

How the Drought Is Affecting Our Native Wildlife

I suspect everybody is getting really fed-up with this drought, and trying to keep our most-prized plants alive is making a lot of us really cranky. And it is much worse for our farmers and ranchers trying to make a living. But the drought is certainly causing problems for our native wildlife too. Here is what I think is going on with the wildlife.

The effects of the drought start with the smallest creatures. Many insects whose larval stage spends the winter underground might not have emerged as adults this year because the ground was so hard and dry. Many insects may have become desiccated in the egg or larval stage and never made it to the adult stage. It seems to me that there are significantly fewer spiders, butterflies and moths this year than usual.

A lower insect population has huge ramifications for all of the animals that depend on insects for food, and that includes birds, lizards, frogs and toads, and even many of our small mammals, especially bats, skunks, raccoons and armadillos. Even seed-eating birds need insects to feed their young, as do hummingbirds. A reduced insect population means that many songbirds will raise fewer offspring, and many species that usually raise two broods a year may only have one brood this year.

Songbirds that usually feed on grass and forb seeds will find the pickings pretty slim this year, which may make them more dependent on backyard feeders.

Lack of water in places where it can usually be found also directly impacts the populations of insects that need water for one of their life stages. Reduced amounts of standing water also affect frogs, turtles, crawfish, and many species of small fish. Their reduced populations mean less food for the higher animals that usually feed on them.

Fewer young birds and lower populations of songbirds in general mean less food for all of their predators, such as many small mammals, hawks and snakes.

Most all of our small mammals, raccoons, skunks, possums, armadillos, rabbits, rats and mice will likely have a much harder time finding food. The result is likely to be that they will become more desperate and range wider in their daily search and thus are more likely to come into people's yards where there may be sources of green plants or other food. It is also likely that they will be out more often in the daylight hours when they can't find enough food at night.

All of these animal's populations will eventually be impacted as they are able to raise fewer young and also are more likely to be killed as they are more active and come into contact with people more frequently.

The populations of rabbits and hares, as well as rats and mice are known to fluctuate widely from time to time because of various environmental conditions. What is also

known is that once the population of these prey animals declines significantly, a decline of all of the predator populations follows, usually a year or two later. So we may see a decline later in the population of hawks, owls, foxes and coyotes. Animals that eat carrion will do alright for a while, but as the populations of all animals decrease, they will eventually be affected also.

The white-tailed deer are doubly stressed by the extreme heat and drought. We had such a good year early in 2010, with abundant rainfall into September, that both the bucks and does were in good condition during the last breeding season, so many does carried twins or triplets into the spring. They are now being stressed trying to raise more fawns than the current pasture conditions will allow and having to travel farther for water. The general overpopulation of white-tailed deer and their having to compete with livestock and exotic ungulates makes their plight even more serious.

Both deer and livestock are susceptible to heat stress in these conditions and may be seen breathing with open mouths.

How significant all of the above effects may be will obviously depend on how long and how severe this drought turns out to be. We know that it is certainly one of the worst droughts on record, so we really don't have much experience with these kinds of conditions, nor do our wildlife.

If you know a rain dance, now would be a good time to try it. Until next time...

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