

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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WINTER TOLL ON WILDLIFE IS HIGH IN WESTERN STATES

The winter of 1978-79 has been a hard one for wildlife in Western States and some other parts of the country, an informal survey by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows.

Thousands of deer and elk starved to death in western and southwestern Colorado where 4 feet of snow has fallen so far this winter. Officials predicted that the State could lose as many as 60 percent of its 350,000 deer and 30 to 40 percent of its 125,000 elk, compared with normal winter loss of about 10 percent. The State conducted a massive emergency feeding program in the hope of cutting losses, but the final toll won't be known until April.

A bighorn sheep herd near Gunnison, Colorado, was reduced to a remnant when heavy snow and cold hit during its breeding season in December. At least 150 out of an estimated herd of 200 died, mostly from bacterial pneumonia triggered by the combined stress of breeding season and bad weather. Officials say the herd will probably have to be built up again with animals brought in from other herds.

Hungry deer and elk damaged farmers' haystacks in Wyoming, which experienced an early winter with plenty of snow and extreme cold. Wyoming officials usually feed elk in winter because human developments have displaced elk from valleys where they used to feed during cold weather. This year the State had to feed antelope as well. Some antelope herds are believed to have been reduced by 30 percent or more from starvation and road kills. Other losses were caused by fences and other developments that prevented the antelope from migrating to their historic winter range and crowded them into areas too small to provide enough food. Dogs killed some antelope wintering near populated areas.

In Nebraska, employees at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge had to feed hay to elk for the first time in 15 years. Usually, wind blows ridges bare of snow, exposing vegetation upon which the animals can graze, but this year a thick crust kept snow on the ground. Very young and aged animals were unable to paw the snow away to feed, and more elk than usual died as a result of malnutrition and wind chill temperatures of -65 degrees. The hardy buffalo did quite well, however, according to refuge manager Robert Ellis. "They just put their noses down and root along like a snow plow."

In the East, the biggest snowstorm in more than 50 years paralyzed Maryland and Virginia in late February but did not have much effect on wildlife because rising temperatures quickly melted the snow.

The storm meant trouble for black ducks in New Jersey, however. Seven to 10 days of sub-zero temperatures in early February froze the coastal marshes where the birds were feeding. Such conditions would have normally

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moved the birds to fields to feed, but the big storm covered the fields with snow. Black ducks began dying of starvation and New Jersey officials had to feed them corn for about a week after the storm. Fortunately, high tides associated with the solar eclipse and warmer temperatures once again made water and food available in the marshes. Brant, which stayed in New Jersey and starved during the past two winters, did better this year because most migrated to Virginia.

In Pennsylvania, hundreds if not thousands of deer were reported to have fallen on ice, sometimes sliding to their deaths over cliffs or on to highways. Many of the fallen deer were injured or had difficulty rising on the ice and died from shock.

In parts of the Midwest, quail, pheasant, rabbit, and resident songbird populations are reported to have been reduced by severe winters for the last 3 years. Missouri quail have suffered tremendously from heavy snow and a farming practice of plowing crops down in the fall, which puts the quail's food source under the snow. Missouri officials are urging people to plant more food and cover plots for wildlife this spring.

Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin all reported worse than average winters this year. Deep snow and cold have stressed deer and in some areas handicapped deer and some of last year's fawns have died. Officials in these States say losses may rise unless spring comes early.

Deer often have a tough time in winter because supplementary feeding can do them more harm than good. Unlike elk, which do well on hay, deer need microorganisms from woody plants for digestion and have difficulty digesting hay fed to them during winter emergencies. Often they die from bowel compaction. Limited success has been achieved by feeding a mixture of alfalfa hay and special pellets distributed over wide areas so deer cannot eat too much at once. Some States knock over trees and bushes to provide natural browse for deer.

Things are not all bad, though. New England reported a milder winter than last year with no severe wildlife problems. In Florida, a mild winter has been good news for the endangered manatee, an aquatic mammal which is susceptible to pneumonia and other ailments when water gets cold. During the frigid winter of 1976-77, 38 manatees died from the effects of cold weather. This winter, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists reported only six manatee deaths, most of which were caused by human activities rather than weather.

Although this winter's losses may be severe in some areas, biologists emphasize that wildlife populations have been surviving harsh winters for eons. Winter losses are one of nature's ways of limiting the number of animals to the level that the habitat can support. The deaths of some animals reduces competition and increases the availability of food for survivors. Given good habitat conditions, most wildlife populations will recover from a winter of high losses within a few years.

But as more wildlife habitat is destroyed by development, winter losses in future years are expected to go higher as animals try to survive in more restricted ranges.