

The Salt Lake Tribune

Commentary: Citizen Scientists needed to study Wasatch wildlife



Courtesy photo from the Wasatch Wildlife Watch project, University of Utah. A motion-triggered camera recorded this image of a moose in Utah's central Wasatch Mountains June 23 as part of University of Utah research, led by biology graduate student Austin Green, exploring how recreation affects wildlife. Volunteer teams rigged cameras at 210 sites and recorded 40,000 to 50,000 images of animals during a 15-week study period. Now the team is seeking help from the public to process this tsunami of data.

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There has perhaps not been a more important time to hone our understanding of the current state of ecological health and function of the Wasatch Mountains and the wildlife that live here.

The Wasatch sustains 9 million visitors a year, which is about the same as that of the “mighty five” Utah national parks. Currently many planning processes and opportunities to shape the future of the central Wasatch are unfolding, ranging from the Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area legislation, transportation solutions from the recent blue print of the Central Wasatch Mountain Accord, and other national forest planning opportunities.

The greater Salt Lake area is predicted to experience a 40 percent increase in human population in the next 25 years, and with that will come predictable increases in human pressure on this fragile range.

At the same time, and like never before, our state and federal land and wildlife management agencies have their budgets slashed, hiring frozen and staff worked thin. Without proper resources, our public lands and wildlife resources are at serious risk of being degraded and diminished. We need the community's help to protect our critical natural resources and natural heritage.

Community Scientists (also known as Citizen Scientists) are community members that are trained to collect data. They don't need a degree or expertise, just dedication. With the data Community Scientists collect, we can positively affect our public lands and wildlife.

Wildlife in the Wasatch Mountains live in one of the most highly-trafficked national forests in the country and next to one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. Yet, we know very little about what Wasatch wildlife need to sustain their populations. This year, a partnership including the University of Utah, Wild Utah Project, Utah Natural History Museum and more than 200 Community Scientists began studying the Wasatch's wildlife with the goal of learning about critical habitats and movement corridors.

Community Scientists deployed trail cameras and are now helping analyze nearly a million images including moose, elk, mule deer, and cougar. Each image will be used to understand the most important habitats and movement pathways for these animals. The study is designed to help us learn how current human activities and influences in the Wasatch are affecting these habitats and pathways. This will help better inform management of not only our Wasatch wildlife, but also the transportation and other planning solutions that are underway, thus helping these projects avoid impacts to our wildlife.

Without Community Scientists, research like the Wasatch wildlife study is not possible. Leveraging Community Science to collect crucial information on ecological data gaps is a win-win for local stakeholders and land and wildlife management agencies alike. Especially now, as agency budgets are so lean and conservation science is sometimes given short shrift, we think the positive partnerships grounded in volunteer Community Science efforts can help bridge these gaps, fostering positive results for Utah's natural resources.

We encourage you to be a Community Scientist and help play a role in conserving our natural heritage. Learn more at <https://www.wildutahproject.org/citizen-science/> .

Austin Green is a Ph.D. student in the Biodiversity and Conservation Ecology Lab at the University of Utah, studying how human activity affects wildlife occurrence and behavior. **Allison Jones** is a conservation biologist and director of the Wild Utah Project, which is orchestrating the Community Science volunteer effort for the Wasatch trail camera study.
