

What Wilderness Means to Wildlife Habitat and Fisheries

By Matt Keller

The 2004 National Trout Unlimited bumper sticker says it all: “Wilderness: A Great Place to Hunt and Fish.” Hunting and fishing are indeed two of the major outdoor recreational uses of Wilderness areas, as well as the viewing of flora and fauna which brings such awe and enjoyment to other Wilderness users. Much of the inherent value of the Wilderness resource comes from its wildlife.

The proposed Wilderness areas on the Monongahela National Forest provide rich habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal species, six of which are federally listed as Threatened or Endangered and several others that are rare and/or listed species of concern. Designation of an area as Wilderness ensures protection of habitat from the impacts of logging, mining, roads, utility lines, wind power projects, and other human disturbance

Some other facts about wildlife and Wilderness:

- Wilderness areas are often the best places to conduct baseline research on wildlife populations and long-term trends in habitat use.
- Wilderness areas often hold the largest individuals of certain game species found in an area.
- Wilderness provides refuge to big and small game animals alike – places where populations can escape the pressures put on them by roads and human activities.
- Wilderness hunting is traditional hunting by foot or horseback.
- Wilderness is a place where the forces of natural selection and survival rather than human actions largely determine which and how many wildlife species will exist.
- In terms of fish habitat, within the proposed Mon NF Wilderness boundaries are located forty-nine (49) streams classified by the WV Department of Environmental Protection [DEP] as “Tier 2.5” streams. This is a special antidegradation designation for “high quality waters of special concern.”¹ Currently, approx. 450 streams are on the list statewide. Thus, although our proposed Wilderness acreage represents less than 1% of the State’s land base, over 10% of WV’s most pristine streams are located within this small amount of land. Wilderness is the highest form of protection from human impacts that can be given to these streams over the long term.

Wildlife and Fisheries Management in Wilderness

The Wilderness Act (1964) does not change the jurisdiction of state and federal agencies with regard to wildlife management: “Nothing in this Act shall be construed as affecting the jurisdiction or responsibilities of the several states with respect to wildlife and fish in national forests.” The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) manages fish and wildlife in WV wilderness and all other state and federal lands.

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Wilderness managers are mandated by the Wilderness Act to maintain the wilderness character of an area, including its native wildlife populations. The Wilderness Act specifically allows for a variety of wildlife management activities in designated Wilderness. In fact, the continuance or restoration of native wildlife populations dependent on natural habitats often constitutes one of the prime reasons for designating Wilderness, and is one of the “conservation” purposes for which wilderness is to be managed pursuant to section 4(b) of the Wilderness Act.²

Other aspects of wildlife management in Wilderness:

Wildlife management in Wilderness is to be done through the use of the “minimum necessary tool” when implementing management programs, while at the same time assuring a continuing untrammelled (left to operate freely) condition.³

The use of motorized or mechanized equipment, and access by motor vehicles or aircraft, may be permitted within designated Wilderness areas for certain wildlife and fisheries management activities if found to be “necessary to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act.”⁴

Chemical treatment of waters is permissible in Wilderness if done to restore native habitat impacted by human activity in a way that does not harm wilderness values. Thus, application of limestone fines to counteract humancaused acidification of a Wilderness stream can be done, especially if stream access for trucks exists outside the Wilderness boundary, or other means of delivery are feasible.

The WV DNR in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service may carry out fish stocking activities in Mon NF Wilderness streams, using means appropriate for Wilderness, for either of the following reasons:

to reestablish or maintain an indigenous species adversely affected by human influence;
to perpetuate or recover a threatened or endangered species. ²

Minimizing Wildlife Management Impacts of Proposed Mon

Wilderness

The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources currently has access to 1,512,245 acres of federal and state land to manage wildlife. Current and proposed Wilderness areas make up only 15% of this, as shown below. ⁵

Furthermore, the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition has worked with WVDNR Wildlife and Fisheries managers, along with U.S. Forest Service fisheries personnel and WV Trout Unlimited members, in drawing proposed Wilderness boundaries. As a result, boundaries for several areas were modified to avoid conflict with current wildlife management activities. Over 17,000 acres of proposed Wilderness acreage (nearly 10%) were removed from consideration to accommodate current WVDNR wildlife management activities, which require occasional vehicular access and motorized equipment.

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Through these modifications, we have excluded from proposed Wilderness acreage: 65% of maintained wildlife openings, 67% of maintained orchards, 22% of waterholes (6 out of 27), and 55% of linear wildlife clearings.

¹Jessica Welsh, WV Department of Environmental Protection, Charleston, WV

²Scott, Doug, 2001. Wildlife Management and the Wilderness Act of 1964—debates regarding Whiskey Mountain area in the Fitzpatrick Wilderness, Wyoming (1984). Pew Wilderness Center, Seattle, Washington.

³California Wilderness Act, H. Rept. 98-4042-44.

⁴The Wilderness Act of 1964, : Public Law 88-577

⁵West Virginia Land Stewardship Data, Natural Resource Analysis Center and West Virginia Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, West Virginia University, updated January 2000