



# FADING GOLD QUAKING ASPEN IN OUR FORESTS

In the mountains of northern California, deciduous aspen groves are oases of plant and animal diversity in a vast sea of shady conifer forest. Abundant sunlight, moisture and occasional wildfire or other disturbance keep aspen groves vigorous and the understory rich with a diversity of grasses, wildflowers and shrubs.

In the past century, this environment has changed because of the absence of wildfire, combined with repeated grazing of young aspen. Conifer seedlings that would have been killed by fire have invaded, overtopped, and shaded out the aspen. Like giant drinking straws, these conifers drew water from the soil. As the soil became drier and shade more dense, aspen have faded out and even disappeared in some sites. Biologists expect the loss of aspen to have a cascading effect on other plants and animals that depend on this vital habitat.

## ASPEN RESTORATION

In northern California, successful aspen restoration projects have clearly demonstrated that the greatest threat to continued aspen existence is to do nothing. Without regular disruption of encroaching conifers, aspen will eventually disappear. Active intervention -- thinning out conifers, burning, and protecting sprouts from browsing during re-establishment -- are needed to restore aspen groves to their historical role in our landscape. The Shasta-McCloud Management Unit, in cooperation with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, has created a stewardship program to remove encroaching conifers from dying aspen stands in the Hambone area to restore elk habitat. Future aspen restoration projects in other areas of the forest are likely.

## WILDLIFE HABITAT

Elk and mule deer forage on aspen seedlings along with the lush wildflowers and grasses. Beaver have a strong preference for aspen as food and building material, and were abundant in Siskiyou County in the past. Many birds are drawn to quaking aspen for nesting cavities and plentiful insects to eat. The Lewis's woodpecker, flammulated owl, and northern goshawk all nest and forage in our aspen groves.

## HOW TO KNOW A HEALTHY ASPEN GROVE

A healthy aspen grove includes sprouts, saplings, and mature trees that make it difficult to see through. If only older trees can be seen, with no younger sprouts or saplings to replace them as they die, the grove is in danger of disappearing.