

Wildlife gradually using Wyoming 789 underpass



(Courtesy photo, Wyoming Department of Transportation) A Wyoming Department of Transportation camera captures a buck mule deer using the Wyoming 789 wildlife underpass to get from the east side of the two-lane state highway to the west side. Nearly 6,000 mule deer were observed using the underpass north of Baggs during the 2010 winter migration.

Second underpass to open this summer

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Published: Wednesday, December 14, 2011 2:07 AM MST

A small herd of mule deer cautiously moved toward the Wyoming 789 wildlife underpass north of Baggs on Tuesday.

Two of the deer crept down the sides of the ravine, while the main group waited further from the entrance to the underpass. One deer wanted no part of the underpass, standing by the accompanying fence far from the others.

The deer gradually moved forward despite the traffic of semi-trucks thundering across the underpass. The herd then suddenly fled to the low hills to the east when it heard a vehicle slow down as it crossed the underpass.

"We had approximately 6,000 deer use the underpass during last winter's and spring's migrations," said Tony Mong, Wyoming Game and Fish biologist in the Baggs District. "We've had groups of 40 to 50 deer go through the tunnel at one time, and we've had single deer go through. Some of them sneak up on the underpass, while others go through it like a blur.

"If we measured the distance from each wall of the underpass and the path a deer takes, more times than not the deer would have passed through exactly in the middle."

Game and Fish, Wyoming Department of Transportation, Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative and the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust Fund are providing the funding for the construction of a second wildlife underpass on Wyoming 789, Mong said. The first underpass is about five miles north of Baggs and the second will be built three miles south of the first one.

"The second underpass should be completed in the summer of 2012," said Mong. "It takes about two months for construction, and traffic will be disrupted. The entrance to the second underpass will not be as deep as the first one."

The wildlife underpass consists of a concrete culvert with a dirt floor. The tunnel will be as wide as possible so sunlight shines through all of it during the day, Mong said. Five miles of deer proof fencing was installed on both sides of Wyoming 789 and the underpass to help funnel the migrating deer through the man-made opening. When the deer make it through the underpass they head west to their winter feeding grounds.

"Once the underpass was opened, we knew the deer were going to be very confused," Mong said. "These deer have been crossing Wyoming 789 at the same locations for generations. At first, we saw deer wander up and down the fence line for days or try to jump into the fence. The biggest problem now is that some of the deer still walk around the fence."

Mong would like to see four more miles of deer proof fencing installed and five underpasses built along this nine-mile stretch of Wyoming 789 to thoroughly safeguard the wildlife migration.

"We have seen elk use the underpass and plenty of coyotes," said Mong. "We even had a couple of bobcats go through as well as white-tailed deer. Our cameras once caught two elk bucks fighting it out in the tunnel."

Mong credits WYDOT employees and policy for helping to pick the locations of the wildlife underpasses. WYDOT employees observed where the deer most frequently crossed the state highway and the company kept track of the location of all the animal and vehicle collisions that have occurred on the road, he said.

In a related project, Mong is involved in trapping and applying ear tags to mule deer in the Baggs District. Using the cameras at the underpass, Mong and his G&F colleagues can count how many of the tagged deer eventually use the underpass and how often in a year's time.

They have tagged four deer so far this winter with a goal of 100, Mong said.

Mong plans to update Carbon County residents on the health of the Baggs mule deer herd, and the tagging and underpass projects at a January public meeting in Rawlins. The exact date and location of the meeting has not been set.