

How to keep the Upper Green

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Ted Kerasote PERSPECTIVE

Like many places in Wyoming, the Upper Green River Valley seems like a nowhere sort of place -- at least from a speeding car. It's hard to believe that there's much out there except sage and more sage. But there is.

The Upper Green has some of the most diverse big game populations anywhere in the contiguous United States. It's home to 48,000 mule deer, 32,000 pronghorn, about 8,000 elk, one of the largest communities of sage grouse in North America, and seasonal concentrations of waterfowl.

What's unique about the mule deer and pronghorns of the Upper Green is that they -- like many of their ancestors -- remain highly migratory. These mule deer travel upwards of a hundred miles to their summer range in the Wyoming, Gros Ventre, and Wind River mountains, and the Upper Green River pronghorn make an annual round-trip of over 200 miles to the Tetons. In fact, in the fall and spring, you can stand on a high point and see a sight reserved for the high Arctic and the national parks of Africa: the brown backs of animals moving, moving, moving to a horizon where the specks of more animals disappear into the sky.

Wyoming's hunters have a deep appreciation of this spectacle. In 2001, 2,600 people hunted antelope in the Upper Green, 7,300 hunted mule deer in the region's river bottoms, hills, and surrounding national forests, and another 7,600 went after elk.

These days, though, many of us who get part of our yearly food from the Green River country see something else besides moving animals when we stand on a high point. Gas wells have sprouted, new dirt roads, trailer camps, ATVs, pickup trucks, seismic lines, helicopters, and thumper trucks, rumbling along in lines of half a dozen and shaking the earth.

Recently, there have been times when I've sat on a bluff above Daniel and watched herds of antelope dash from one set of thumper trucks, only to turn around, two miles later, and sprint madly from a low-flying helicopter.

Like so many other lovely "nowhere" places in Wyoming, the Upper Green River Valley is now a destination for a variety of energy companies, natural gas their goal. The Bureau of Land Management has permitted 3,090 wells, with thousands more on the way. This far exceeds the limits set by the agency's 1988 Resource Management Plan, and it's writing a new one, which will decide the fate of this region for the next 15 to 20 years. For the next two months, the BLM will be taking public comments.

Unfortunately, the long-term studies now underway to determine the effects of oil and gas development on wildlife in the Upper Green won't be completed before the RMP is finalized. However, none of us has to sit by idly, waiting for studies that will undoubtedly confirm what numerous studies on the vulnerability of elk have already shown: disturbance plus loss of habitat equals loss of wildlife. Therefore, those of us who care about the Upper Green must let the BLM know that energy development should proceed with extreme caution. This means that the new RMP contain several important safeguards for wildlife: Critical winter habitat must be put off limits to any sort of disturbance. "Transitional habitat" -- the country in which mule deer and pronghorns move, feed, and rest while on their journeys from their summer to winter haunts -- must also be protected.

Bottlenecks along migration routes -- passages through which deer and antelope have migrated for millennia, some of them only a half-mile wide -- must be left undeveloped. These would include the Trapper's Point and Freemont Lake bottlenecks near Pinedale as well as the Cora Butte transition range and the LaBarge Creek elk winter range. Finally, the BLM needs to reduce the number of well pads per section from 16 to four, and permit only a low number of wells until these ongoing studies tell us what the cumulative impacts will be.

Unless these measures are instituted to protect the Upper Green River Valley's wildlife and landscapes, this "nowhere" place is certain to become somewhere most of us would prefer not to be.

Kelly resident Ted Kerasote (tkerasot@wyoming.com) is the author of "Bloodties and Heart of Home," and writes for many periodicals, including Audubon, Outside, and Legal Affairs.