

Bitterroot Valley Winter Eagle Project  
Winter 2018 Update  
12/31/18  
Kate Stone & Eric Rasmussen



This winter we placed cameras at 12 locations on private lands throughout the Northern Bitterroot Valley, stretching from the Miller Creek drainage southeast of Missoula to areas south of Hamilton.



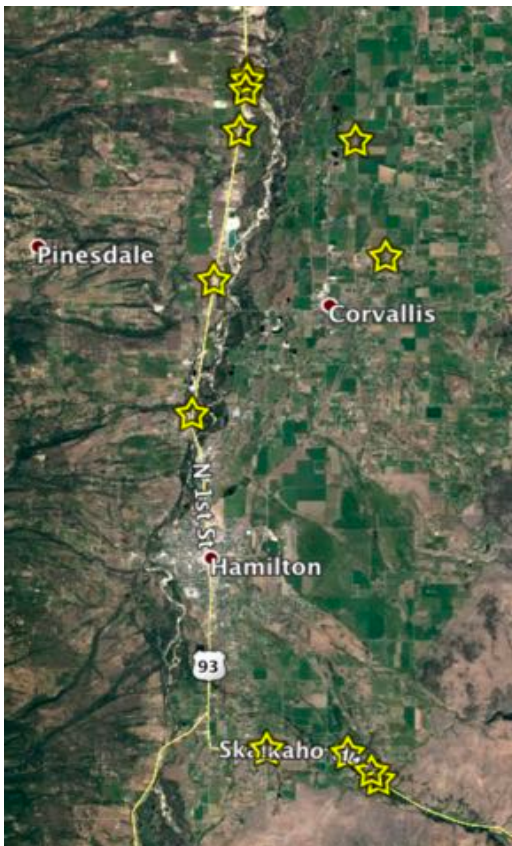
Our winter eagle crew includes Eric Rasmussen, Kate Stone, and Troy Maier, with support from Raptor View Research Institute. Here Rob Domenech helps arrange a deer carcass in hopes of catching a pair of resident Golden Eagles frequenting the northwest corner of the Bitterroot Valley.



We have salvage permits from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to collect and move roadkill deer and elk within the Bitterroot Valley. So far, we collected and set 97 white-tailed deer, three mule deer, and two elk carcasses. Many of our carcasses come from the Montana Department of Transportation, and we are thankful for their help with roadkill collection. Removing roadkill from roadsides keeps both people and scavenging wildlife safe.



Though most of our carcasses come from the DOT compost station, we began mapping roadkill pick-up locations when we find them. Deer collision hotspots become clear the more data we collect.



We examine deer carcasses for body condition as well as physical abnormalities such as an overbite/underbite, hoof deformities, and unusual genitalia. Most of the deer we've inspected have thick layers of fat. We found several guts filled with grain and cracked corn, suggesting Ravalli County residents continue to illegally feed deer. We also noted many carcasses missing antlers or entire heads. Though it is illegal for the public to do so, it appears many people continue to collect antlers from roadkill deer.



Our twelve sites are situated in varied terrain, from the Bitterroot floodplain, east and west to the foothills of the Sapphires and Bitterroot Mountains. We are seeing unusually large congregations of Bald Eagles at several of our mid- and southern-Valley sites. Capture locations on the MPG Ranch lack such Bald Eagle congregations.



Hamilton site

6 inHg | 39 F | 12/14/2018 04:06PM HAM1



Stevensville site

M 12:31 PM 12/16/18 57 F | STEV7TH CAM

We also have good detections of Golden Eagles, including presumably resident pairs, at several of our sites.



25.42 inHg - 8 34F 12/17/2018 08:10AM SKALK 1



25.86 inHg 1 8F 12/04/2018 08:24AM FLO2



Golden Eagle "295" appeared in the Sapphire foothills northeast of Hamilton. RVRI captured her as a third year female on the MPG Ranch on 12/23/15. She has not been seen for nearly three years.



