

Windows to Wildlife



A day of viewing and adventure in Hells Canyon © Katherine Jones, Idaho Statesman

Looking for Bighorn Sheep in All the Right Places

Written by Frances Cassirer*

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Something about their strength and agility, the rugged places they inhabit, and their innate inquisitiveness makes bighorn sheep popular with just about everybody. These hardy animals are really cool. Whether you are a lucky hunter who has drawn one of the 80 some tags Idaho offers, somebody who likes to watch animals, or both, seeing bighorn sheep is a special experience. In Idaho, there are about 3,000 wild sheep with the largest populations in the central, eastern, and southwestern parts of the state. There are places you can see sheep from the road and even more can be seen in Idaho's spectacular river canyons, especially along the Snake, Salmon, and Owyhee Rivers. Here is a selection of accessible places to view wild sheep.

Eastern Idaho

There are a number of places to see bighorn sheep along roads around Salmon. In fact, highway mortality is a problem in some areas because sheep are not very savvy about traffic, so be careful driving along these stretches of road. Along Highway 93, north of Salmon, sheep can be seen year round between Tower Creek and Wagonhammer Creek. A viewing area with a scope and interpretive information is located at the Red Rock river access site. South of Salmon, bighorn sheep are seen year round along the lower ends of the Williams Creek and Williams Lake Roads west of Highway 93. Sheep often feed in fields on the west side of Highway 93, north of Challis between Fuller Gulch and Morgan Creek. South of Challis, another viewing site is located near the Buffalo Jump just off Highway 93 on Highway 75 and sheep are observed for several miles along this stretch of Highway 75.

Sheep are often seen along the Salmon River Road that leads to the put-in for rafting the Salmon River at Corn Creek. Down river, bighorn sheep are regularly seen on trips on the Main Salmon River.

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Southern Idaho

A side trip off of Highway 84 from Malta south on Highway 81 provides an opportunity to view bighorn sheep on the southern tip of Jim Sage Mountain along the Narrows Road adjacent to the Raft River. Sheep can be seen year round near two small buttes on the mountain and in the adjacent agricultural fields along the river on the south side of the road.

Central Idaho

Bighorn sheep can be seen from the Salmon River road above Riggins on the north side of the river between Allison Creek and Vinegar Creek. Good places to look are around Manning Bridge, across from French Creek, and around the mouth of Wind River. Around Lewiston, you can travel upriver along the Washington side of the Snake River from Asotin towards Heller Bar and nearly always spot bighorn sheep near cliffs across the river in Idaho. Binoculars are good to have for both of these areas. A river trip through Hells Canyon on the Snake River south of Lewiston is also a good way to see bighorn sheep.

Fall and early winter are great times to view wild sheep. In fall the rams move down and join the ewes for the breeding season. During this period, usually starting in October and lasting through December, the rams are challenging each other's dominance by shoving, kicking and of course the head to head bashing they're famous for. Ewes and lambs are also very active and playful during this time. Spring and early summer is another great time for watching small lambs growing up, running and playing in sheer cliffs, appearing weightless as they leap from rock to rock.

A few tips on finding and watching bighorn sheep: They tend to be found in open areas, close to rugged cliffs and they can blend in pretty well, so be patient. Although sheep can often be seen without special optics, you will see much more and be able to clearly watch their interesting behavior without disturbing them if you have binoculars. A spotting scope is even better. Once you spot one sheep, keep looking. Bighorn sheep live in groups and where there is one there are likely more. The longer you look, the more sheep you may see, as they seem to magically appear from behind rocks and ridges.

Thanks to Tom Keegan, Greg Painter, and Daryl Meints for information on viewing areas in southern and eastern Idaho.

Filling the Feeders

by Vicky Runnoe*, Conservation Education Supervisor, IDFG

“How come we feed the birds?” It was a question posed by my children when they were small. We had returned from visiting a friend whose yard was conspicuous by the absence of bird feeders. In contrast, our yard fairly bristled with feeders that bustled with avian activity. While I do not remember what I told my inquiring children on that particular day, that question has never gone away. Instead, it nudges me to wonder what it is about feeding the birds that captivates so many of us.

Many people simply like to see the birds. Identification of birds is not necessarily important, but their presence lends a wild beauty to the yard that brings enjoyment. A sunny goldfinch posing at the thistle feeder is a lovely sight indeed. Christmas cards frequently feature a cardinal on a snow-covered feeder, capturing on cardstock one of nature’s most elegant combinations. Birds are beautiful and having them grace our yards increases our pleasure in being outside.

