

UTAH'S CONSERVATION PERMIT PROGRAM

ANNUAL REPORT



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Utah's Conservation Permit Program

Annual Report — Fiscal Year 2025

Utah's Conservation Permit Program benefits all Utah hunters. What started in the early 1980s as a creative approach to raise needed funds for wildlife conservation has blossomed into a well-regulated program that raises millions of dollars each year. Those dollars are then invested back into wildlife conservation. This novel approach to funding conservation has allowed the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) to seize opportunities, grow the state's wildlife populations and improve wildlife management. This program is made possible by public draw hunters generously giving up a small percentage of coveted permits to help generate revenue for Utah's wildlife.

Origins of Utah's Conservation Permit Program

Historical accounts and archeological evidence indicate that bighorn sheep were once abundant across much of Utah, but in the early 1970s, many of Utah's bighorn sheep populations were struggling or had altogether disappeared. There was a very limited distribution of desert bighorn sheep across southern Utah. Biologists observed large tracts of unoccupied desert bighorn sheep habitat and, at the same time, became concerned about the many desert bighorn concentrated in Canyonlands National Park. Wildlife managers recognized that the high bighorn densities in Canyonlands were not sustainable. Those excess bighorn sheep presented wildlife managers with both an opportunity and a dilemma.



The excess bighorn in Canyonlands provided an opportunity to establish new populations and augment other struggling herds, but how could a large-scale, expensive translocation project fit within the tight constraints of the DWR's budget? At about the same time, a group of avid hunters founded the Utah Bighorn Sheep Society. They made a proposal to generate funding to reestablish bighorn sheep in the state. They asked for one permit that could be sold at auction, with the proceeds dedicated to bighorn sheep

management. In 1980, the first permit sold for \$20,000, and Utah's Conservation Permit Program was born. The program allowed generous hunters to help cover the costs of conserving, transplanting and managing this highly sought-after species.

The conservation permit strategy was effective, and over several years the DWR used the proceeds of auctioned desert bighorn sheep conservation permits to fund a successful translocation program. That program led to the establishment and/or supplementation of new desert bighorn sheep herds in several hunting units, including San Rafael-North, San Rafael-South, Henry Mountains, Kaiparowits-East and Kaiparowits-Escalante, as well as herds within Arches National Park and Capitol Reef National Park.

The early success of the Conservation Permit Program led to its expansion. The program now includes and benefits the following species: bear, bighorn sheep (desert and Rocky Mountain), bison, deer, elk, moose, mountain goat, pronghorn and turkey.

How the program works

Conservation permits represent only a small percentage of total hunting permits issued, but they can produce big results. The number of conservation permits allocated for a given species is based on how well a population is doing (e.g., population size, increasing trends and long-term health) and the number of hunting permits available to public hunters. As public hunting opportunities increase, conservation permits may also increase, with a maximum of eight conservation permits per hunting unit. After the Utah Wildlife Board approves specific permits and numbers, the DWR partners with wildlife conservation organizations to sell the permits.



Conservation organizations that participated in the program in fiscal year 2025 included the Dallas Safari Club Utah Chapter (DSC), Mule Deer Foundation (MDF), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), Safari Club International (SCI), Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (SFW), Utah Archery Association (UAA), Utah Chukar & Wildlife Foundation (UCWF), Utah Houndsmen Association (UHA), Utah Wild Sheep Foundation (UWSF) and Wildlife Conservation Foundation (WCF). Other conservation groups can also apply to participate by following the procedures listed in [Utah Administrative Rule R657-41](#), which is the rule that regulates the Conservation Permit Program.

The conservation organizations market, promote and auction the permits. These auctions typically coincide with chapter banquets, expos or other fundraising events. The goal is to maximize revenue to fund wildlife conservation activities. After the auction, the conservation organization returns 30% of the money raised directly to the DWR. The conservation organizations may keep up to 10% of the proceeds to cover administrative costs, and the remaining 60% is held by the conservation organizations for a short time as they work cooperatively with the DWR to choose approved conservation projects to fund. As a result, hunters can identify and prioritize projects that matter to them and then direct conservation permit funding to those projects. It gives conservation-minded hunters a strong voice and encourages cooperation and collaboration between the DWR and participating organizations.

Seizing opportunities

The funds raised through the Conservation Permit Program are reinvested back into Utah's wildlife. Conservation projects are wide ranging and provide diverse benefits. With these projects, wildlife managers can establish new populations, augment existing populations, improve wildlife habitat, monitor for diseases and conduct essential research. The program provides resources and tools that let wildlife biologists and hunters accomplish remarkable things for wildlife and habitat conservation.

