friends of Wolf Creek coalition worked to stop this destruction by filing suit against the U.S. Forest Service for providing access across public land to allow for the development. Our team has reviewed thousands of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that describe the process used by the Forest Service to come to this decision. Our case is fully briefed and we are waiting for a court decision.

East Vail Pass – I-70 on East Vail Pass has been identified as a top priority for the construction of wildlife crossing structures by a broad coalition of groups including: Colorado Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service (White River), Summit County, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), ski areas, recreation groups, and conservation organizations. This initiative is backed by five years of research conducted by Rocky Mountain Wild and the Denver Zoo which documents an abundance of wildlife in this linkage zone.

In 2019 we worked with the Summit County Safe Passages Coalition and CDOT to contract with Wood Consulting to conduct a feasibility study for this project. This is a major step forward with this project, and the crossing designs and cost estimates included in the study will provide the basis for completing shovel-ready engineering plans and fundraising targets. The feasibility study is in the final draft form and will be shared with stakeholders and the public in October 2020.

Additionally, Summit County has now officially endorsed the Summit County Safe Passages Plan which provides a road map for improving wildlife connectivity throughout the county.

Community Science

Protecting the biodiversity of our region is a big job, and we recognize that we can't do it alone. To assist us with research, data collection, and outreach Rocky Mountain Wild is building a robust volunteer community science program. These volunteers help us collect data to: understand the impacts of climate change on alpine ecosystems and the American pika; catalog the abundance and type of wildlife on East Vail Pass to inform wildlife crossing construction, and; understand and monitor Colorado's 18 species of bats.

Front Range Pika Project – The Front Range Pika Project utilizes community scientists to collect data on the impacts of climate change on the American pika, with the goal of ensuring species survival. During 2019 we expanded the project beyond the Front Range to include sites in the White River National Forest and Rocky Mountain National Park. We trained and deployed over 300 community scientists who visited more than 250 field sites. We partnered with Dawson High School in Lafayette, CO and their students analyzed pika DNA from scat samples in their lab. The results of our research are being used by a national network of pika researchers to determine the elements that are key to pika survival. Our results were presented at three conferences and in an article in the journal of Nature Climate Change.

Colorado Corridors Project – This project uses community scientists to help us monitor wildlife near I-70 on East Vail Pass. The data from this project is designed to be used to promote the need for wildlife crossing structures at this site, inform the specifics of crossing structure design and construction, and eventually to serve as a baseline for monitoring the success of the completed crossing structures. Our camera traps captured over 160,000 photos of wildlife at the proposed wildlife overpass site. These photos were uploaded to an online platform called Zooniverse, where volunteers identified the species and cataloged the photos. Over 3,000 volunteers have participated in the Zooniverse project. Additionally, we engaged 70 volunteers in the camera setup and maintenance.

Colorado Bat Watch - This project is a citizen science initiative in the Pike and Routt National Forests, designed to collect bat population data and measure the impact of white-nose syndrome and threats in Colorado. During 2019, we began scoping this project and applying for grants for funding.

Oil & Gas Lease Sale Screening*

Rocky Mountain Wild supports the larger conservation community by screening all oil and gas lease sales in the region for conflicts with wildlife habitat and other natural resources, and sharing the results with the conservation community for local and regional action. Our team performed 65 oil and gas

screens on 34 proposed lease sales in Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming from July 2019 to June 2020. In that time period, over 690,000 acres were deferred or deleted from sales primarily in greater sage-grouse habitat. An additional 590,000 acres were postponed primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Due to other reporting requirements, this accomplishment is reported on a mid-year calendar.