

Wildlife Over-Population

Last year at our family reunion, our guests were awakened by the roar of the neighborhood mountain lion at the end of our driveway as he encouraged our dog to come out and play. One of our guests was Mike's brother, Tom Spalding the deputy director of the Arizona Game and Fish, who throughout his career with the game and fish department has publicly spoken many times throughout the west on endangered species and predators.

His memory of being so rudely awakened prompted him this year on his annual trip to offer his observations about the future problems he sees we will encounter with wildlife in Colorado. Now recently retired, from the Arizona Game and Fish he has been coming to Colorado for the past 27 years, officially and for pleasure. He has seen many changes in Colorado and fears we are heading for major wildlife problems with the exploding population of wild game in the Front Range. For example, Lions have increased in this century, he believes, throughout the Rocky Mountain region, including his home state of Arizona.

He personally observes that there is a much more dense and diverse population of all types of wildlife in the Front Range due to the unlimited resources of food available. The wildlife, especially the elk he says, no longer have to compete with the cattle for grazing land. Land now, in chopped up pieces, offers a variety of vegetation for nibbling.

One of the ongoing challenges for the game and fish departments in the Rocky Mountain region is to coordinate efforts with the people of their respective states on how to retain wildlife without endangering people. The three highway deaths this year in the Evergreen area from elk collisions point to the necessity of addressing this problem. With so many new people moving in and the population increasing this problem can only get worse.

Spalding believes that it will sap the resources of the Division of Wildlife to expect them to do the thinning of the elk herd with government hunters. Drugging, tranquilizing and transporting the elk to other areas is also an expensive solution and not effective. He believes a possible solution would be to increase the reliance on the sport hunter and increase safer ways to harvest the game such as using bows, crossbows and muzzleloaders.

Spalding thinks the solution calls for more education and tolerance for hunting. If more elk are harvested by the hunter, less are available to be hit on the highway and cause the deaths of people in the automobiles.

Ralph Matzner, manager of the Mount Evans wildlife area and a veteran with the Division of Wildlife here in Colorado for the past 27 years, agrees with Spalding, that hunting is the tool and without that we can't manage the herds effectively. He says in Colorado both the bow, crossbow and shotgun with a slug can be used to harvest the elk. For the past three years permits for hunting on private land have increased, but the problem is that the land is getting so cut up into small pieces that hunting is becoming more difficult.

Dr. Joan Spalding is a member of the Commercial Arborists Association and an educational consultant.