

LIGHTHAWK

WAYPOINT

SUCCESS STORIES FROM ABOVE

May 2010 Issue 40

LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to highlight the impact of our work. Each edition covers one specific flight, or series of flights, and illustrates how LightHawk advances conservation efforts throughout North and Central America through the unique perspective of flight. We hope you enjoy WayPoint and will share with others our success stories from above.

LightHawk Provides New Perspectives – In the Air and On the Ground



VP Steven Garman and LightHawk's C185 take off from the Thomas Creek airstrip in the Frank Church Wilderness. *Photo: Blake Everson*



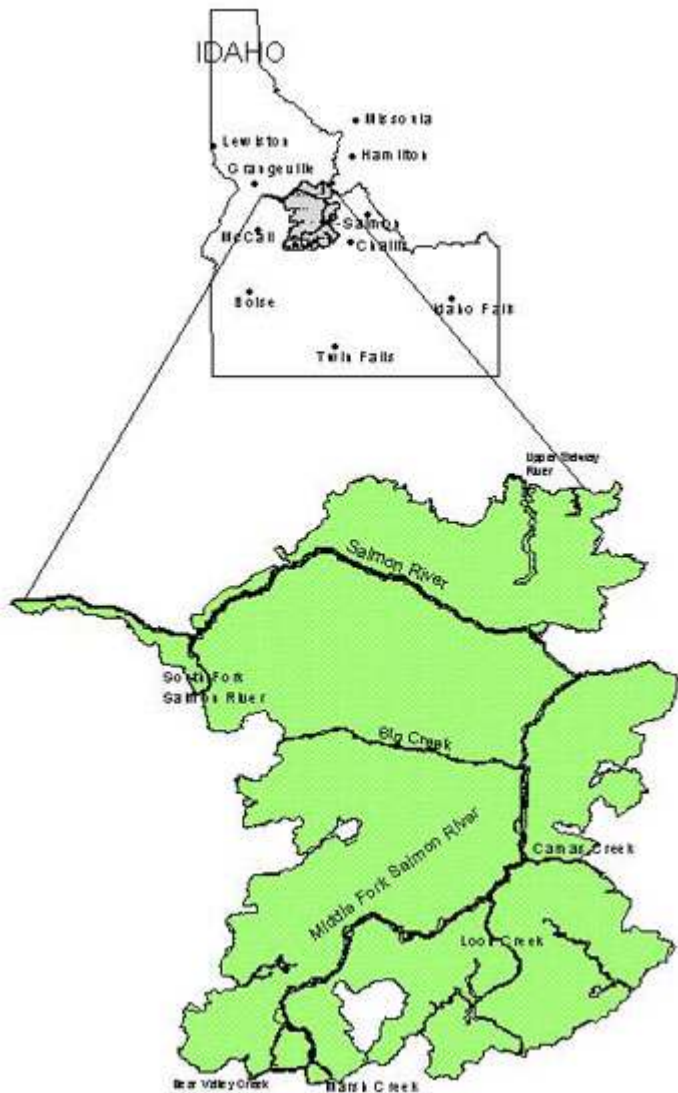
Wildlife watching from base camp in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. *Photo: John Robison, Idaho Conservation League*

Every day, from Alaska to Panama, LightHawk missions provide new perspectives on conservation issues. Typically, these insights and observations come courtesy of the aerial view, which reveals the true condition of landscapes and habitats below. In February and March 2009, LightHawk volunteer pilots Steven Garman and Dick Walker offered an additional perspective to a coalition of wilderness advocates in central Idaho. LightHawk took 15 people into the heart of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness over a three-week period to observe winter wildlife populations, to gain a better understanding of the winter condition of this vast wilderness, and to bear witness to a series of helicopter landings in the Wilderness.

The 2.3-million-acre Frank Church Wilderness is the largest wilderness area in the continental U.S. and is central to a 5-million-acre wilderness complex when combined with the adjacent Gospel Hump and Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Areas. The landscape of the Frank Church Wilderness consists of mixed coniferous forests on steep rocky slopes and dry sagebrush plateaus that follow the drainages of the Salmon River and its tributaries. The diverse habitats support a rich variety of wildlife including bears, wolves, mule deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, salmon and steelhead.

