

Brutal winter has been tough on animals

By Andrew Selsky, AP

Antelope injured while falling on ice. Horses stranded in snowy mountains. Cougars descending from their wilderness lairs to forage in a town.

It's been a beastly winter in the American West, not just for people but for animals too. One storm after another has buried much of the region in snow, and temperatures have often stayed below freezing, endangering a rich diversity of wild animals.

In southern Idaho, about 500 pronghorn antelope tried to cross the frozen Snake River earlier this month at Lake Walcott, but part of the herd spooked and ran onto a slick spot where they slipped and fell. Idaho Fish and Game workers rescued six of the stranded pronghorn, but 10 were killed by coyotes and 20 had to be euthanized because of injuries suffered when they fell down.

Another 50 pronghorn were found dead in the small western Idaho city of Payette after they nibbled on Japanese yew, a landscaping shrub that's toxic. Tough winter conditions have forced some wildlife to feed on the plant in urban areas.

Heavy snow has forced Idaho's fish and game department to begin emergency feeding of big game animals in southern Idaho.

In eastern Oregon, state wildlife officials are feeding elk, but the weather makes accessing them difficult. When highways and the Interstate are closed because of the snow, the workers must still get to the rural feeding stations where they feed the elk alfalfa hay.

"When you run feed programs, you can't take a day off because

of bad weather. If you take a day off, the elk wander away," said Nick Myatt, district manager of La Grande office of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Wandering elk tend to feed on haystacks that ranchers have left for their cattle, and congregate in low-elevation sites along Interstate 84 in northeastern Oregon, where cars have hit them in recent weeks, Myatt said.

In western Wyoming, supplemental feeding of elk wintering on the National Elk Refuge near Jackson started the first week of January, three weeks earlier than usual because heavier than normal snowfall buried the natural forage the thousands of elk graze on at the 24,700-acre refuge.

Mule deer, which are smaller than elk, have not only been prevented by a layer of ice from pawing through powdery snow to reach their natural forage, but that ice also makes them easier prey. The deer break through the ice and stumble while animals like coyotes can stay on top of the surface.

"With conditions that we have, we do anticipate higher mule deer mortality," Myatt said.

John Stephenson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said wolves are also more agile in deep snow than deer or elk because their lighter bodies and big feet help them stay on the surface better. Stephenson said he is amazed that a wolf he's tracking south of Crater Lake, Oregon, traveled roughly 30 miles through 6-foot-deep snow in less than 12 hours recently.

Some animal lovers have been taking matters into their own hands by feeding deer, but experts warn they will likely do more harm than good and could end up killing the animals.

"What they're feeding the deer is an improper diet," said Rick Hargrave, a spokesman for the Oregon wildlife department. "They have a complex digestive tract, and they require the

right mix of crude protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals.”

The deep snow likely caused a group of normally elusive cougars to come to the woodsy community of La Pine in recent days, where they preyed on pets and chickens, the Oregon wildlife department said. Authorities on Thursday killed a fifth cougar in the central Oregon town. Four others were shot dead on Saturday and Monday, raising an outcry among some conservationists.

Amid the grim news, there were some bright spots.

In central Idaho, volunteers earlier this month rescued a horse stranded on a snowy mountain by tranquilizing it, placing it in a sling and then attaching it on a long line to a helicopter. It was flown, dangling from the belly of the chopper to safety. A second stranded horse was not found and is believed to have died.

The experience was emotional for the rescuers.

“You get your adrenaline going and everyone gets all excited and choked up,” Robert Bruno, president of Idaho Horse Rescue, told KTVB-TV of Boise.

In California, some of the heaviest snow and rain in decades should prove a life-saver for threatened native salmon, whose numbers have dropped during the state’s five-year drought that is now easing.

Flooding this winter has greatly expanded the bug-rich wetlands where young salmon can eat and grow strong on their way to the ocean, said John McManus of the Golden Gate Salmon Association, a fishing-industry group.

“They eat like little pigs, and they love it,” McManus said. “It’s a little smorgasbord for them.”

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