

Douglas County Wildlife Area Complex

2021 - 2022 Management Plan Update



Pacific gopher snake - Bridgeport Bar Unit.

This document is intended to highlight accomplishments as they relate to goals and objectives identified within the [2006 Wells Wildlife Area Management Plan](#) and the [2006 Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area Management Plan](#). These plans address the status of wildlife species and their habitat, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities at the Wells Wildlife Area. Every 10 years, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) develops a process for revising the management plans for each wildlife area to identify new management priorities and actions. In between plan revisions, the update focuses on recent accomplishments over the last two years.

Management Highlights

Annual Food Plots

The Sagebrush Flat and Wells wildlife areas include planted and maintained annual grain crops on the Bridgeport Bar and Washburn Island units. Most acreage that was planted in September of 2021 was winter wheat. The area has shifted to using the Clearfield variety of winter wheat,

which greatly improves the ability to control annual weeds in the wheat fields and increase the yield of food plots.

Tree and Shrub Rows

Consistent irrigation of food plots and shrub rows continues to be challenging due to fluctuating water levels of Wells Pool. Drawdowns equal to or greater than 3 feet prevent operation of pumps that draw from the river. This occurs multiple times during the growing season. In the latter part of summer, another issue to contend with are the large blooms of algae in the slow-moving water of 'Bridgeport Bar slough' that would completely clog the fish screens of our Green Gate and Corner pumps. The most effective solution to remove the algae was to pull the intakes out of the river and remove the algae by hand.

In November 2022, we borrowed a masticator/skid steer which we put to work on Bridgeport Bar Unit grinding up Siberian elm trees that are encroaching on the food plots. The machine is capable of chewing through and shredding trees up to several inches in diameter. It's rather slow going but much more efficient than cutting them by hand. Approximately 10 acres were cleared with the machine. Many more remain.

Nov. 6, 2022 delivered a quick end to autumn with a snowstorm that dumped 10 inches of heavy wet snow across the area. Most of the deciduous trees had yet to drop their leaves so this combined with the weight of the snow caused damage to hundreds of trees and shrubs ranging from broken limbs to entire trees coming down and too often damaging risers and sprinklers within the shrub rows. Additional winter storms in November and December left nearly 2 feet of snow on the ground for the remainder of winter.

Noxious Weed Control

Staff kept busy chasing after an increasing suite of noxious weeds. Weed species treated include Dalmatian toadflax, diffuse knapweed, Russian knapweed, Russian thistle, cereal rye, annual bursage, kochia, rush skeletonweed, crabgrass, and a variety of other annual weed species. Treatment methods included chemical, mechanical, and release of biocontrols. Many locations received multiple treatments during the growing season to ensure coverage. Treatment of roads is a priority due to their function as a disturbance and dispersal for weeds. More than 8,000 *Mecinus janthinus*, (the biocontrol for Dalmatian toadflax) were distributed across all units with a particular focus on those burned in the 2020 Pearl Hill Fire. The recently available *Aulacidea acroptilonica*, a gall-forming wasp to address Russian knapweed, was acquired and released on units of the Wells Wildlife Area and the Big Bend Wildlife Area.

Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Projects

Staff planted about 5,300 shrubs, trees, and grass on the Bridgeport unit. Species included water birch, bitterbrush, big sagebrush, black cottonwood, Woods rose, serviceberry, chokecherry, Rocky Mountain juniper, and Great Basin wildrye. Planting sites included sites with drip irrigation, mesic draws and areas deemed suitable for drought-tolerant bitterbrush and big sagebrush. The intent was to reestablish these species within the footprint of the 2020 Pearl Hill Fire. Spring 2021, however, proved to have little rainfall so consequently many of the species planted in drier sites did not survive.

At the Big Bend Wildlife Area, staff continued field work to prepare three old agriculture fields for restoration to native habitat. Collectively, these fields amount to 235 acres and had been irrigated alfalfa. This work began in 2019 and involved multiple treatments of herbicides to kill annual and perennial weeds. In 2021 the largest field of the three, at Bissell Flat (165 acres), was seeded with mixture of native grasses and forbs. Meanwhile, the remaining acreage at the Magers location required an additional year of weed control. At the end of 2022 this acreage was seeded with native species, plus live plants of Great Basin wildrye were planted in a shallow drainage that leads to the Columbia River.



