

# Teton County Idaho Natural Resource Overlay Recommendations

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Prepared by Teton County Idaho Wildlife Advisory Committee.

Presented to Planning and Zoning Commission, Teton County Idaho, May 2024.

## Introduction

The Teton County Idaho Wildlife Advisory Committee (the Committee) prepared the following recommendations for revision of the Natural Resource Overlay (NRO) as part of its authorized powers, duties, and responsibilities to recommend policies designed to protect and restore fish and wildlife habitats in Teton County, to make recommendations in the planning processes undertaken by the County as these processes relate to wildlife and wildlife habitats, to recommend regulations to promote natural resource conservation, and to provide information for the purposes of fish and wildlife habitat management in the County.

Our guideposts in this effort arose from both the Teton County Comprehensive Plan and the Land Development Code:

1. Comprehensive Plan Chapter 5, The Framework Plan, Natural Resource Goal #8 states: *“Respect sensitive habitat and migration areas for wildlife”*. It specifically discusses policies directing land development decisions to *“strongly weigh the needs of wildlife”*, and it emphasizes utilizing tools such as overlay maps *“including new information as it becomes available, to make land use and site planning decisions”*.
2. Comprehensive Plan Chapter 6 - Implementation delineates a key action to *“Reduce impacts in riparian, wetland, floodplain and other sensitive or hazardous areas by **strengthening** the wildlife habitat and natural hazard overlay standards”*.
3. Land Development Code 5-4 Natural Resource Protection: *“The Natural Resource Overlay Map identifies the general areas where the most important and sensitive natural resources are located in the County. These areas are most likely to include indicator habitats for indicator species as listed in Sections 5-4-1-C and 5-4-1-D below. The Natural Resource Overlay Map may be **updated to reflect new, credible information** that is provided to the County.”*

An NRO is a tool to help decision-makers conserve important natural resources, therefore it must incorporate the most current data and analysis regarding the resources addressed in the overlay - otherwise it fails in its purpose.

The data referenced in the Committee recommendations below represent the newest and most credible information available (as expressed in items #1 and #3 above), from the most credible sources available (Idaho Department of Fish and Game and Teton Regional Land Trust). The data for these recommendations represent the first such information to inform revision of the Natural Resource Overlay since 2006, and also the first in the twelve years since the Comprehensive Plan goals were implemented.

The primary source for the NRO recommendations that follow is the revised [Summary of Fish and Wildlife Resources in Teton County, Idaho](#) prepared by the Upper Snake Region of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game in April 2022 (referred to in the narrative as ‘IDFG Summary’ or ‘Summary’). The robust data underpinning this Summary are largely the result of advances in wildlife monitoring technology that have occurred in recent years. These advances have dramatically augmented information regarding wildlife habitat utilization,

movements, and life cycle needs.

Additionally, highly credible data sourced from 20 years of Teton Regional Land Trust monitoring were also utilized to guide these recommendations.

These data sources will be referenced more specifically within the following narrative.

Along with this narrative, preliminary updated Natural Resource Overlay maps, to visually represent these recommendations, have been constructed and made available.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee recommends changes to three of the seven layers in the Natural Resource Overlay. The remainder of the NRO that is not specifically addressed below is recommended to remain the same.

The support for these recommendations is detailed as follows:

### **Big Game Migration Corridors and Seasonal Range**

*-Incorporate updated seasonal mule deer and elk movement overview map (Figure 4, IDFG Summary) which includes winter range.*

The Summary describes Figure 4 as based on “past and ongoing collection of data from vhf and GPS radio-collared animals, aerial surveys, and staff observations collected by IDFG for decades”. It specifically states that Teton County is below IDFG elk population objectives and “IDFG’s ability to increase elk population objectives...is limited in Teton County by a lack of suitable winter range and low landowner tolerance”. The Summary goes on to state that populations could decrease further with loss of additional winter range.

In regards to mule deer, the Summary describes their need for varied habitat throughout the year and connectedness of habitats. The Summary specifically states “Teton County leaders can maximize benefits to regional mule deer populations by focusing on winter range and transitional habitats that facilitate migration to and from higher elevation public lands”.

*-Incorporate updated mule deer and elk migration data (Figures 5 & 6, IDFG Summary and digitally acquired data).*

These two figures are generated by movement analyses of elk and mule deer in the northern part of Teton Valley and illustrate corridors utilized in their seasonal movements. Portions of these corridors are not included in Figure 4 so are included as a separate recommendation for incorporation into the NRO.

*-Retain elk wintering areas along the Teton River and areas associated with the South Leigh Creek corridor in the 2006 NRO.*

The Summary describes elk wintering areas along the Teton River/Teton River valley corridor and fluvial cottonwood corridors extending from the western slope of the Tetons into the valley. These areas are not depicted in Figures 4 or 5 of the Summary.

### **Sharp-tailed Grouse Breeding Habitat**

*-Incorporate updated data provided by IDFG Summary (Figure 11) detailing land within Teton County located within 2 kilometers of a known Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse (CSTG) lek.*

As a Teton County keystone species and one currently occupying <5% of its historical range in

the US, CSTG has been classified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need by IDFG and thereby warrants ongoing habitat restoration and conservation efforts. This particular recommendation based around lek locations is supported by research documenting that most nest and brood locations occur within 2 kilometers of the lek where the hen was bred.

*-Retain areas along Teton River Canyon, Teton River downstream of Harrops Bridge, and Badger Creek corridors in the 2006 NRO.*

The Summary describes that CSTG winter habitat includes shrubby riparian zones and patches of mountain shrubs including along the Teton River Canyon, aspen groves and stringers, fluvial Forested riparian habitat, valley reach of the Teton River, and along the National Forest Boundary.

### *Waterbird Breeding, Migration, Foraging and Wintering Habitat*

*-Incorporate updated Waterbird Breeding, Migration, Foraging and Wintering Habitat layer.*

Include Teton Regional Land Trust's annual monitoring observations from the years 2003-2022 of fall staging greater sandhill cranes (over 100,000 observations), an iconic Teton County species of high ecological and economic importance. Sandhill cranes are a Teton County Idaho indicator species and Idaho Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

*-Correct 2006 NRO mapping error.*

Through the process of updating the NRO layers, we discovered a technical mapping error that resulted in a portion of the Waterbird Breeding, Migration, Foraging and Wintering Habitat (specifically the Waterbird Migration, Foraging Habitat) not being shown in the current (2006) NRO maps. This map covers wetland habitats generally associated with the Teton River and lands east of the river and west of Highway 33 from Victor to Tetonia. This area includes habitat for nearly all of Teton County's resident and migratory waterbirds and is particularly important for breeding, migration and overwintering. The missing portion of the waterbird map was largely already covered by other 2006 NRO maps, particularly the priority wetland habitat map, amongst others.

### **Summary**

As seen in the narrative, specific recommendations for updating several Teton County NRO layers have been made based primarily on data from the 2022 IDFG Summary, with significant contributions by Teton Regional Land Trust. In addition to these specifics, the Committee recommends that any land parcel under consideration for technical evaluation due to the presence of one or more Natural Resource Overlay layers should be evaluated for all indicator species and all indicator habitats.

Finally, the Committee recommends that regular Teton County NRO map reevaluations occur, initiated by acquisition of data updates at regular intervals from Idaho Department of Fish and Game and other sources.

We hope these recommendations will prove helpful to our Teton County decision-makers.

Respectfully,  
Teton County Idaho Wildlife Advisory Committee  
Jeffrey Klausmann, Chair