

# 10

## Wildlife Preservation

*Parks and conservation protect the creatures of the Boise River.*

*by Mike Medberry*

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Celinda Hines rode into Boise along the Oregon Trail in 1853. She wrote that her group of wagon train voyagers “crossed over three bottoms reaching the river. The first is covered with sage, the second with woods, the third with grass.” That green, green grass must have been a comfort to travelers after a long trip through the Great American Desert. She must have seen deer and antelope along the route from Missouri or Nebraska, sage grouse and rattlesnakes, grizzly and black bears, and perhaps thousands of bison along the way. Red-tailed hawks, ospreys, and eagles in the nearby trees beside the Boise River might have soothed her. No cows roamed the land and no cheatgrass grew, no dams loomed and nobody crowed about the need to protect the river because every acre that existed was simply wild. Hines had a fresh view of a harsh landscape and land that had not yet been tamed by the plow.

In the 1870s, fewer than 18,000 people lived in the Boise area. In 2015, roughly 616,500 people inhabit the Boise metropolitan area. In the past 100 years, the desires of white people have dominated development of land in the Boise River drainage and defined the course of floods. The Boise River has flooded at least 16 times over 100 years. Some of these floods were disastrous or near disastrous. Some of the high water was merely costly or inconvenient. Most of these floods occurred before 1944, and none has been more than 10,000 cubic feet per second since Lucky Peak Dam was built in 1955. Since the 1850s, wildlife have survived in good numbers, but some species, such as grizzly bear, salmon, and bison, have been wiped out while others have survived handily.

The Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area lies entirely within the Boise River floodplain at the confluence of the Snake, Owyhee, and Boise Rivers. When Lucky Peak Reservoir, which lies above the City of Boise, allows more than about 6,000 cubic feet per second of water into the river, the Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area is inundated. Apparently, the original Fort Boise was lost when flooding rivers changed course, but no one is really sure—call it lack of foresight or failed optimism, but today, this 1,300-acre piece of land supports enormous numbers of wildlife.

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ADDISON MOHLER

The Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area features 13 ponds and 20 miles of walking trails along the Boise River. Andy Ogden, wildlife biologist for the Southwest Office for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said that Fort Boise is a popular place for duck, turkey, and pheasant hunting and is occasionally used for bass and catfish fishing. The area supports thousands of migrating waterfowl in the spring and autumn seasons, and occasionally rafters float through it to the Snake River.



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

A mallard duck takes flight.

### *Dam Building Brought More Wildlife*

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation have built 7 dams, 3 power plants, and 2,670 miles of canals and drains that turned the mostly dry Boise Valley into a place of abundant water. All of this work was done to control floods and provide irrigation between 1915 and 1955, but today, as the valley fills up with people, the needs of people living here have changed in dramatic ways. Wildlife still thrive in the Boise area, partially because much of the water has been redistributed over a broader area over a longer period of time, but not everyone knows where to look for the birds and mammals.

“Humans in today’s world are less connected to nature now than in any other generation and any other time in history,” said Dave Cannamela in 2015. Cannamela is the superintendent of Idaho Fish and Game’s MK Nature Center.

The 4.6-acre center, which sits right next to the Boise River beside Boise's 11-acre Municipal Park, offers educational programs and tours of the river area. "Sometimes people don't really know how much they enjoy nature," Cannamela continued. "They hear bird songs and are aware of the river, but they aren't really conscious of it all. They're out there walking, and, on some level, they know they need the river and water." The MK Nature Center has a native plant garden and sells plants in its annual auction in May, mostly to people who intend to plant their yards with desert-loving species like sage, bitterbrush, and wild rose.

After World War I, Municipal Park provided a temporary place for people seeking to establish homesteaded claims on nearby land. The park provided a temporary place for people seeking to establish homesteaded claims on nearby land. Settlers brought their dreams to Boise, and some spent decades trying to "prove up" on the land, to make the land produce an income, mostly by farming and raising cattle. Some succeeded fabulously and some failed miserably, but most merely survived. Beaver were trapped out, dams were built, water was diverted, former floodlands were turned into farmlands, and wildlife fled or were driven away from the Boise River. Downstream dams blocked passage of salmon, steelhead, lamprey, and bull trout.

