

Mule deer, US 93 and wildlife crossings

By Larry Hyslop



A group of mule deer using the overpass at 10-mile crossing

Highway 93 north of Wells used to be a problem area for wildlife/vehicle collisions. This area is a main migration route for mule deer between their summer range in the Snake and Adobe Ranges to winter range in the Pequop Mountains. In the early 2000s, all of Nevada documented 2,000 wildlife collisions during a five year period, 1,500 of these collisions involving mule deer. Other states have much higher collision numbers but since Nevada's mule deer population is lower than other states, our losses of wildlife are significant, plus the vehicle damage incurred and possible human injuries.

Since the construction of the two wildlife crossings north of Wells, wildlife collisions have dropped significantly. Mule deer are using 10-mile crossing's one overpass and two underpasses, along with HD Summit's overpass and underpass.

Nova Simpson spent the last four springs and falls conducting research to determine if mule deer were using these crossing structures and which structure type was preferred. This time covered eight mule deer migrations at 10-mile and six at HD Summit. She conducted this research as part of her graduate studies at UNR and is now employed with the Nevada Department of Transportation.

She used 22 cameras, setting them at the entrances to the various crossing structures to record movement across the highway. They produced 500,000 photos during the study, all of which she analyzed.

More than 26,000 crossings were documented within the first three years of data collection, with the fourth year still being analyzed. During the spring migration of 2013, these photos captured 4,521 successful deer crossings, 89% of which used 10-mile and 11% used HD Summit. Of those, 84% of the mule deer crossings used the overpasses and 16% used the underpasses.

Of particular importance was a set of photos taken during the summer of 2011 that captured three pronghorn antelope using the 10-mile overpass. This is the first instance anywhere in the U.S. of pronghorns using an overpass. Nova's photos also caught elk, badgers, bobcats, coyotes, jackrabbits, cattle and horses.

The favorite times for crossings were mornings and evenings, with larger groups of mule deer crossing during the day than night. During the fall migrations, a spike in crossing numbers occurred about the third week in October with smaller spikes during later fall storms. The spring migrations spiked at different times during March and April. Nova's guesses are spring spikes coincide with landscapes greening up.

Her research showed the crossings are beneficial by greatly reducing the number of vehicle collisions. They also help maintain mule deer migrations. Since these two crossings were constructed, another has been added to I-80 at Silver Zone Pass, the first Nevada overpass crossing an interstate and the largest overpass in the U.S. Another crossing is badly needed on I-80 near the top of the Pequops.

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