

Protecting habitat critical to survival of mule deer

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

Mike Piercy was readying his Truckee home for winter one afternoon when he “pretty much tripped over” a strange-looking device on the ground.

It was a calling card from deer No. 79897.

With mule deer numbers dwindling, biologists have been tracking deer and studying their annual Reno-Truckee migration to identify critical habitat that must be protected to maintain the herd.

Deer No. 79897 was tranquilized by biologists on Reno’s Peavine Peak in January 2010 and fitted with a satellite collar. The doe sported the device throughout the winter and in the spring as it wandered to its summer digs in the Truckee area.

The next fall, the collar accompanied the doe as it scampered down the Truckee River Canyon to the Reno area to weather winter’s snows, then again as the deer crossed the state line back into California as the seasons turned. Ultimately, the collar dropped off as it was designed to do.

Piercy picked it up, recognizing the device as a tracking collar for wildlife. As requested by a stamped notice, he dropped by the Nevada Department of Wildlife and asked if they wanted it back.

They did. Data later downloaded from the collar – which had malfunctioned so it couldn’t be located – was incorporated into a study conducted by biologists from Nevada and

California. The scientists were monitoring deer that migrate twice each year through the Truckee River Canyon, with 25 does collared and their movements tracked.

Among the conclusions of the \$170,000 study: These mule deer make their Truckee-Reno migration at about the same time each year, with departure dates only days apart, and travel very close to the same route every time.

“They’ve got their path dialed in,” said Mike Cox, big game biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife. “The take-home message is that these mule deer have an innate and learned behavior to use the same route time after time.”

Why? The answer is relatively simple, Cox said. They do it because it works.

The deer take roughly the same route because it’s easiest, minimizing expenditure of energy, and because they know where there is forage to feed upon, Cox said. Taking the same path may also help reduce the risk of being ambushed by a predator.

Read the whole story