A great many people feed the birds because they like to feel that they are helping these lovely creatures survive. Anyone who has enjoyed watching birds crowding around feeders on a cold winter day has probably felt the sense of satisfaction that such a scene conveys. Our feelings are reinforced when we read that feeding the birds can make a difference, particularly during severe winter weather. Further bolstering our confidence is research that indicates that the presence of feeders aided the northward range expansion of the northern cardinal and, more recently, the Carolina Wren. Closer to home, we learn that feeders help cold-sensitive American Goldfinches tolerate Idaho’s winters, making this bird more common during the winter months than they were in the past.



Bird feeding lets you get to know your wild neighbors. Identifying feathered visitors is great fun and can reveal the incredible variety of birds that share your yard. Knowing their identity becomes important. Field guides and binoculars are stationed on counters near the best viewing window. Seeing a new bird is a puzzle to be solved and tackled with enthusiasm. Knowing your backyard birds adds to the enjoyment of feeding.

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For others, bird feeding is an introduction to phenology, the study of periodic biological events. Migration, for example, is obvious at the feeders with the annual changing of the avian guard. It is fascinating to keep track of which birds arrive in your yard and when. Several years-worth of such observations provides a vibrant picture of the annual cycle of migration occurring right outside your door.

Bird feeding also provides an opportunity for data collection. From the Great Backyard Bird Count to Project FeederWatch, large numbers of people enjoy adding to information being gathered about North American bird populations in winter. Hummingbirds Home is another project where birders can gather backyard data that will inform current and future research, eBird has become a valuable database that birders can use to record observations of birds in the backyard and beyond, and the tried and true “yard list” remains a perfect way to record the backyard birds simply for your own pleasure.

I suppose I can now tell my children that I feed the birds for all these reasons. But I would also tell them that through it all runs a powerful “something” that I cannot quite define. It is the great pleasure I feel when the song sparrow returns to the yard in the autumn or the cheer I feel when filling the feeders to the tune of the local band of chickadees, commenting on my tardiness. Socio-biologist E.O. Wilson would call it biophilia, the innate human desire to connect with other living things. We can see it all around us from the connection we feel with our pets to the awed murmurs of wildlife watchers; in the hunter who pauses to give thanks for the harvest; and in the unmistakable look of wonder on the face of a child. We feed the birds out of a desire to connect more deeply with the natural world. Bird feeding allows us to nurture this very human desire right in our own backyards.



Help keep bears safe around feeders!

Most people know that “a fed bear is a dead bear.” This means that if bears get accustomed to human food, or food found near human houses, they usually need to be lethally removed from the area. You can prevent this by cleaning up birdfeeders, apples, and other fruit sources, compost garbage, and pet food if you observe bears in your area. If you live in an area shared with bears, you might consider bird feeding only in the winter, when the birds need it most and when the bears are inactive. Remember feeding wildlife, other than birds, is not recommended. If food set out for birds is being eaten by other wildlife, move the food to a safer location or discontinue feeding.



All photos by © Steve Byland/Shutterstock

Fall Wildlife Events

Boise WaterShed

11818 West Joplin Rd., Boise; (208) 489-1284

www.cityofboise.org/Bee/WaterShed/Home/index.aspx

October 10 - WaterShed Watch

Be a water quality scientist for a day and diagnose the health of the Boise River! No experience is needed to participate. Individuals and groups are assigned locations throughout the watershed from Lucky Peak to Caldwell, and a trained water quality expert will lead the group in monitoring activities. All ages are welcome. Register by October 1. Visit <http://www.boisewatershedwatch.org> for more information.

October 17 - WaterShed Weekend: Slither, Slime, and Stink!

Join us between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. to celebrate Fall in Boise with music, hay rides, yummy local food, live animals and more! Get up close and personal with some live reptiles in the theater with Reptile Adventures! Create beautiful Fall-themed arts and crafts, have fun with our slime boxes, and take a fun harvest photo! At 10:30, enjoy some toe-tapping Idaho folk songs by performer John Thomsen. Take a fun hay ride tour on the outskirts of the wastewater treatment plant at 10:30, 11:15 and 12:00! Tours limited to first 25 people, weather-permitting. FREE admission!

November 21 - WaterShed Weekend: Map Mania!

