



THE DIFFERENCE MAKER

By Clint Wirick

After unnecessarily hiking in several miles, I sat under the nearest mahogany for a hot meal of Top Ramen via the backpacking stove I lug around. I say 'hiked unnecessarily' because I could have driven an ATV up a ridge within a few yards of where I now sat in the draw. This 'unnecessary' hike was about 11 miles round trip, I know because I've done it several times. Walking the draws below ATV riddled ridges offers a perspective not seen from above. On these unnecessary hikes, I often see many mule deer out of sight from the two-tracks above. I know this too because many of those ATV hunters tell me they've seen very few deer when our paths cross. I just grin and think back to all the deer, including bucks, they drive above.

Now it was noon, and the ATV chatter had all but disappeared. Sitting below this mountain mahogany, I slurp wet fifty cent noodles across my chin. In that moment, something moves 400 yards below me. With binos up, it's obvious the movement is two bucks also eating lunch...

This area is extremely important ecologically, archeologically, geologically, historically, and economically. It is the eastern edge of the Great Basin before rising to the Colorado Plateau in southern Utah. This part of the Great Basin is characterized by sagebrush in the lower elevations, aspen and pine in the upper elevations, and a mixture of these plant communities in between. The Utah Division of Wildlife mapped this area as CRITICAL mule deer habitat. Only the best-of-the-best

and most important habitats receive this designation. This general season area produces a lot of mule deer and some really nice bucks over the years.

You might say this area is CRITICAL rural community habitat too. Tourism, hunting, fishing, ranching, farming, camping, and hiking all provide economic opportunities to surrounding towns. Having a healthy landscape is as important for the humans as much as it is for the animals.

Given the extreme value of these wild acres, sportsmen, agencies, grazing permittees, non-government organizations, and landowners decided to work together and be proactive, not reactive. Maintaining good habitat is much easier, and cheaper, than trying to fix habitat once it's broken.

Here are a few things habitat partners have been doing the last two years:

SAGEBRUSH HABITAT

Simply stated – mule deer don't exist without sagebrush landscapes. This habitat includes grasses, flowers, and other shrubs that make a sagebrush landscape what it is. The biggest issue in our sagebrush was the spread of juniper and pinyon. If you haven't noticed, juniper and pinyon trees are being cut down in the West. These trees have vastly spread in the last century because humans have been putting out the fires that used to keep them at bay. Once they get in sagebrush, they become increasingly thick over the decades until all you have are junipers, pinyon, and dirt below. What we did was cut down these trees where sagebrush, grasses, and flowers were still thriving. In other thicker areas where very little sagebrush, grasses, and flowers were, we had a plane fly in seed and then used machinery to shred the juniper and pinyon trees. We needed to preserve the good sagebrush habitat and restore some other areas. We didn't get rid of all the trees though, we left some for cover and travel corridors. Not every juniper is a bad juniper. Juniper and pinyon woodlands are an important part of diverse landscapes too.

SPRINGS AND WETLANDS

This is an arid landscape so any habitat where water is present is beyond critical for all wildlife. In sagebrush country, nearly 70 percent of wet habitat is privately owned, this means working with private landowners is of the utmost importance. Partners worked with landowners to protect spring sources by building natural-looking cedar post and lodge pole fencing. Ironically, this spring protection will also benefit local amphibians as well as a super rare snail species that only occurs in these springs. The spring head protection will also ensure water flowing below to the grassy wet meadows that feed every kind of wildlife you can imagine.

MOUNTAIN MEADOW HABITAT

A very important part of higher elevation sagebrush/forested habitats are the meadows made up of nutrient-rich flowers and grasses. These meadows are the flatter spots, where aspen stands are on adjacent slopes and sagebrush creates

a frame surrounding the dark green grassy vegetation. The meadows are made up of grasses and flowers because runoff slows down here and soaks into the soil. A common issue these meadows face is when erosion starts and creates small gullies anywhere from one to several inches. This drops the water table in the soil and the grasses die out and brush takes over. On this project, we identified those areas on public and private land and hand built small rock structures in these gullies. These small rock structures slow water and catch soil while building the water table and meadows back up. Again, these grassy, slightly wetter habitats are of extreme importance to the health of the landscape and wildlife. Losing them is a huge strike against wildlife.