Having a source of funding available to wildlife managers in a timely manner can make all the difference when it comes to managing wildlife. Wildlife and their habitats are dynamic, and changes can happen rapidly. The desert bighorn sheep source population in Canyonlands National Park experienced a die-off shortly after the translocations in the 1980s occurred. Had wildlife managers been forced to pursue traditional funding, which is typically limited in availability and takes much longer to obtain, that opportunity might have been lost. Whether it is capturing source animals when they are abundant, or striking while the iron (or ground) is hot to get a wildfire reseeded, timing is essential in effective wildlife management. Utah's Conservation Permit Program allows wildlife managers to adapt to challenges and allocate resources where and when they are needed.



Photo courtesy of Jim Shuler

Improving wildlife management in FY 2025

Having adequate funding is often a source of concern and a limitation for state fish and wildlife agencies. While many Western states struggle with increasingly stretched budgets, Utah leads the way with habitat work, wildlife transplants, wildlife research and monitoring.

The Conservation Permit Program is key to providing funding for needed research and management of Utah's game populations. Below are examples of work completed this past year that would not have been possible without funding from conservation groups and the Conservation Permit Program.

Turkey translocations

In January 2025, the DWR partnered with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and National Wild Turkey Federation to transport 25 Rio Grande turkeys from Texas to Utah. The translocation had three main purposes:

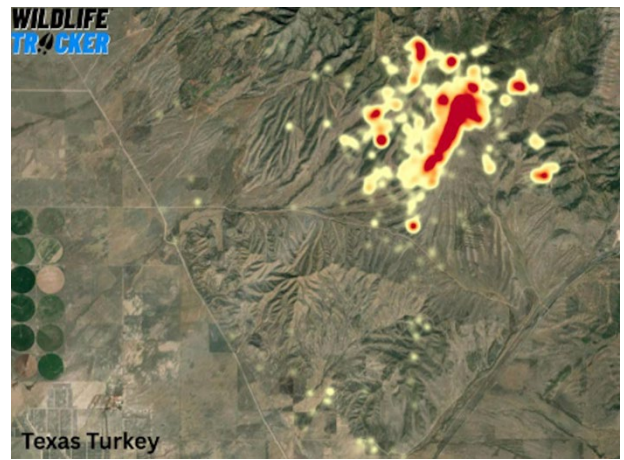
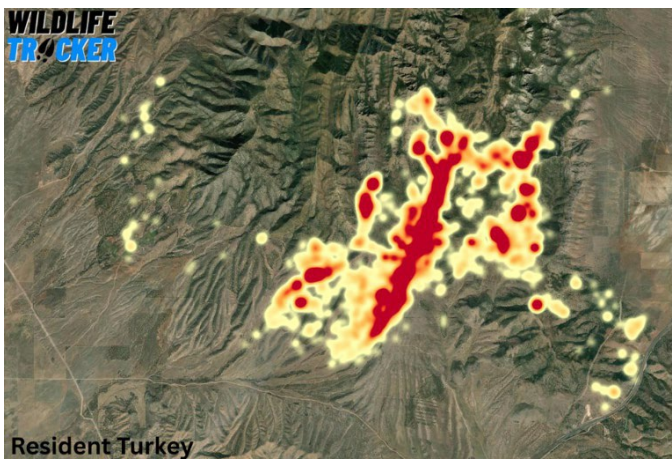
- To collect data on the survival rates of turkeys in different habitat types
- To measure the nesting success of translocated vs. resident birds
- To collect feathers for genetic sampling

In total, 18 hens, five toms and two jakes were transported to Utah from Texas via Delta cargo. The birds were all fitted with bands prior to shipment, and upon arrival, 13 of them were fitted with GPS transmitters, 12 of which also had VHF capability.

The turkeys' southern Utah release site was chosen because it had similar climatic conditions to Texas and featured suitable habitat types that offered ample food and cover. The new birds would also augment an existing turkey population. During processing, biologists measured the turkeys' weights and took feather samples, assessed their body condition and administered electrolytes. The turkeys were then placed into a soft-release pen at the release site. (The pen's design and methodology came from Arizona Game and Fish, which has reported high post-translocation survival rates of soft-released turkeys.) The turkeys were released once the results from the veterinary diagnostics lab confirmed all birds to be disease free.