Gray wolves were reintroduced into the Wilderness Area in 1995 and previously were managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nez Perce Tribe. Wolves in Idaho currently are managed by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, which in December 2009 received permission the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to make twenty helicopter landings in the Frank Church Wilderness to dart and collar wolves, in order to be able to keep better track of wolf packs in this remote region of Idaho. This decision prompted wilderness advocates including The Wilderness Society, Idaho Conservation League, Western Watersheds Project, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Winter Wildlands Alliance and Sierra Club to file an injunction against the decision, citing the illegality of the helicopter landings and a lack of scientific basis for the wolf collaring effort. Some critics suspected the IDFG sought to collect this

Frank Church--River of No Return Wilderness



Source USFS



The approach to Thomas Creek airstrip. Wildlife watchers camped on the bench above the airstrip and used the approach to scout for wildlife viewing locations. Photo: John Robison, Idaho Conservation League

information on wolf behavior in anticipation of increasing the amount of wolf hunting (which is legal) in the area.

As part of their opposition to the USFS decision, Idaho conservationists formed a group of "Wilderness Wolf Watchers" who pledged to camp and hike in the Frank in February and March to survey winter wildlife populations and to serve as witnesses to the IDFG helicopter landings. This pledge built public awareness about the proposed helicopter plan and helped to establish legal standing for the injunction effort. Ultimately, the injunction was denied and the plan was allowed to proceed without environmental review using a categorical exclusion, however U.S. District Court Judge Lynn Winmill stated, *"The Forest Service must proceed very cautiously here because the law is not on their side if they intend to proceed with further helicopter projects in the Frank Church Wilderness."*



While wilderness designation generally prohibits all motorized uses, the legislation that created the Frank Church Wilderness Area (the Frank) in 1980 specifically recognized the history of backcountry aviation in the area and grandfathered the continued use of a network of airstrips scattered throughout the Wilderness Area. These unique wilderness airstrips made it possible for LightHawk to play a vital role in the Wolf Watcher effort. Volunteer pilot Steven Garman made five trips into the Frank, carrying a total of 13 passengers, and also spent many hours coordinating logistics with LightHawk Program Manager Laura Stone, scouting the backcountry strips for usability and monitoring wildlife populations from the air. Volunteer pilot Dick Walker stayed in the wilderness for three days with his two passengers. During his time in the backcountry, Dick made multiple aerial photography missions and investigated wildlife presence from the air.

According to John Robison, Public Lands Director for Idaho Conservation League (ICL), *"These flights were integral to our litigation effort. Although we did not prevail with our request for a preliminary injunction to stop the helicopter landings, the judge did provide some clarity and incorporated some important sideboards on any subsequent proposals. The flights were also integral to our effort demonstrating that wolf viewing programs are feasible and of great interest to the general public. Without LightHawk our successful trip would not have happened at all."* In addition to simply being present in the Wilderness during the planned wolf collaring effort, the Wilderness Wolf Watchers wanted to survey wildlife populations in the heart of the Frank in winter because one of the arguments made by the USFS in approving the helicopter landings was that wildlife use of the Frank in February and March was low, so landing helicopters would not disturb wildlife. Contrary to USFS assertions, ICL's John Robison reported that his group saw hundreds of elk, large herds of mule deer, ten bighorn sheep and five wolves.



Mark Menlove of Winter Wildlands Alliance points to a wolf track on the airstrip next to LightHawk's C185. Photo: John Robison/Idaho Conservation League.

In the end, IDFG landed in the Wilderness twelve times and collared four wolves. Idaho's conservation community felt that the Wilderness Wolf Watcher effort helped them to hold IDFG accountable, gave them a better understanding of the Frank Church Wilderness in winter and brought attention to the wilderness qualities these groups are working to protect. Following his trip into the Frank, Mark Menlove, executive director of Winter Wildlands Alliance reported, *"Protecting wilderness values, particularly in winter, is a key component of Winter Wildlands Alliance's mission. By having an on-the-ground presence during the period when Idaho Fish and Game was planning to land helicopters, we were able to increase the importance of maintaining these wilderness values. The trip accomplished everything we hoped in terms of witnessing and monitoring the wildlife activity."*

While LightHawk's work will continue to focus on the view from above, these flights enabled our partners to gain a new wintertime perspective on the Frank Church Wilderness and its wildlife. One passenger, Chris Hansen, the Owyhee Wilderness Coordinator for the Oregon Natural Desert Association summed it up well, *"This was a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the Frank Church at a unique and distinctly undocumented time of year. We were able to show ample wildlife in an area inhabited by wolves. Without LightHawk's help we would be a group of committed volunteers on the ground looking in. By allowing us access to the Frank Church Wilderness airstrips you gave us a base camp from which to hike and look outward."*

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man and a vision has grown to over 170 volunteer pilots flying missions across the U.S., into Canada, through Mexico and down to Panama. Today, LightHawk is the oldest and largest nonprofit, volunteer pilot-based organization flying environmental missions in collaboration with hundreds of partner organizations.

At LightHawk we believe the view from the window of a small airplane provides a powerful and effective platform for research, ground-truthing, environmental awareness, and education.

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