



## Project Promises Safe Passage for People and Wildlife



Ed Bottum celebrates the completion of a wildlife underpass on State Highway 21 near Boise. *IDFG photos by Vicky Osborn*

By *Vicky Osborn*

A cheer went up from Ed Bottum as he stood under the new wildlife underpass on State Highway 21.

“It’s a picture postcard of a wildlife underpass,” said Bottum, habitat biologist for Idaho Fish and Game. “It’s open. It’s tall. It’s wide. It should feel pretty comfortable to a deer or an elk.”

This winter, deer and elk migrating to the Boise Foothills and Boise River valley have another way to cross Highway 21 – under it.

The highway connects Boise

with the high country of the Boise National Forest. It also cuts through the migration route of one of Idaho’s largest mule deer herds. Every winter up to 8,000 deer and 1,000 elk drift down from the mountains in search of shelter and food to help them survive the winter cold.

Bottum manages the Boise River Wildlife Management Area, which is part of 36,000 acres of mule deer and elk winter range in the Boise Foothills and the Boise River Valley.

In the spring, mule deer and elk follow the retreating snowline back to their summer range.

With each migration, deer and elk cross Highway 21 at least once. The 11 miles closest to Boise are the most dangerous for motorists and wildlife.

“We’ve been tracking the number of deer and elk killed along this stretch of highway for the past 33 years,” Bottum said. “Since 2000, we’ve been losing around 100 big game animals a year, although in 2002 more than 230 were hit and killed by vehicles.”

The loss of life is hidden from most motorists because Idaho Fish and Game regularly picks up carcasses from the road side.

“It’s a horrifying job to do,” Bottum said. “I’m not the only who’s done it, and I think it affects all of us the same way.”

To draw attention to the problem, two large highway signs were installed in 2010. They regularly update drivers

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**Wildlife Road Mortality in Idaho**

YEAR	Total
1976-77	3
1977-78	25
1978-79	21
1979-80	17
1980-81	13
1981-82	10
1982-83	3
1983-84	11
1984-85	36
1985-86	46
1986-87	25
1987-88	40
1988-89	33
1989-90	52
1990-91	29
1991-92	69
1992-93	154
1993-94	39
1994-95	55
1995-96	69
1996-97	111
1997-98	100
1998-99	150
1999-00	163
2000-01	169
2001-02	230
2002-03	169
2003-04	151
2004-05	97
2005-06	128
2006-07	91
2007-08	117
2008-09	61
2009-10	74

**(Safe Passage** Continued from Page 1)

on the number of deer and elk killed on this 11-mile stretch of highway each year.

Signs alert motorists of the danger of deer and elk on the road, but the long-term solution to the chronic problem of vehicle-wildlife collisions is to separate the two. After more than 30 years of damaged vehicles, injured drivers and dead animals, the state is taking this step.

With the help of federal stimulus dollars, the Idaho Department of Transportation designed and funded an underpass and part of the wildlife exclusion fence. Three months of road construction and \$800,000 later, the wildlife underpass and some of the exclusion fence is done.

“You ask an engineer to solve a problem for you and they will,” Bottum said. “Seeing this project go from an idea to cement and steel is an affirmation of ITD’s engineers’ ability and skills.”

Located at milepost 18.2, the 15-foot high and 30-foot wide opening lines up with two drainages heavily used by migrating deer and elk.

“What we have here is a natural funnel,” said Scott Bodle, with the Boise National Forest. “The deer and elk are moving up on the ridgeline, and they drop down the draws bringing them right through here.”

Biologists expect deer and elk that already migrate along this route to discover the underpass on their own. But this represents a fraction of the animals that could be directed to the underpass.

The Transportation Department’s design calls for 1.65 miles of fence on the east side of the highway and one mile on the west side. Only part of the fence could be built with the funding available.

As the fall migration approaches most of the east side fence is not built, limiting the effectiveness of the underpass.

“Conditions haven’t really changed that much on Highway 21 for this winter,” Bottum said. “We won’t be able to say ‘look how well this works’ quite yet. But I’m optimistic more money will be allocated to complete this project.”

An estimated \$450,000 is needed to complete the fence. The Boise River Wildlife Linkage Partnership, a group of agencies and residents working to reduce vehicle-wildlife collisions on Highway 21, has already collected \$25,000 in an effort to raise money for the fence.

