

SALMON VALLEY



SPECIES



GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARY

The Salmon Valley is bounded on the west side by the Salmon River Mountain Range. The Beaverhead Range bounds the valley on both the east and north sides. Moving south, the valley turns to the west at the intersection with the Lemhi Range, which separates the Salmon Valley from the Lemhi Valley. The extreme southern end of the valley ends as it grades into the Great Basin Ecosystem at the Idaho Natural Energy Laboratory area.

IMPORTANCE OF LINKAGE AREA

This area is important because of its riparian features-the cottonwood gallery forests that lie along the Salmon River and their function as a linkage area for ungulates and forest carnivores between the Salmon River Range and the Beaverhead Range. Certain areas within the valley are considered high-quality core habitat for sagebrush obligate species.

ECOLOGICAL SETTING

One of the dominant features of this valley is the Salmon River. Within the valley much of the land has been converted to agriculture. For natural vegetation, much of the area consists of two sagebrush communities: a Basin-Wyoming big sagebrush community and mountain big sagebrush community, each dominated by sagebrush (*Artemisia spp.*), but with associated species such as mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*) and snowberry (*Symphoricarpa spp.*). On non-forested slopes of greater than 15°, land is dominated by native perennial grasses such as bluebunch wheatgrasses (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) and Idaho fescue (*Festucus idahoensis*).

Forested areas are dominated by lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Riparian areas are dominated by extensive, mature black and narrowleaf cottonwood gallery forests (*Populus spp.*).

WILDLIFE

This valley is considered a dispersal corridor between the Salmon River Range and the Lemhi Range for many species, including elk, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, wolves, and sage brush-obligate species such as sage grouse and pygmy rabbits. The valley acts primarily as wintering grounds for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep. In the winter, pronghorn concentrate in areas northwest of Challis up to Morgan Creek, while bighorn sheep, mule deer, and elk concentrate north of Ellis. The cottonwood galleries along the Salmon River are very important nesting habitat for bald eagles and migratory songbirds, and support some moose and a few whitetail deer. Golden eagles are prolific in the area. Peregrine falcon nest in very high concentrations along the cliffs on either side of the riparian areas and are dependent upon smaller birds as food. The area between the White Hills and Salmon are considered important for sage grouse and pygmy rabbits. Biologists consider this “western” edge population of grouse and rabbits important for long-term genetic diversity.

CONSERVATION THREATS

Animal-vehicle collisions are causing a lot of mortality along Highway 93. While these collisions have occurred along almost all stretches of the road, there are several wildlife mortality “hotspots.” Ungulates such as elk, mule deer,

pronghorn, and bighorn sheep are the most common large animals killed in these collisions. The first hotspot is at the very north end of Salmon valley, the second is near Willow Creek where elk are often hit. North of Challis, an area known as Buffalo Jump has been a site of high mortality-particularly for bighorn sheep, which are crossing the road to access alfalfa fields in the valley. South of Challis, there is a bridge over the Salmon River on Highway 93 where there has been a high number of mule deer killed. Social intolerance of carnivores-particularly towards gray wolves and grizzly bears-is widespread. Fencing is rated as substandard for wildlife passage in many areas. While private land subdivision is not as much of a threat in Idaho as other parts of the High Divide, the land that is in private ownership is mostly the riparian corridors. Additionally, fencing on much of this private land is difficult for wildlife to cross. Thus, if this land were to be sold and subdivided, it could be devastating for wildlife dependent on riparian vegetation for cover or nesting habitat. One of the areas considered at high risk for subdivision is private lands along Carmen Creek. Plant diseases such as bark blister rust and bark beetles are causing the death of many forested areas that are already unnaturally dense due to past fire suppression, which in turn make them to susceptible to catastrophic, stand-replacing

fires. It was noted that lungworm is present in bighorn sheep populations, and currently sheep allotments in the area are considered a threat to existing bighorn populations.

CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

There is a local stewardship group and a regional land trust that are actively engaged in county growth management plans and encouraging conservation stewardship among local landowners. In addition, there are properties that are considering conservation easements near Carmen Creek. The local communities accept habitat improvements on the basis of supporting healthy fish populations, as recreational fishing is a large sector of the local economy. Agencies are also expressing an interest in safe passage mitigation measures, such as signs, variable messaging systems, or flashing lights, to ameliorate the effect of animal-vehicle collisions on wildlife. In 2004, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) limited off-road vehicle travel to existing road and trails, and at the time of this writing, the U.S. Forest Service is undergoing forest plan revision, including development of a “linkage” map. Also at the time of this writing, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are undertaking travel planning. There is also a sage grouse working group