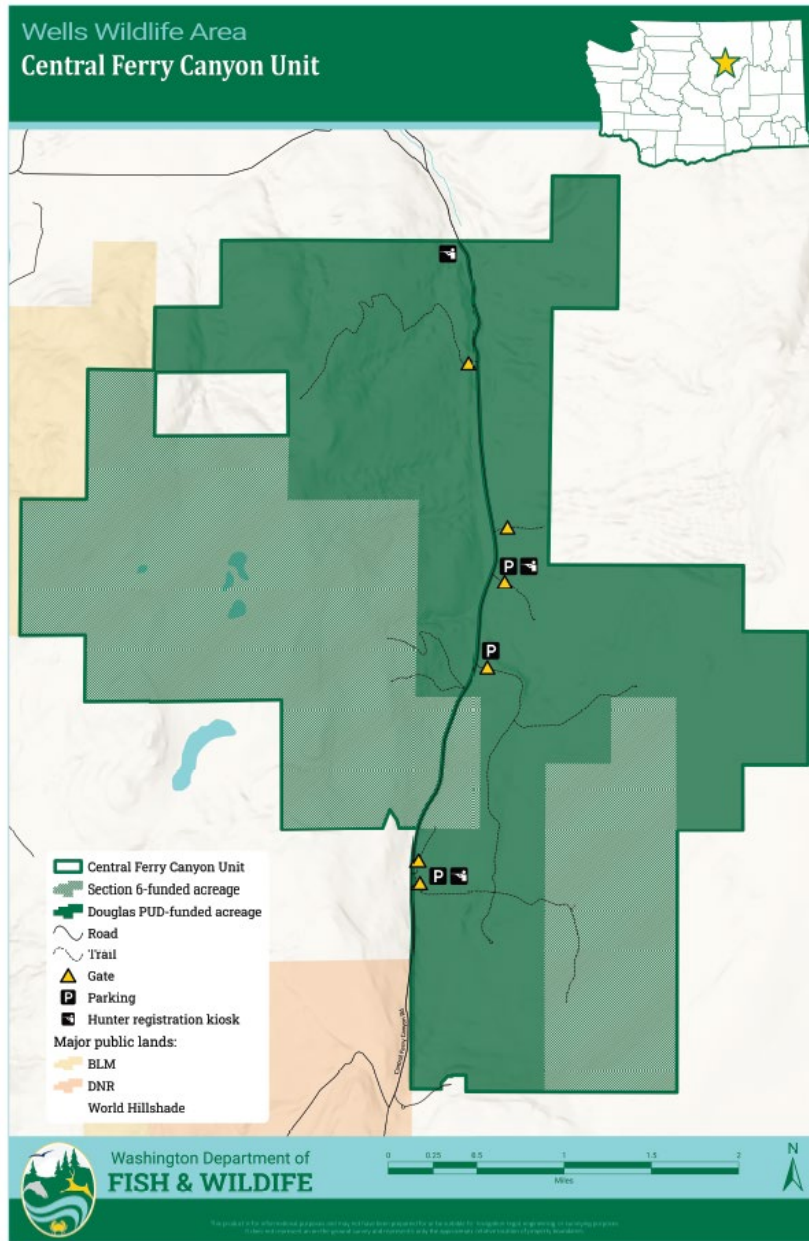
Pygmy short-horned lizard - Central Ferry Canyon unit. Photo by Alan L. Bauer

Public Recreation

On the Wells Wildlife Area, the 2022 upland bird season saw the lowest number of hunters in 39 years of recording keeping. Of 450 registrants, just 373 reported whether they had success. The previous low was 496 in 1996. However, the weather likely played a significant role in depressing hunter participation in 2022 and 1996. Both years experienced heavy snowfall in early November that effectively ended upland bird hunting on the Indian Dan Canyon, Central Ferry Canyon, and West Foster Creek units. On the other hand, the number of waterfowl hunters was solidly average, and the recorded take was the third greatest in 39 years.

Buildings, Public Use Facilities and Equipment

Staff remodeled two rooms in the office building to improve working conditions for the assistant manager and staff members. New drywall and entry door, laminate flooring, LED lights, trim and fresh paint spruced things up.



Dark green: pre-2022 Central Ferry Canyon boundary.
Light green: 2022 property acquisition/addition

Land Acquisition

The agency purchased 1,520 acres of private property that borders the Central Ferry Canyon Unit on the east and west boundaries. Approximately 1,000 acres is native habitat, while the remaining 520 acres had been in active dryland agricultural production until 2021. The newly acquired property increases public access for recreation as well as supports the management and

recovery goals for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, greater sage-grouse, Washington ground squirrel, mule deer, and other wildlife. In the next few years, the wildlife area will pursue and secure funds to convert the former agriculture land to native habitat, build fencing, continue management/control of noxious weeds, and plant native shrubs/trees in suitable locations. Annual operation and management dollars are via state funds at a rate of \$52/acre. Funding for this acquisition was from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act, Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund. The previous owner was a willing seller motivated by conservation values and a desire to have it in public ownership.