17°F - 8°C ●

12-03-2018

One day later a Golden Eagle with a transmitter arrived. After retrieving location data we determined this eagle is “Niko”. RVRI captured this fourth year eagle at a mobile site in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains, west of Victor, on 2/8/18. A year of satellite tracking shows that Niko’s breeding territory is in the Saint Elias Mountains of the southwest Yukon Territory. He returned to the Bitterroot Valley in mid October. After feeding at this site in early December, he headed west into the heart of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.



26°F - 3°C ●

12-03-2018

Golden Eagle "390" is one of only a few eagles captured by RVRI on the MPG Ranch during fall migration. They captured it as a hatch-year male on 9/20/18. Mike McTee picked it up feeding on a gut pile near Whaley Draw on the MPG Ranch on 11/15/18 (top) before we re-sighted him west of Hamilton on 12/12/18 (bottom).



InHg | 8 42F | 11/15/2018 01:27PM CAMERA18



Bushnell | M HAM5 | 24°F - 4°C | 12-12-2018 09:36:14

Bald Eagle "48" was captured by RVRI on 2/28/18 as an adult in the Bitterroot foothills west of Victor. It appeared at the same site as the previously mentioned three Golden Eagles.



19°F - 7°C ●

12-02-2018

Bald Eagle "28" joined the feeding frenzy on 12/23/18, east of Stevensville. RVRI banded this male on 2/5/18 as a second-year bird, on the MPG Ranch floodplain.



12:10 PM 12/24/18 59 F ● STEV7TH CAM



AM 01:44 PM 12/23/18 53 F ● STEV7TH

Golden Eagle “303” was banded 1/24/16 at MPG’s Woodchuck bait, as a fourth year bird. This is the third consecutive year of resighting this eagle—once in Miller Creek on 1/16/17 and on 3/4/16 in St. Ignatius.



25.90 inHg ↓ 20°F 12/13/2018 09:05AM MIL 2

Golden Eagle “290” was banded 12/11/15 at the same bait station as above, as a hatch year bird.



25.59 inHg ↓ 29°F 12/14/2018 03:09PM MIL 2

Northern Goshawks seldom scavenge, though we've seen them feeding at three of our sites. An adult flies off while an immature feeds on the ground (top) and the juvenile flies off with the arrival of a Red-tailed Hawk (bottom).



31F ● 11/23/2018 12:17PM FLOR1



26.25 inHg | 26F ● 11/18/2018 01:09PM FLOR1

We also have a consistent lion visiting a site located at the northwest corner of the valley, due west of MPG. Last year we collected DNA and identified two different lions at this location, neither related to MPG lions.



The lion buries the carcass as much as possible, using snow and pine needles (below). We found a lion “litter box” nearby and collected two samples of lion scat (right).





We continue to document American marten, bobcats, and coyotes at several of our sites.



We now have 4771 volunteers classifying our camera images on Zooniverse, the crowd-sourced, citizen science website. We continue our outreach and education efforts using various means, including a scavenger “art” display at the North Valley Public Library in Stevensville (top), and public talks about scavengers and our research (bottom).





Behind the scenes we find a little time for amusement.



We drag an enormous elk carcass behind the truck to move the bait station further from road disturbance.



We plan on keeping our twelve camera trap stations going through the winter, with the possibility of adding a few new sites if landowners express interest. If the start of this season is any indication, then the rest of the winter holds great potential for more encounters of marked eagles.

The Raptor View Research Institute's crew is also excited to begin mobile trapping at four of our more productive sites, from south of Hamilton to east of Stevensville, up to the west of Florence.

Many thanks to the private landowners involved, the RVRI team, Jesse Facchini (for replacing the truck alternator in a pinch), Troy Maier (for doing a lot of the dirty work), and Bitterroot Audubon and MPG Ranch for their continued support.

