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NEWS

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River-bottom Wildlife Thriving Thanks to Seedling Trees

FRUITA, Colo. – If you grow it, they will come.

Such was the logic behind two decades of planting trees and shrubs to attract wildlife to Horsethief Canyon State Wildlife Area, where the fertile bottomlands of the Colorado River snake through the high-desert landscape west of Grand Junction. Hunters frequent the area to harvest mourning doves, waterfowl, mule deer and other game, while hikers and horseback riders visit the desert oasis to enjoy the riverside scenery and watch birds and other wildlife.

Although the wildlife area provides a 1,200-acre oasis for both wildlife and recreationists, its wide-open landscape and close proximity to Interstate 70 made the habitat less appealing. So over the past two decades, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Colorado State Forest Service together planted more than 100,000 tree and shrub seedlings to improve habitat for wildlife, including birds, deer, bobcats, wild turkeys, rabbits, raccoons and the odd black bear or cougar passing through.

This week, the agencies will be planting another 900 seedling trees and shrubs at the state wildlife area as part of an ongoing project to meet U.S. Bureau of Reclamation requirements on the property.

“We want to convert portions of these agricultural areas to a dense mix of trees and shrubs, which will provide critical cover and a food source for a variety of game and non-game wildlife species,” said Kelly Rogers, district forester for the Colorado State Forest Service in Grand Junction. The trees and shrubs planted at the state wildlife area all came from the CSFS Nursery in Fort Collins.

First Seedlings Planted in 1993

Walking through Horsethief Canyon SWA, one notices the fragrant scent of sumac and damp earth, along with the sounds of mourning doves cooing, geese honking... and the occasional interruption of Jake brakes blaring from passing semi-trailers. In part to minimize the sights and sounds of the interstate, in the early 1990s the previous manager of the state wildlife area worked with the CSFS on a plan to revegetate bottomlands that until the 1980s had been comprised purely of corn and alfalfa fields.

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Of the first CSFS seedlings planted at Horsethief Canyon SWA in 1993, many were derived from seeds that were harvested there and grown at the CSFS Nursery to ensure higher survival rates. Rogers says many of the seedlings died that first year, but every year since, the plantings have been increasingly successful due to such improvements as installation of an irrigation system, the use of weed barrier fabric and better selection of planting sites. After five or six years, the rows took off and still thrive through continued watering from the irrigation system.

“The first year after you plant seedlings, they often don’t look like much. Even in the second year, they frequently don’t look good. But by the fourth or fifth year, they’re chest high,” Rogers said. “It just takes patience.”

The dense thickets grown at Horsethief Canyon SWA from seedling stock – some now nearly 20 feet tall – offer prime habitat for many wildlife species and effectively minimize the sights and sounds of the nearby interstate. To date, 56 acres of the approximately 300 acres of agricultural land available on the state wildlife area are dominated by planted trees and shrubs, some which offer food for wildlife. Division of Wildlife Technician Tom Sanderson, who helps manage the state wildlife area, says the local birds and other animals really love the fruits produced by the planted shrubs.

“They’ve gotta get past me to get to the plums, though,” he jokes.

More Seedlings Now Being Planted

The Rocky Mountain juniper, buffaloberry, New Mexico privet and native plum plantings just south of the river have been so successful that the Division of Wildlife and CSFS are planting another 900 seedlings this week on the north side of the river. According to Derek Lovoi, a Division of Wildlife laborer involved in the project, the focus of this year’s planting is to create a buffer between the highway and the river corridor that also will replace invasive tamarisk that was cut and removed last year.

“The end result will be a long, narrow, dense band of trees and shrubs that will provide a visual and noise barrier between the river and the highway,” Rogers said.

CSFS personnel will assist the Division of Wildlife with the planting by providing labor, technical assistance, a tree planting plow and a fabric-laying implement. The seedlings to be planted this month represent the first to be added to Horsethief Canyon SWA in five years, although the CSFS has continued to help landowners with seedling projects on nearby properties. Rogers says area wildlife and human users will need to be patient, as the seedlings planted this month won’t offer significant benefits for several years.

Landowners interested in purchasing CSFS seedlings should contact the CSFS Grand Junction District at 970-248-7325.

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