As the City of Boise developed in the early years of the 20th century, the need for parks to provide a connection between people and nature became increasingly important and wildlife returned to their home. In 1914, very few parks existed in Boise; in 2015, the city has at least 123 parks preserved mostly for people and wildlife to enjoy. The city government plans to add additional open lands to buffer the ever-expanding city.

When Lucky Peak Dam was built, the levees that were anticipated along the river were never built for lack of federal money. However, some private property owners who had land beside the lower Boise River built berms and levees with their own heavy equipment. It was done out of a fear that when the river changed its course, it would lay claim to their private



DORMAN SHAW

Along the Morrison Knudsen Nature Center StreamWalk are sheltered areas to view wildlife in their natural habitat.

land or make that land inaccessible. The levees were spotty—they were never built to uniform standards—and they forced floodwater onto other lands where water was neither wanted nor needed for farming. Where that water drained was never developed because the “surplus” land became swampy and the vegetation overgrown. Today, some of this land, including part of Eagle Island, is being developed on the ever-evolving floodplain thereby eliminating wildlife habitat.

DAVID MENKE, NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION



Bald eagles look for prey.

### *Roosevelt's Refuge*

Just west of the city of Boise, water at the west end of the 40-mile New York Canal formed Lake Lowell as a reservoir, and in 1909 the Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge was proclaimed by President Theodore Roosevelt. Deer Flat surrounded the reservoir. It was formed to protect migratory birds, which were declining across the nation in the early 20th century. This protected refuge is now 10,588 acres and supports 249 species of birds, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The checklist includes many rare species, such as white pelicans, snowy geese, tundra swans, northern bobwhite, loons, merlins, peregrine falcons, and sandhill cranes. In winter, as many as 150,000 geese and ducks now roost at Lake Lowell, and predators, like bald eagles, are common. Before 1900, the reservoir site was dry and home to only a few desert birds and mammals.

Annette de Knijf, manager of Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge, said that the area is popular with local people. “It’s an urban area refuge in Canyon County with about 200,000 people and that’s why this area is hopping!” She added that Deer Flat is an “overlay refuge,” meaning that the land management is subservient to the primary use of water for the irrigation purposes of the State of Idaho, Bureau of Reclamation, and local irrigators. This presents a conflict with recreationists who want to use the reservoir for fishing, boating, hunting, and wildlife when water is drawn down for farming in the summer.

De Knijf also spoke about upland areas of the refuge, which are dominated by invasive cheatgrass that was brought in by cattle and sheep ranchers over a century. “The sage obligate species have been replaced by more weedy species.” The sage grouse isn’t listed as threatened yet, but lawsuits have been filed to support that listing and a decision is imminent from the U.S. District Court for the District of Idaho. The loss of sagebrush habitat across the West has profoundly affected the Boise River’s wildlife, as cheatgrass displaces nutritious feed for the wild animals. “We would like to reestablish a sagebrush habitat type,” de Knijf said, “but the cheatgrass is intractable.” She was quick to add that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is establishing test plots that may prove successful in getting rid of the cheatgrass by introducing natural bacteria to control it. This would encourage sage grouse, sage thrasher, pigmy rabbit, and antelope, among other species.

The Deer Flat Visitor Center, near Nampa, Idaho, provides education about wildlife and history of the refuge in a series of dioramas. Starting from the visitor center, a 29-mile car trip around Lake Lowell Reservoir gives drivers a sense of the rapid pace of residential growth that has occurred over the past few years. Twenty-five miles of walking trails also depart from the visitor center. Some of the trails wander among the observation platforms, offering views of the lake and many varieties of birds. In 2015, a pair of bald eagles had roosted in trees along Lake Lowell, and the land was closed to curious people to protect the eagles for a few months.