In February, 14 resident birds were caught and processed from the same location. These resident turkeys were also banded and fitted with GPS transmitters (12 of which also had VHF capability). To date, four Texas turkeys and 10 resident turkeys have transmitters that are still working. Of these, two Texas birds and six resident birds likely nested this year; four nesting residents were confirmed in the field. Low nesting rates are to be expected as translocations are stressful, and most turkeys do not nest during the first year after the event. The remaining birds either died or their backpacks stopped transmitting locations. The turkeys that are still on air and transmitting at the release site will continue to be monitored.

In addition to this project, 1,057 resident turkeys were trapped in Utah this year. Of those, 149 were taken to Nevada, and the rest were translocated within the state. NWTF funded two full-time seasonal positions — one in the Northern Region and one in the Central Region — and those employees were instrumental in the success of trapping and translocating turkeys this past winter and spring.



Figures 1 and 2: It appears that the Texas birds roamed more just after translocation, exploring the habitat to decide where to settle. Two nonresident birds and six resident birds are assumed to have nested, due to telemetry data.

Neonate projects

On many wildlife management units across Utah, fawn recruitment rates are below historical averages, and the reasons for the decreases are unknown. (Fawn recruitment is the process of fawns surviving long enough to become part of the adult deer population.) In FY23, the DWR worked with Brigham Young University, Utah State University and conservation partners to conduct mule deer neonate survival studies on four study sites across Utah: Mt Nebo, Range Creek, La Sal and San Juan. (A neonate is a fawn between the ages of 0–6 months.) These studies were designed to improve researchers' understanding of mule deer does' body conditions and pregnancy rates, neonate birth timing, neonate survival rates and causes of mortality. From March 2023 to March 2025, 180 pregnant does from the four units were captured and fitted with GPS collars. The does were also implanted with a vaginal implant transmitter (VIT) that sent a message to biologists in the spring right after a birth occurred. This allowed biologists to immediately locate the newborn fawns so they could be collared, assessed and monitored. The number of fawns captured by year and unit are shown in the table below.

Unit name	FY23	FY24	FY25
Nebo	36	73	57
Range Creek	58	59	44
La Sal	45	56	41
San Juan	54	60	32
Totals	193	248	174

This project will provide a better understanding of the timing and causes of neonate mortality and how these vary across the state and by year. This data will also allow managers and biologists to implement management actions to improve neonate survival and recruitment.



Pronghorn transplant

For more than 50 years, the pronghorn herd on Parker Mountain in southern Utah has served as a source population for pronghorn transplants throughout Utah and other Western states. Nearly 6,000 animals have been captured there and relocated since 1975. However, due to recent population struggles, no transplants occurred between 2014 and 2024.

Fortunately, the Parker Mountain pronghorn population has recovered in recent years. In 2025, it once again had enough animals for a capture-and-transplant project. In late January 2025, the DWR and its conservation partners captured 317 pronghorn from Parker Mountain for transplant to four management units across Utah. These units included the Cache, Mt Dutton/Paunsaugunt, South San Rafael and Southwest Desert.

To capture the pronghorn, a helicopter was used to herd groups of around 50 animals at a time into a funnel trap. Once inside the trap, animals were mugged, processed, loaded into trailers and then taken to their respective units. As part of the transplant — for the first time ever — the DWR was able to initiate a study examining the success of the transplant. To do this, 279 pronghorn were fitted with GPS collars that provide biologists with data on their survival rates, cause-specific mortality, and movement rates and patterns. Preliminary results suggested that although the initial survival rates of the transplanted animals were lower than ideal, the pronghorn that survived the first three weeks after the release are now doing well, and many have integrated with resident pronghorn herds at the release sites.



Big game captures

Utah's biologists conduct regular aerial surveys to count bighorn sheep, bison, elk, moose, mountain goats and pronghorn. Conservation permits have also contributed to the ongoing monitoring of black bear and cougar survival, disease monitoring, turkey-trapping efforts and other components of wildlife management. In FY 2025, conservation permit sales helped fund the capture and/or collaring of nearly 2,000 big game animals as part of translocations, research, monitoring and disease-testing activities (see Table 1 below). This work would not have been possible without the money generated through Utah's Conservation Permit Program.

