

RIVERSIDE STORIES

BRIAN GRAY

District Wildlife Manager on Colorado River

AS A SECOND generation District Wildlife Manager, Brian Gray has been living by and looking after the Colorado River for his entire life. He has had a firsthand look at the changes the river has been undergoing over the years, and the efforts necessary to revitalize the ecosystem. As a result, Brian spends his days doing a multitude of tasks, which are mostly centered around the protection of wildlife and the education of hunters and local families on their roles in preserving the natural balance.

Brian also consults with federal agencies, counties, and cities on land use issues, and is active in the forum on wildlife preservation. It was through this aspect of protection that he originally became involved with river restoration projects, stating, “Our main goal as an agency is to provide wildlife opportunity for people, and to improve the habitat. When we do a [tamarisk removal] project, we’re enhancing the wildlife habitat there, so the species that are supposed to be there can use it more effectively. In turn, when you provide that quality habitat, people can enjoy the wildlife as well. It’s a cycle. If you make the habitat better, the wildlife will return, and then people will be able to appreciate it again. If the benefit is for wildlife enjoyment, then that’s what we’re all about.”



*“Make the
Habitat Better”*



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This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with the Middle Colorado Watershed Council, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

habitat preservation education as his favorite part of the role, “What gets me up in the morning is the ability to provide my service to people, as far as education goes, and make sure that people are doing the right thing,” adding, “I think education is seeing an impact, when you see people and they understand the importance of wildlife and habitat preservation, and they get something from it, it’s rewarding.”

With hard work, he reminds us, we can return these riparian zones back to their original splendor, while subsequently rebuilding one of nature’s most important and diverse habitats in North America. ■

Most of Brian’s direct involvement with river restoration projects comes through his work in invasive plant species removal and treatment, with emphasis on tamarisk (salt cedar). “As far as wildlife habitat goes, tamarisk has definitely turned out to be a serious problem” he said, adding, “I’ve really seen that happen in my lifetime.” Not only does tamarisk provide little food value for most native wildlife, only a few birds have adapted to nesting in it. In a habitat where the population of wildlife depends exclusively on the nutrients that native plants can offer, the balance is very easily damaged when these plants are choked out. “Other [invasive] plant species have really taken a hold too, like knapweed, and Russian olive,” he explains.

Currently living in Rifle, Colorado, 60 miles northeast of Grand Junction, he’s never far from what he considers to be among the most important habitats in the country. Therefore, the immediate removal of invasive plants has become Brian’s primary goal. However, plant removal isn’t the only step in rejuvenating these riparian habitats. In order to fully restore the river systems to their original ecologic value, Brian also

works to plant native species, as well as help assess and reintroduce wildlife to the areas. In fact, the efforts have already indicated improvement in the return of wildlife, and Brian has witnessed it. “I’ve seen it first hand where the removal and restoration has happened,” he proudly states. “The wildlife has been returning, and in good numbers.”

Although the work he does is intensive, Brian’s days are in no way typical. “It’s really different from day to day and season to season. In October and November, I’m working 10 to 15 hours a day checking hunters out in the field, but in the summertime I do a lot of education, like teaching hunter education classes, angling lessons, and more, so it really changes throughout the year. In January and February, we do a lot of game damage investigations, where deer and elk are getting into haystacks, and people are requiring special hunts or fencing,” Brian states, jesting, “I have five things to do today that are really pressing, and 100 things that can wait until tomorrow.”

Yet, Brian is positive, citing ongoing wildlife and



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