Celebrate GIS in an Aloha way between 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. for a day of mapping adventures! Play map games for cool prizes, make and eat your own tropical island cookie map, make your own clay volcano, and visualize earth in 3D with an interactive topographic map! Young children will enjoy the 'Young Geographer' station. Play our Idaho map toss game or try your hand at digitizing. Melt away the cold with a Hawaiian backdrop photo opportunity. Brought to you by the Southwest Idaho GIS Users Group. A wastewater treatment plant tour is scheduled at 11:30 a.m. Closed-toe shoes are required for the tour. Free. No registration is required.

December 19 - WaterShed Weekend: Carols, Cones, and Conifers

Jingle all the way to the Boise WaterShed from 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. for "tree"-rific holiday décor and gift making! Make and decorate swags out of fresh greenery, decorate pine cones and other natural ornaments for your tree, and make wrapping paper and bags, plus more holiday crafts! Enjoy carols provided by a local choir, free pictures with Santa and Mrs. Claus, as well as tasty treats for all! Note: No wastewater treatment plant tour today. Free. No registration is required.

Foothills Learning Center

3188 Sunset Peak Rd., Boise; (208) 514-3755

www.cityofboise.org/Bee/Foothills/index.aspx

October 7 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Migration

9-10 a.m.; No pre-registration; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Free! Where do our fair weather feathered friends go as winter approaches? Discover winter ranges for Idaho species. Some birds are local migrants and others are long distance migrants. Learn about conservation issues and opportunities in Mexico, Central and South America.

October 14 - Sunset Series: Learn About the Proposed Foothills and River Levy

7-8:30 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Learn more about the upcoming levy and get your questions answered in this evening program in the heart of the Boise foothills. We will have a panel of professionals including representatives from land managing agencies like the BLM and Forest Service, the City of Boise and more. We will talk about what the City has been able to accomplish with levy funds in the past, and what we hope to do to support wildlife, habitat, and clean water in the future.

October 15 - Composting Presentation

6-7:30 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Learn how to reduce waste and improve your garden's soil through home composting with Jim Hall Foothills Learning Center staff and Dave Hopkins, University of Idaho Master Composter. Even if you don't have a yard, we will teach you how to compost with worms, a great option for apartment dwellers and non-gardeners alike!

October 21 - Conservation & Education Series: Celebrating Boise's Open Space!

9-10:30 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Join Sara Arkle, the Foothills and Open Space Manager with the City of Boise to hear more about your backyard and future plans the city has for your open space. Afterwards, let's go for a hike! Join Lana Weber with Idaho Conservation League for a walk up Hulls Gulch to learn about the history of the trails and what you can do to protect this asset.

Fall Wildlife Events

Foothills Learning Center...Continued

November 4 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Winter Bird Feeding

9-10 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Free! Interested in strategies as to how to support winter resident birds? Join us for this session where you will get recommendations about the best bird seed and feeder choices for the birds in your backyard. Having difficulty figuring out who is who at the feeder? Terry will provide helpful identification tips.

November 11 - Sunset Series: Critical Habitat- The importance of the Boise Foothills to Winter Wildlife

7-8:30 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Come and learn about the importance of our Boise Foothills and open space to wildlife. Krista Muller, Boise River Wildlife Management Area manager and regional biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, will talk about the importance of the Wildlife Management Area to wintering mule deer and elk. She will also tell us about the SH-21 wildlife underpass and how its creation has helped these animals. We'll look at maps and discuss the critical connections between high and low elevation habitats and hear about the inherent management challenges and successes.

November 14 - Second Saturday Series: Mammals on the Move

10 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. What are the deer and elk doing this time of year? Where will you find them now and where might you find them in the dead of winter? Come and learn about the movements and local migrations of our four-legged fauna and the importance of our Boise foothills to local wildlife. Our speaker will be Krista Muller, Boise River Wildlife Management Area manager and regional biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

November 18 - Conservation & Education Series: Colony Collapse Disorder with the Treasure Valley Beekeepers

9-10:30 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. This presentation will take an in-depth look at all the known elements contributing to the massive decline of honey bee populations in the United States. We will also discuss what can be done to help reduce the problem and help honeybees survive. Since much of the food grown in our country and around the world relies on honeybees for pollination, this is a critically important topic for all of us as we consider the future health of agriculture and food systems both locally and globally.

December 2 - Birding Series with Terry Rich: Bird Populations

9-10 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Bird books and binoculars are available to borrow. Free! So how are bird populations doing? This session will provide information about bird population monitoring and population trends. Who collects data? How is data collected? Where is it kept? What does it tell us? How can you contribute? You'll learn about ways to participate in data collection events like the Christmas Bird Count, Big Backyard Bird Count, Breeding Bird Survey and eBird.