GREG KRELLER, IDAHO PRESS TRIBUNE

Annette de Knijf,  
manager of Deer Flat  
National Wildlife Refuge

## *The Star Walk*

The Star River Walk is a mile-and-a-quarter stroll through woods and fields right beside the river near the town of Star. It is beautiful all of the way, although part of it must be rehabilitated to appear natural and that plan is currently in the works. Russ Renk pumped up his raft beside the river and readied for a fishing trip. Now an environmental consultant in Washington State, Renk and his brother Dan grew up beside the Boise River near Star. Renk said that he had a record of fish catches going back 50 years, complete with the names of fishing holes, species of fish, and changes to the Boise River. His “Fish Books” from 1960 to 1964 indicate that Russ consistently caught the following fish from the river: rainbow and brown trout, bass, whitefish, squawfish, chub, catfish, bluegills, perch, and carp on spinners and salmon eggs. In 1960, Renk took 97 fishing trips on the river.



BEN RENK

Russ Renk catches an 18-inch rainbow trout on the lower Boise River.

Renk said that the lower river had changed significantly over many years, mostly from increased flows in the river, which he thinks changed the slow-water habitat from one that supported bass to swift, clear-running water that favors trout. The river supported squawfish, chubs, and carp 50 years ago and not much else when the river’s flow was severely restricted, as the upstream dams were being repaired or maintained. What saved the fish when that water was shut off upstream

was seepage from irrigation canals and the groundwater that rose in various places. As years went on, however, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game filed and won a lawsuit ensuring that water would be in the river on a year-round basis for all wildlife.

### *The Ribbon of Jewels*

One of the premium places for Boiseans to see wildlife is in the 25 miles of bike riding trails on each side of the Boise River that form Boise's "Ribbon of Jewels," where people fish, float, and watch wildlife as they ride, run, and walk for exercise and joy. The parks, named after well-known Boise patrons, have been protected for 45 years; they include the Ann Morrison, Kathryn Albertson, Esther Simplot, Julia Davis, Barber, and Marianne Williams Parks. In addition, undeveloped pieces of land, such as the 1.6-mile Bethine Church River Trail, support riparian wetlands, wildlife nesting spots, and the river's fish.

Undeveloped portions of other protected areas support many wildlife species in the heart of the city. For example, young cougars dispersing from the foothills occasionally wind up along the river or the streets of Boise, but they are generally captured by Idaho Department of Fish and Game and released in habitats that are safer for these wild cats. Coyotes and wolves are more secretive and are seldom seen along the foothills; deer and red foxes are more commonly spotted. Kingfishers, magpies, great blue herons, snowy egrets, and dozens of different kinds of ducks can be seen on almost any day along the river within city limits. On the Boise State University campus, Canada geese, ubiquitous and protected, are yearlong residents.