“Ultimately when the fence is complete,” said Marshall Haynes, senior conservation officer for Idaho Fish and Game, “there will be hundreds, if not thousands of animals that will be channeled through the underpass or around and down into the reservoir, keeping animals off the road and making it safer for motorists.”

When the project is completed motorists and wildlife will both have reason to celebrate.

*Vicky Osborn is a public information specialist at Idaho Fish and Game headquarters in Boise.*



The wildlife underpass northeast of Boise nears completion.

*IDFG photo by Vicky Osborn*

**Idaho Fish and Game News**  
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 Published by Idaho Fish and Game  
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 Volume 22, Number 5



# Collisions on Highways 75 and 93 Have Killed 55 Bighorns Since 1986



A group of Rocky Mountain bighorn rams cross River Road. IDFG photo by Jason Husseman  
Traffic is slow on this road north of Salmon. Though bighorns cross it often, they are rarely if ever hit. Wildlife managers note that driving slower is the best way to reduce wildlife collisions.

By Tom Keegan – Idaho Fish and Game

So why do bighorn sheep cross the road? Easy, to get to something they want on the other side – like water or tender green forage.

In the Tower-Kriley area along U.S. Highway 93 north of Salmon, 27 bighorns have been killed in vehicle collisions since 1987. At Tower-Kriley, most bighorns cross U.S. Highway 93 to reach the Salmon River. The highway is between the river and sheep habitat.

Fish and Game has worked with the Idaho Transportation Department to install sheep-crossing warning signs. Two sets, four total, have been put up; one set

in late 1990s-early 2000s and another set early 2000s.

All have been removed and are presumed stolen; no others have been put up. The signs cost about \$500 each and lasted a short time – some less than a few months. In 2009, a kiosk and sheep viewing station was built at the Red Rock Access Site – in the vicinity where several sheep were involved in collisions. But a change in landowner adjacent to the site resulted in new fencing that is apparently not conducive to sheep use of the area, as sheep seem to have vacated the area.

Sheep in this area use several locations along a five- to six-mile stretch of

highway from Tower Creek to Fourth of July Creek. They are subject to collisions at several spots.

Near Buffalo Jump on State Highway 75 south of Challis, 29 have been killed since 1986. Here bighorns cross the highway to reach irrigated fields for forage. Warning signs in this area have been upgraded to include flashing lights.

These signs have been much more resilient, with no thefts to date. In the late 1990s through early 2000s, Idaho Fish and Game worked with the Bureau of Land Management on habitat improvements (controlled burns) uphill and to the west, in part to draw sheep away from the road.

But the presence of irrigated fields across the highway from their preferred escape terrain is a powerful attractant. In 2010, a kiosk and sheep viewing station was erected adjacent to Buffalo Jump – the primary area where sheep are involved in collisions. The purpose of the kiosks includes education about collisions in the area.

Sheep are occasionally involved in collisions as far south as Spud Creek near the mouth of the East Fork Salmon River. These crossings may be related to seasonal migration. Biologists suspect that a few rams from the East Fork Salmon River herd may be crossing the river and Highway 75 to reach southern exposures and grasslands used for winter range in unit 36B.

*Tom Keegan is the regional wildlife manager in the Salmon Region.*



IDFG photo by Gary Power

## Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission’s policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor’s office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.



## When Wildlife Migration Corridors and Highways Intersect

By Jim Teare - Idaho Fish and Game

Every year, hundreds of deer and elk are killed in collisions with vehicles along U.S. Highway 30 east of Montpelier to Wyoming, a section of road known as Rocky Point – it is the worst wildlife road mortality location in southeast Idaho.

More than 8,000 deer and several hundred elk cross this dangerous section of highway during their migrations. But planning and talks with the Idaho Transportation Department and Idaho Fish and Game have begun to resolve the problem.

This year a project prospectus will be written, and Idaho Fish and Game will be working with private landowners to secure needed conservation easements.

A feasibility study will be completed to track animal movements and crossing locations and to summarize mortalities. Armed with this information, engineers can develop better designs and make this project “shovel ready” when funding comes available.

Elsewhere in southeast Idaho, the section of Interstate 15 between Pocatello and Inkom has been a hotspot for deer road mortality and a hot issue among residents, hunters and agencies trying to resolve the problem.