FORESTED HABITAT

Aspen habitat is some of the most diverse and ecologically rich habitat on the earth. Both plant life and wildlife abundance are as high and higher than in any other habitat type. To say aspen habitat is important is an understatement. A common issue across aspen habitat is our fire suppression over the last century. Now conifer trees are choking aspen habitat out. The fact is, aspen evolved with fire. Fire creates a blank canvas in which aspen communities can thrive. Fire also stimulates aspen roots to send up new shoots. Without fire, fir and pine trees become thick, outgrow, outcompete, and shade the ground



Erosional gullies will move through critical meadow habitat. This dries the meadows up and becomes thick brush. Stopping this erosion is important for wildlife.



Hand built rock structures are commonly used to control erosion in meadows. They are low cost-high reward conservation practice.



Here this structure is done. It will stop the erosion moving up valley and catch sediment and help fill in the gully. Several of these were built around this valley bottom.





Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick

This Valley bottom is slowly infilling with juniper trees. Over time, these trees will outcompete important sagebrush habitat.



Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick

This photo is the same valley bottom after a chainsaw crew cut the juniper trees and left them laying in place. This will keep important sagebrush habitat intact and available to wildlife. Also notice the important spring and meadow habitat this will help conserve.

creating an environment where aspen die off and so do the grasses, shrubs, and flowers.

To fix this problem we need fire as a tool. Over the last couple years, partners have identified areas where fire will benefit aspen and can be safely ignited. Burn plans are in place and over the next couple years, prescribed fires will be lit to reset the ecology of these aspen stands.

CONSERVATION DREAM TEAM

To implement the conservation work described above, partners are spending in the ballpark of **\$1.8 million dollars** on more than **17,000 acres** of this critical habitat over a two-year period. Yeah... that's a pile of money that no one person, program, or agency has. It's a team effort with funding coming from the Mule Deer Foundation, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management, Safari Club International, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, Utah Division of Wildlife, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration, and private landowners.

If you've ever wondered what a conservation dream team roster would look like, well that's it.

The collaboration and partnerships don't stop now either. More work is planned for 2020 and each year conservation partners will be evaluating how they can increase the conservation footprint for people and wildlife alike.



Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick

Conservation practices go beyond big game. Here biologist are surveying springs in the project area. Project work will conserve super rare snail species, amphibians, birds, and big game while protecting water quantity and quality.

.... One of the bucks was a bigger 3-point with some little stickers. I'm a sucker for cool 3-points so I knew I wanted him first. I gathered my open-sighted muzzle-loader and backpack and headed north into the next draw where I hoped to get below them so they wouldn't wind me as the breeze was going downhill. When I got to the draw the wind shifted so I ran back to my lunch spot and glassed back down. Whew, they were both still feeding,

unaware of the 250-grain sabot ready to head their way. This time, I hustled uphill then down the opposite draw. I popped out of the draw, checked wind and it was good, no bucks though.

Just as I thought I had blown it, they fed out from behind some oak and pinyon. Bam, I had played it perfect. I crawled forward, sat down, put my .50 caliber muzzy on shooting sticks and watched and waited. When my buck went broadside, I put the iron sight on him and gently squeezed the trigger. As the smoke cleared only one buck was going over the hill.

There was something extra satisfying about harvesting a buck in a landscape you actively participate in conserving. As I looked over my buck and across this ecosystem of federal, state, and private land, I could see the open sagebrush grasslands where junipers had been thinned to preserve critical sagebrush habitat. I could see the springs across the valley where lodge pole fences were built protecting important water sources. Behind and above me were the eroding meadows where rock structures were being built to restore and expand grass meadow habitat. Past that were the choked-out dwindling aspen stands planned for burning to bring aspen and a diverse plant understory back. And across the valley was the seeding and juniper shredding project to restore grasses, shrubs, and flowering plants.



Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick



Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick

A buck rutting does in the habitat project area.



Photo: USFWS/Clint Wirrick

The authors buck moments before stalking in and harvesting this cool 3-point with his muzzleloader.

Author and biologist with a muzzleloader buck taken on public lands in part of the habitat project area. This buck is a special buck because of all the relationships with conservation partners forged and the connections made to the land while implementing habitat conservation in the area.

Harvesting a mature buck on public land has a special sense of accomplishment. This buck was different though. I felt more connected to the animals, the land, the people, and the place. The relationships forged while working on conservation made it different. The sense of pride conservation partners demonstrated when working here made it different.

Time spent writing project proposals and asking for conservation money made it different. The rough truck rides down pitted dirt roads with landowners discussing goals and visions made it different. The trust developed among project partners made it different.

THIS BUCK WAS JUST DIFFERENT!



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