



Drought has mixed effect on northern Nevada wildlife

According to the Nevada Department of Wildlife, Washoe Lake is 5,800 acres in size when full. The day before Thanksgiving, it was nearly gone. Within view of the dusty boating dock on the south end of the lake, a line of desiccated white carp extended through hundreds of feet of brown mud.

Yet the die off does not seriously concern Jennifer Dawson, a park supervisor.

“This isn’t anything new,” she said. Washoe Lake, fed by 11 creeks and 12 feet deep at its lowest point, has been dry or nearly so four times in the last quarter century – in 1992, 1994, 2004 and 2014.

According to Dawson, Washoe Lake State Park has seen 23,000 extra visitors since its shores began to retreat, due to the Park’s new emphasis on wilderness

education over water sports.

Allison Blair, 19, has lived near Washoe Lake for her entire life. In elementary school, she often went on field trips to locations very close to her house. She agreed with Dawson.

“When I was younger, it used to stay pretty full pretty constantly,” she said. In recent years, her family rarely even goes boating. “It’s not as fun anymore.”

According to drought.gov, parts of northern Nevada are literally “in the red” – suffering D4 (“exceptional drought”) conditions.

Gary Kiernan, 40, has fished for brown and rainbow trout on the Truckee River since childhood, and has experience with the river’s fluctuations.

Living right next to the river inspired both his lifelong love of fishing and his business, Reno Custom Rods. In past years, the Truckee was a good place to fish.

“It was really good until they cut off the flows,” he said. But this round with drought has been bad. This time, Kiernan’s business took a hit. He described sales as “horrible.”

Kiernan rarely fished this year, because even catch-and-release fishing could kill stressed trout living in a declining ecosystem.

Kim Tisdale, the western region supervising fisheries biologist for NDOW, is also familiar with the decline of the Truckee and other fisheries in northern Nevada.

“Even though we have been in a drought for the last three years, people haven’t noticed because the flows of the river have been maintained so nicely,” she said. For a time, flows on the Truckee River were kept just high enough to keep water cool and oxygenated. But both reservoirs and the river have dried up in recent months.

“This fall was extremely low,” she said. “This year, when the water ran out, they had to shut down the hydro-power plants.” Hydro-power ditches that tap water from the Truckee are often full of large fish.

Draining the ditches could have stranded and killed thousands of fish. NDOW shocked ditches in order to stun fish and carry them away. NDOW employees and volunteers saved as many as possible.

The fish were loaded into fish trucks and removed to the Truckee “and some of the urban ponds.” As human effort can only manage the effects of the drought, Tisdale hopes for a wet winter.

“If we get a below-average winter, we’re gonna be in really bad shape.”

Yet for some wildlife populations, 2014 has been a boon.



According to the Nevada Chukar Forecast, released by NDOW, aerial surveys from Aug. 18-21 demonstrated a 42% increase in chukar populations across northern Nevada.

Changes were erratic: in the Jackson Mountains, a 318% population increase was observed. The Pine Forest Range, in a season of overall population growth, lost 39% of its chukar population.

Chris Healy, 58, an employee of NDOW for 28 years, attributed the increase to rainfall.

“We had good rain in the spring,” he said. Ideally, chukar experience steady light rain in spring and summer that provides green food for mating chukar and their chicks. Hard rain can destroy the nests that they build on the ground.

According to Glen C. Christensen’s Chukar Partridge: Its Introduction, Life History, and Management, chukar were introduced to Nevada from parts of central Asia in the 1920s. The first official hunting season in Nevada was 1947. It lasted only two days, and inspired little interest.

By the 1950s, some were catching on. Don Robertson, 94, was a Navy recruiter from Santa Monica, Cal. when he was first stationed in Reno and hunted chukar with local friends.

“They used to come on golf courses,” said Robertson. He often saw coveys, or groups, of more than 20 birds. He sometimes hunted the ditches on the Truckee River.

He quoted an adage that one hunts chukar the first time for fun and the second time for revenge: The introduced birds displayed a unique habit when chased.

“They can run up that hill a lot faster than you can walk!” said Robertson. Chukar chased to the top of a mountain often fly down the other side.

They assimilated well to their new habitat. Russian thistle, also an introduced species, commonly showed up in the crops of chukar that he shot. But Robertson said that local chukar populations declined drastically in the 90s.

“Each year it was less and less,” he said. Coveys shrank and retreated as Reno developed.

“Hopefully, they’ll make their way back.”



Jimmy Wike, 66, spent much of his childhood in Silver Peak, halfway between Reno and Las Vegas. There, his father was both a constable and a purchasing agent for U.S. Milling and Minerals.

Wike accompanied his father as he loaded silver ingots from local mines into a Suburban and drove them (by a different route each time) to Tonopah Airport.

“That was cool for a kid,” he said.

His father also took him to a spring where other Silver Peak locals filled 50-gallon oil drums with drinking water, to avoid tap water that tasted like alkali.

There, in 1959, said Wike, “I see these quail-like birds with all these little ones.” The slate-colored, red-legged birds were the same chukar that had just begun to exasperate Robertson. Wike began hunting them with a bolt action 20-gauge in 1960.

In Silver Peak at that time, Wike was the only one interested.

“Nobody hunted them up there. Nobody even knew what they were,” said Wike. Adults ignored the birds that provided Wike with a steady supply of game meat. “In those days, everyone wanted to hunt sage hens.”

Wike had the new birds to himself. They were everywhere. “One time,” he said, “I counted 22 mothers with chicks.”

By the middle of the 1960s, however, Wike said that locals wised up, inspired by articles in hunting magazines. Later, Las Vegas residents and Californians trickled into northwest Nevada to hunt a bird that many had heard of for the first time.

Chukar populations have since crept further east and south, rising and falling with rainfall.

Wike estimated from experience that chukar populations crash and rebuild every five years. The last good chukar season was 2010-11.

“We’re coming up on five years.”