

Researchers detail newly discovered deer migration

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A mule deer buck travels south near Boulder Lake in Sublette County in a newly discovered deer migration corridor that is the topic of an April 22 presentation at the University of Wyoming. Credit: Joe Riis

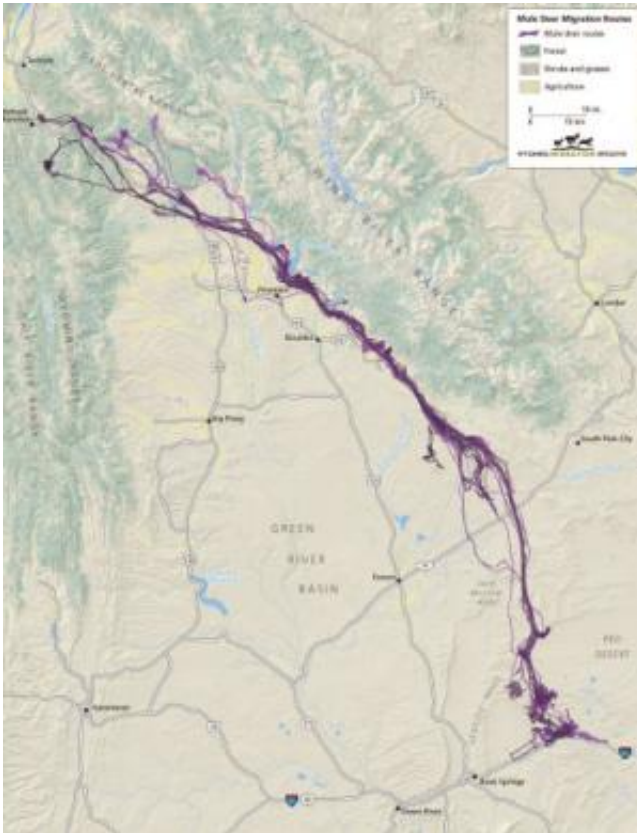
A team of researchers including University of Wyoming scientists has documented the longest migration of mule deer ever recorded, the latest development in an initiative to understand and conserve ungulate migration in Wyoming.

The researchers explained the Wyoming Migration Initiative and described the newly discovered Red Desert-to-Hoback deer [migration](#) during a public program Tuesday, April 22.

"Ungulate migrations require vast, wide-open landscapes, and they are part of what makes Wyoming one of the few truly wild places in the West," says Matt Kauffman, director of the Wyoming Migration Initiative and head of the Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, where he is an associate professor in UW's Department of Zoology and Physiology. "Our aim is to make research about Wyoming's ungulate migrations more accessible—and more useful—to people working to manage and conserve these herds and their habitats."

Tuesday's event begins with an opportunity to view photos and other exhibits at 5 p.m. in the Berry Center atrium. Presentations by researchers Kauffman and Hall Sawyer, and Riis, are scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. in the Berry Center auditorium. A reception and further opportunity to view photos and exhibits will run from 7-9 p.m., with refreshments provided. The event is co-sponsored by the UW Biodiversity Institute and the Department of Zoology and Physiology.

Sawyer was working as a researcher in the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit more than a decade ago when he first began researching Wyoming's migratory ungulates, which include pronghorn, elk, [mule deer](#), moose and bighorn sheep. At that time, scientists had to track the animals on foot, searching for radio telemetry signals, to document their movements. Sawyer was the first to use such methods to identify the Path of the Pronghorn that leads pronghorn from the Pinedale area to Grand Teton National Park, an annual trek of about 120 miles.



Credit: migrationinitiative.org/

The latest discovery of the 150-mile mule deer migration, detailed in a new publication led by Sawyer and produced by the Wyoming Migration Initiative, demonstrates the need for further research into the movement of the state's most prized big game animals, Kauffman says.

"The more we learn, the more these animals surprise us," Kauffman wrote in the introduction to the new publication.

Sawyer, who went on to earn a doctoral degree in zoology and physiology at UW, now works as a research biologist and project manager with Western Ecosystems Technology Inc. The latest discovery began in 2011, when Sawyer worked with the Bureau of Land

Management to place radio collars on what they thought was a resident herd of mule deer near Rock Springs.

He found that most of the animals, numbering about 500, only spend the winter in that part of the Red Desert. During spring, the deer travel 50 miles north across the desert to the west side of the Wind River Mountains, where they join with 4,000-5,000 other deer that winter in the foothills of the Wind Rivers and then travel a narrow corridor along the base of the mountains for 60 miles before crossing the Upper Green River Basin. In the final leg of the journey, the animals travel another 30-50 miles to their individual summer ranges in the Hoback Basin.

The new publication includes detailed maps of each leg of the deer migration, descriptions of obstacles the animals face, and recommendations for land managers and others to preserve the migration.

"Even though mule deer are able to navigate the [migration route](#) in its current form, there are areas where the route could be made more permeable for mule deer, which would improve the functionality of the route," Sawyer says. "Fortunately, advances in GPS-telemetry and associated mapping methods now allow us to accurately delineate migration routes across large landscapes and provide stakeholders with the information needed to effectively conserve ungulate migration."

Wyoming Game and Fish Department Director Scott Talbott says the work of the Wyoming Migration Initiative is valuable for his agency.

"The department utilizes this type of research for all species in our management of all wildlife resources in Wyoming," Talbott says.

"Specific research findings, such as detailed migration information for mule deer, provide additional insight and understanding to department personnel, enabling them to make science-based management

recommendations benefiting the wildlife resources and sportsmen of Wyoming."

Kauffman notes that the Wyoming Migration Initiative is compiling an "Atlas of Wildlife Migration" detailing all of the state's ungulate migrations, along with building an online database to make migration data widely available.

More information: migrationinitiative.org/content/migration-assessment

Provided by University of Wyoming

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