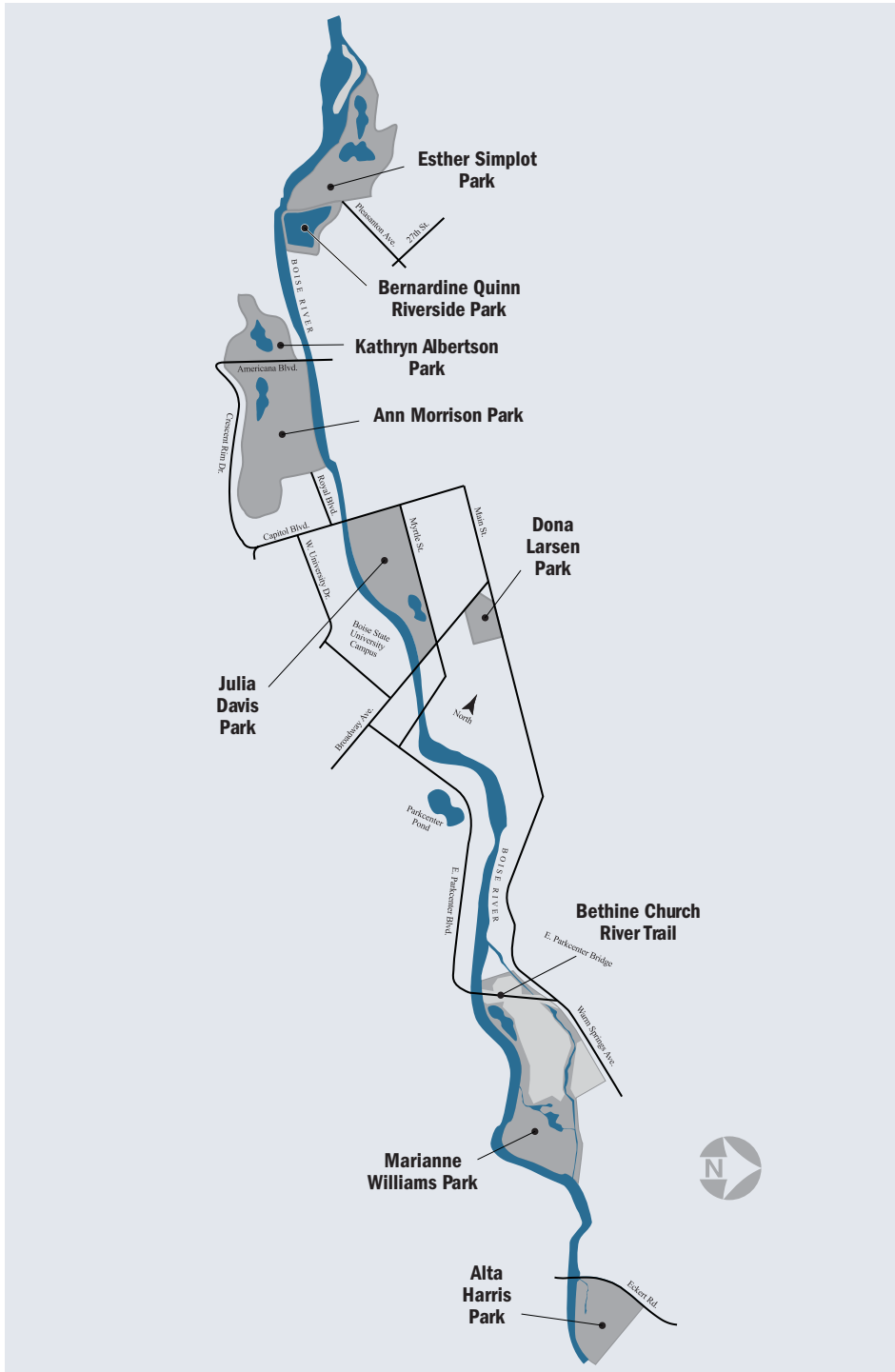
It seems that the reservoirs, water diversions, and canals have been a boon for wildlife because where water is found in the desert, wildlife abound. But there remain three problems with the construction projects along the river: (1) many of the diversions have no screens on them and fish die in farm lands, (2) residential development now crowds the river and pushes back wildlife, and (3) created swampland now holds greater



TY SMEDDES

Canada goose





financial value and it is very expensive to protect wildlife. The pressure for controlling floods has also increased, with new subdivisions requiring more certain protection from floods, so that what was swampland might become dryland and then be sold as homeland. For the people who want to support wildlife, this trend is troublesome, and it is difficult to change.

The city of Boise will continue to grow, and the river that runs through it will continue flowing, but will we protect the habitat for pelicans, gopher snakes, and beavers? As long as the populace fails to assert its need for the river—for its beauty, productivity, and preservation of wild animals—the treasure that the Boise River embodies will shrink as home construction grows. Where the wildlife is still alive, the Boise River will remain a gorgeous place to visit right in the heart of the city. As Dave Cannamela said, “Sometimes people don’t really know how much they enjoy nature.” And the river speaks the final words: “until it is gone.”



MANJITH KAINICKARA

American white pelican



CHERYL REYNOLDS/WORTH A DAM

Beavers return to the Boise River.



**MIKE MEDBERRY** is a writer of short fiction, essays, and blogs, and teaches writing at the Cabin in Boise. He also wrote a memoir, *On the Dark Side of the Moon*, about recovering from a stroke he had while hiking in Idaho’s Craters of the Moon National Monument. Look for him walking along the Boise River.