

Resource Management Planning Efforts on the Bureau of Land Management's Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area¹

John Sullivan²

In 1993, Congress passed Public Law 103-64, which established the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (NCA) for the purpose of conserving, protecting, and enhancing raptor populations and habitats. The NCA encompasses over 485,000 acres of public land along 130 km of the Snake River in southwest Idaho, and is located within a 30-minute drive of Boise and about half of Idaho's population. The area supports one of the highest densities of non-colonial nesting raptors in the world (USDI 1979b, Olendorff et al. 1989), and has been popular with raptor enthusiasts since the 1940s. Over 700 raptor pairs representing 16 species nest in the NCA each spring, with an additional eight species migrating through the area during various seasons. The increasing human population in the area has caused a number of recreation-related impacts to the NCA. The greatest impacts, however, have been caused by natural and human-caused wildfires.

Since 1980, about 280,000 acres of Wyoming Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata wyomingensis*)/bunchgrass habitat have burned at least once (fig. 1). About 60,000 of these acres have burned as many as four times during that period. Most of the burned areas have been replaced with exotic annual grasses and weeds, particularly cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) (USDI 1996). Because cheatgrass forms a continuous carpet of fine fuel that ignites easily and burns rapidly (Pyke 2000), the widespread conversion to this annual grass type has resulted in larger and more frequent wildfires (USDI 1996). The increase in the fire cycle keeps native shrubs from reestablishing and promotes the spread and persistence of cheatgrass and other exotics. Wildfire-related shrub loss in the NCA may have adversely affected Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) by reducing the NCA's carrying capacity for Golden Eagles (Kochert et al. 1999). The number of Golden Eagle pairs occupying nesting territories in the NCA declined significantly from 1971 to 1994 (Steenhof et al. 1997). The number of Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) pairs found on long-term survey segments within the NCA also declined significantly from 1976 to 1997 (Steenhof et al. 1999).

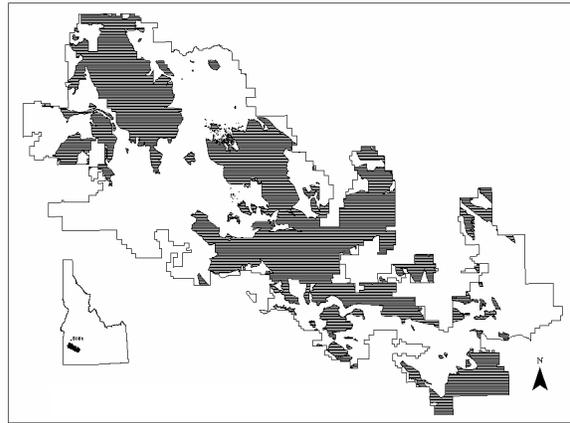


Figure 1— Snake River Birds of Prey Fire History 1980 through 2001.

Golden Eagles prefer to eat jackrabbits (Steenhof and Kochert 1988), and Knick and Dyer (1997) documented a decline in Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*) abundance in the NCA from 1971-1992. As a result, some of the Golden Eagle pairs have enlarged the size of their home ranges to accommodate different foraging needs (Kochert et al. 1999), which has reduced the NCA's ability to support numbers of Golden Eagle nesting pairs by about 15 percent over the past 30 years. Numbers of Prairie Falcon nesting pairs have also shown significant declines in some areas of the Snake River Canyon, but have remained fairly stable in other areas. Steenhof et al. (1999) showed that declines in Prairie Falcon nesting pairs from 1976-1997 occurred mainly in the west-central area of the canyon (fig. 2). However, the only area that showed a decline in 2002 was the area around the Simplot Grandview feedlot (fig. 2) (K. Steenhof, pers. comm.). The NCA's Prairie Falcons, which may have represented up to 5 percent of the world's population (USDI 1979a), feed primarily on Piute (formerly Townsend's) Ground Squirrels (*Spermophilus mollis idahoensis*). The broadscale change to an annual grassland has caused ground squirrel populations to become less stable (Yensen et al. 1992, Van Horne et al. 1997), and population numbers annually fluctuate much more than before. Other land uses in the NCA, such as livestock grazing, military training, and off-road vehicle use, also are suspected of affecting raptor populations because of their impacts on vegetation, but the escalating fire cycle, the associated loss of native plant

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²National Conservation Area Manager, Bureau of Land Management, Lower Snake River District, 3948 Development Avenue, Boise, ID 83705. E-mail: john_sullivan@blm.gov.

communities, and spread of annual weeds is believed to have had the most significant and profound influence.

In August, 2001, the NCA initiated the development of a Resource Management Plan (RMP), which is expected to take about four years to complete. The RMP is the BLM's umbrella planning document that will outline the desired future resource conditions that BLM hopes to attain over the next 20 years. Issues that will be addressed in the plan have been finalized, and BLM will now begin development of various management alternatives that will allow the agency to move towards the desired future resource conditions. BLM will use scientific data gathered from a number of research and monitoring projects over the past 20 years to analyze the impacts of the alternatives. Based on the analyses, BLM will determine which combinations of future uses are most consistent and compatible with the purposes for which the NCA was established. The most significant issues to be addressed are the conservation and protection of raptor and prey species, management of hazardous fuels, reduction in numbers and acreage of wildfires, and restoration of raptor prey habitat.

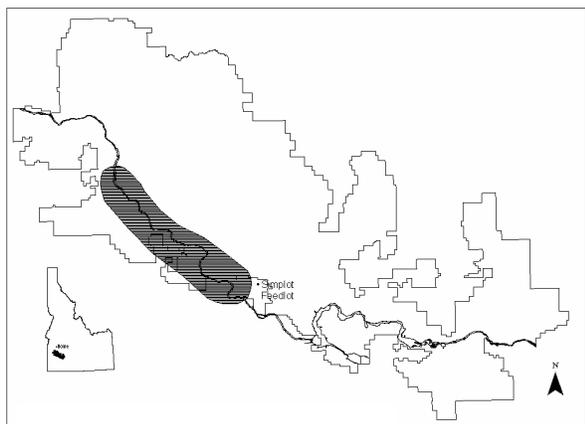


Figure 2— Shaded areas show the West/Central area of the Snake River Canyon.

The RMP will identify improved wildfire protection measures for remaining shrublands; establish viable, long-term, landscape-level habitat objectives; identify and prioritize the areas where habitat restoration projects will occur; and define a scientific approach for conducting habitat restoration. The plan also will include an adaptive management strategy to continuously evaluate and provide timely feedback from ongoing activities. This information will be used to increase the effectiveness of subsequent management actions and investments, and will hopefully allow BLM to continue to conserve, protect, and enhance the raptor populations and habitats for which the NCA was established, as required by the enabling legislation.

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