

Mother Nature's help for mule deer



Two mule deer on late season snow, photo by NDOW personnel

We can spend lots of time and money doing population studies, habitat rehabilitation, and predator control but nothing helps our mule deer populations as much as a year of good precipitation. This year's snow depths and spring rains will undoubtedly benefit Elko County deer throughout this year.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies represent wildlife professionals from 17 states and four Canadian provinces. Their web site states "the amount and timing of precipitation affects plant growth and quality, deer diet and nutrition, the ability of a habitat to support a population of deer, distribution and movement of deer, predation and management."

Mule deer eat primarily shrubs, although they will browse forbs and grasses. A good water year allows them to feed primarily on more digestible, nutrient-rich shrubs, compared to a drought year when they must make do with lower nutrient foods. Drought years can delay when their sexually maturity and does' ability to produce milk. Good water years mean larger fawns and more survivors during that all important first winter.

A good water year allows smaller home ranges for deer since they do not have to travel as far to find adequate meals. Next winter, it will also mean better cover and more critical shrubs like bitterbrush.

Ken Gray is the Regional Game Supervisor for Elko's Nevada Department of Wildlife office. He states "The bottom line is good precipitation, especially to this year's extent, affects the whole gamut of a mule deer's life cycle." We had good precipitation during the last two years but it came during late spring. This year's precipitation has occurred from last fall through now, benefitting this spring's grass, forbs and shrubs.

The last population surge for mule deer occurred during the 1980s and was accompanied by three to four years of good precipitation. We probably will not see such a surge today due to the amount of deer habitat lost to fires between the 1980s and today.

Good precipitation literally allows the land to carry more deer. During the last several years, it has been thought that Elko County was near or at carrying capacity, carrying about as many deer as can be accommodated. At least while this good precipitation continues, we may see increases in deer populations.

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