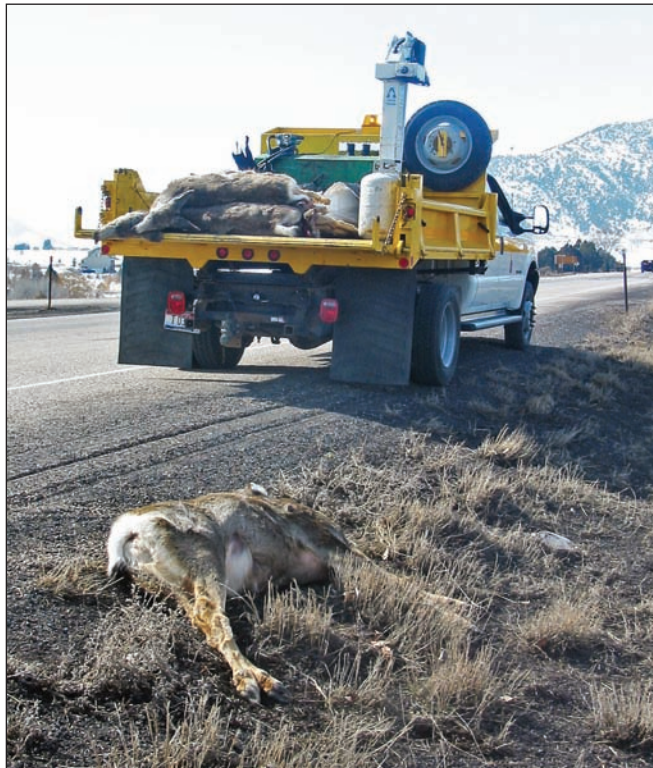
Idaho Fish and Game, the Idaho Transportation Department, Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation, Portneuf Valley Road Mortality Working Group, Bureau of Land Management, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife and individuals are working together on a new deer fence along 10 miles of I-15.

Work began on the fence in July 2009 with the installation of new wood and metal fence posts and in-line bracings along both sides of the interstate. A new woven wire top will be added to extend the height to eight feet.

The fence is not expected to hinder the movement of local and wintering deer herds. Though deer move across

the interstate, herds on either side are independent, and the fence will not block any critical migration corridors.

In addition, four existing underpasses continue to allow safe wildlife passage under the interstate. Ramps or “jump outs” will be installed along with the fence modifications to provide a means of



These mule deer were killed crossing U.S. 30.

IDFG photo

escape for deer that get on the interstate.

Fish and Game estimates that 100 or more deer may be saved annually on this section of road once the project is complete, and vehicle collisions will be reduced, improving public safety.

Along Highway 30 over Fish Creek Pass, Fish and Game has also been working on about five miles of the existing deer fence. Deer are finding ways through the old fence and onto the highway where they are at risk of vehicle collisions and present safety issues to motorists.

This existing wire fence needs improvements, including a new woven wire bottom, new eight-foot gates across private access points, new posts and reconstruction where necessary. The

woven wire to be used on this fence improvement effort came from a fence removal project completed by volunteers last fall near Stone.

The project is funded by Fish and Game’s Mule Deer Initiative program and the Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Foundation, and the work is being done by Fish and Game personnel, volunteers and the Skilled Labor Work crews from the Bannock Sheriff’s Department.

Other southeast Idaho projects include:

- Fencing along a four-mile section of Union Pacific Railroad track outside Dietrich was modified recently to allow improved deer and antelope passage. Deer and antelope train mortalities historically have been high along this section of railway. The existing fence actually trapped animals along the rail line. The fence has been rebuilt with a wildlife-friendly design to improve passage.

- A two-year study will begin this year to track big game movements across State Highway 23 in the Island Park area. This project will consist of putting GPS collars on elk and moose to track their movements across

the highway, identify crossing areas and monitor mortalities.

In some places, however, wildlife-vehicle collisions have diminished because the barrier created by a highway has reduced or eliminated the population. For example, mule deer migration near Black Pine was eliminated by Interstate 84 between the junction of I-86 and the Utah state line.

In addition, I-84/86, and its associated fencing has severed many north-south movements for pronghorn antelope throughout southern Idaho. This may be the case for mule deer, elk and other wildlife in some other areas as well.

*Jim Teare is the Mule Deer Initiative coordinator in the Southeast Region.*