December 16 - Conservation & Education Series: All About Snow

9-10:30 a.m.; No pre-registration; free; please leave pets at home. Join Kerry McClay, SnowSchool Program Director with Winter Wildlands Alliance and Marie Kellner, Water Associate with Idaho Conservation League, to learn all about the science of snow and how snowmelt affects our water supply in the valley. If conditions allow, we will step outside and have some time for a hands on experiment!

Great gray owl © Mike Morrison

Attention Grouse Hunters

Your information is important to us to assess our management of the WMA and the quality of your hunt.

Wings from upland game birds provide information about the age-structure of the population. The Idaho Fish and Game would like wings of grouse harvested on and around the Tex Creek WMA.

Please take a wing envelope from this kiosk, fill it out, and return it at the end of your hunt whether you harvested birds or not.



Wing Barrels, A Collection of Information

by Vicky Runnoe*, Conservation Education Supervisor, IDFG

If you spend any time driving around Idaho's back roads, you might come across seemingly abandoned barrels at intersections. Careful examination will reveal a Fish and Game logo on the outside and possibly a bunch of bird wings inside. What, you might think, is up with that? These are, appropriately enough, wing barrels. Upland bird hunters are encouraged to place wings from harvested birds in the barrels, which are then collected and examined by biologists at a "wing bee." A great deal of information can be gathered about the bird as well as species population status. For example, feathers will reveal the species, sex and age of the bird. The ratio between juvenile and adult wings can provide a snapshot of the population status of that species in the area. A close examination of the wing of an adult female can even tell if she reproduced in the spring.

Feathers are treasure troves of information for biologists. Feather wear, feather molt patterns, feather colors and patterns are all clues to the age of birds. In some species, the variation in feathering between different aged birds is striking. Birders rely on feather colors and patterns to identify the bird they are viewing. For the birds themselves, feathers are exquisite adaptations for survival in habitats around the globe and the means by which they slip into the skies above, catching our eyes and making us wish that we too, could fly.

A wing barrel at Tex Creek WMA © Jeff Knetter, IDFG
Sharp-tailed grouse and spruce grouse © (CC-BY-SA) Tatiana Gettelman on Flickr CC
Ruffed grouse © (CC-BY-SA) Eugene Beckes on Flickr CC



Creating Bee Habitat

by Michael Lucid*, Regional Wildlife Biologist, IDFG- Panhandle Region

“I just felt like I did something good for the world” a friend told me as we watched an osprey disembowel a fish high above her Sandpoint home this summer. She let her oregano bloom and had been rewarded with 12 different bee species on a single plant. She couldn’t identify which species of bees they were but that didn’t matter. What mattered was she created habitat for a group of pollinators of which many are declining throughout their range.

It’s easy to provide habitat to meet bees simple needs. Bees need flowers to forage, a place to nest, and to not be exposed to pesticides. To make your yard bee friendly you would first identify and protect existing habitat. Determine which flowers you have and when they bloom. Then look for potential bee nest sites. About 70% of North American bees nest in the ground either digging their own tunnels or using abandoned rodent burrows. Most of the remaining bees nest in wood tunnels such as abandoned beetle nests in standing snags. To find bee nests look for bees flying low and slow in areas where flowers are not present.



Western Bumblebees (*Bombus occidentalis*) were once common in the western US but are now hard to find.
© Shannon Ehlers, IDFG.

Once you’ve determined the pollinator habitat already present you can make a plan to provide more. If there is a time in the summer where no flowers are blooming in your yard plant species which will fill the gap. A variety of flowers which bloom all summer is ideal and native plants are best. To create ground nesting habitat you can clear small areas of warm and dry ground. Tunnel nesters don’t necessarily need a whole snag to nest and you can be creative in ways to provide small wooden nesting tunnels. A bundle of bamboo stems stashed in a warm dry spot can be effective. If you want to get serious you could even erect a log and drill a hole in it to ‘create’ a snag.

As you get the garden cleaned up for the season be thinking of ways you can increase pollinator habitat next spring. If you’re serious about making some bee friendly changes check out The Xerces Society website to purchase a great book ‘Attracting Native Pollinators’. So start small but dream big. A new plant and nest box next garden season could turn into an entire pollinator garden in a few years. You may not be able to identify all of the species you attract, but it won’t matter, because you can feel the same joy my friend felt of “doing something good for the world.”

Thank You for Your Support!



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Canada Goose © Mike Morrison



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