Table 1. Big game animals captured and/or collared using conservation permit funds in FY 2025

Species	No. animals	Unit	Purpose
Bighorn sheep	38	Nevada	Translocated to Promontory
	10	Henry Mtns	Survival, disease testing and migration
	40	Kaiparowits	Survival, disease testing and migration
	19	North Slope	Survival, disease testing and migration
	10	Pilot Mtns	Survival, disease testing and migration
	26	Pine Valley	Survival, disease testing and migration
	2	Willow Creek	Survival, disease testing and migration
Total	145		

Deer	15	Anthro	Survival and migration
	40	Book Cliffs	Survival and migration
	28	Boulder	Survival and migration
	51	Cache	Survival and migration
	11	East Canyon	Survival and migration
	133	La Sal	Survival, migration and neonate capture
	59	Manti	Survival and migration
	57	Monroe	Survival and migration
	119	Nebo	Survival, migration and neonate capture
	23	North Slope	Survival and migration
	60	Oquirrh-Stansbury	Survival and migration
	41	Pahvant	Survival and migration
	88	Pine Valley	Survival and migration
	159	Range Creek	Survival, migration and neonate capture
	83	San Juan	Survival, migration and neonate capture
	46	South Slope	Survival and migration

	25	Southwest Desert	Survival and migration
	52	Wasatch West	Survival and migration
	40	Zion	Survival and migration
Total	1,130		

Elk	23	Box Elder	Survival and migration
	41	Cache	Survival and migration
	16	East Canyon	Survival and migration
	63	Hardware Ranch	Survival, disease testing and migration
	52	Nebo	Survival, migration and neonate capture
Total	195		

Moose	12	Box Elder	Survival and migration
	15	Wasatch East	Survival and migration
	25	Wasatch West	Survival and migration
Total	52		

Mountain Goat	10	La Sal	Survival and migration
	32	Tushar Mtns	Survival and migration
	12	Uintas	Survival and migration
Total	54		

Pronghorn	5	Anthro	Survival and migration
	317	Parker Mtn	Transplant to augment other herds
	21	Parker Mtn	Survival and migration
	20	Southwest Desert	Survival and migration
Total	363		

Total animals	1,939
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Program results in FY 2025

The Utah Wildlife Board approved 336 conservation permits for FY 2025 (see Table 2 below). This represents less than 2% of the total number of permits issued for all these hunts combined. The permits were auctioned by conservation organizations and raised more than \$8.7 million. In contrast, if these permits had been sold at current resident permit prices, they would have raised just over \$56,000. Since 2001, conservation permits have generated more than \$96 million for conservation work in Utah. See the 2025 Conservation Permit Program Audit for more information.

Table 2. Conservation permits authorized for FY 2025

Permit type	Number
Antlerless elk	20
Bear	44
Bison	6
Buck deer	39
Bull elk	91
Bull moose	5
Desert bighorn sheep	8
Mountain goat	7
Pronghorn	69
Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep	6
Wild turkey	41
Total permits	336

The true value of conservation permit dollars often exceeds the balance listed on paper. The DWR frequently uses this money to serve as matching funds for grants and other funding mechanisms that result in much larger amounts being awarded and spent in Utah. For example, in projects permitted by the Pittman-Robertson Act, every dollar generated by the Conservation Permit Program can be matched by three dollars in federal aid.

In FY 2025, conservation permit funds covered the costs of numerous habitat, research and monitoring projects. The amount of revenue spent directly on approved projects or transferred to the DWR to help fund conservation-related projects can be found in the conservation permit audit.

Program oversight

The DWR understands the value of Utah's wildlife resources and takes many steps to ensure the Conservation Permit Program is transparent, complies with administrative rule and uses funds effectively for wildlife conservation purposes. In addition to an annual report, the DWR conducts an audit of the Conservation Permit Program each year. Both the annual report and the results of the audit are presented in a public meeting to the Utah Wildlife Board. Additionally, specific information about all funded conservation projects — including project details, budgets, wildlife benefits and summary reports — is available online at wri.utah.gov.

Successful wildlife conservation

In FY 2025, Utah's Conservation Permit Program raised millions of dollars that were directed back into productive and meaningful wildlife conservation projects. These projects help the DWR better fulfill its mission of serving as trustees and guardians of the state's wildlife. The program has a track record of success and creates unique opportunities for hunters to work with the DWR in expanding wildlife populations and conserving wildlife habitat. As a result of this program, Utahns have more wildlife species to enjoy, and hunters have a greater diversity of hunting opportunities. Translocations and population growth have also ensured the availability of more hunting permits. The DWR believes that wildlife is valuable to everyone, and the Conservation Permit Program protects and improves wildlife and wildlife habitats for all to enjoy.

