

Montana Forests News

Summer 2021

MEET JAMES OTT Stewardship Intern

We are pleased to welcome our newest Montana Forest intern, James Ott. James grew up in the shadow of the Mission Mountains but spent a good portion of his life away from home.

He spent two decades in the Navy, many of those as a supervisor gaining valuable leadership experience. After retiring from service, he settled in Seattle and spent a year working for the local park service. The work stuck with him, and he moved back to Montana to pursue a Parks and Recreation Management degree and a Business minor from the University of Montana.

As a Montana Conservation Corps “Conservation Fellow,” James will spend the next five months assisting The Nature Conservancy (TNC) by patrolling and stewarding our forest lands and educating summer users about our Montana Forests Open Lands Policy. “I anticipate another increase in use by recreational users this season,” James says. “I’m interested to see if it’s more local use or people coming from out of state.” As part of his work, James will survey the people he meets on the land and maintain a patrol log. This information will then be shared in frequent reports that can help determine future land management decisions. One unique aspect of his work will be supporting the Bureau of Land Management through interpretation and maintenance work at Garnet Ghost Town. The BLM and TNC have a deep and collaborative relationship in managing lands in western Montana.

Growing up, James’ mom would refer to the mountains and the outdoors as his family’s church. He feels a connection to the places he’s helping protect, particularly Primm Meadow which reminds him of the old growth forests he fell in love with while living in Washington. Today, he’s introducing his wife and two young children to the wonders of nature through short hikes and camping trips.

TNC is grateful to James and other interns who are providing much needed resources to make a measurable difference in local conservation efforts while developing their own professional experience.



NEW GRANT = NEW IDEAS

The community of Potomac and forests in the Gold and Twin Creeks area are benefitting from a Forest Action Plan grant to The Nature Conservancy by the state of Montana. The \$288,217 award is enabling TNC and our partners to expand our work reducing the risk of severe wildfire in the forests around these communities.

One exciting new component of this work is a plan to use some of the unmarketable materials such as tree tops, limbs and small diameter trees, materials that, traditionally, would have been burned on site. Now, we hope to put it to work as biochar.

Biochar is a charcoal-like material used to enhance soil health. It’s produced by subjecting the woody debris to high temperatures in the absence of oxygen. The resulting product can be spread on the forest floor and on nearby agricultural land to improve soil. No one expects to become biochar moguls, but we are glad to see the material put to a productive use.

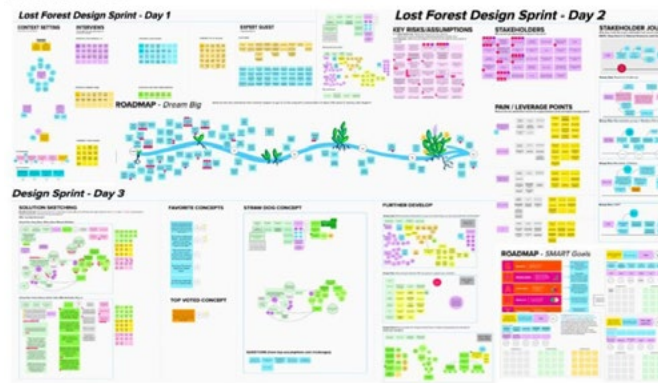


RECREATE RESPONSIBLY

Across the West, our natural areas are experiencing unprecedented visitation as people turn to nature and the outdoors for solace and enjoyment during the pandemic. With more people getting vaccinated and feeling comfortable traveling farther from home, this trend is only expected to increase, and Montana's forest lands are no exception. Higher numbers of campers, bikers and other recreators will have an impact on our lands and the wildlife that depend on them. We will be working diligently to remind visitors to treat the landscape respectfully and follow posted regulations. We encourage people to recreate responsibly and to plan ahead. TNC's open lands policy, created in partnership with MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks, outlines acceptable activities for public recreation on TNC properties. It also reinforces the fact that it is each visitor's responsibility to know whose property they are using and what the regulations are for that property.



Our Montana Forest lands are open to the public. Please review our Open Lands Policy before your next trip at nature.org/mtforests.



DESIGN SPRINT

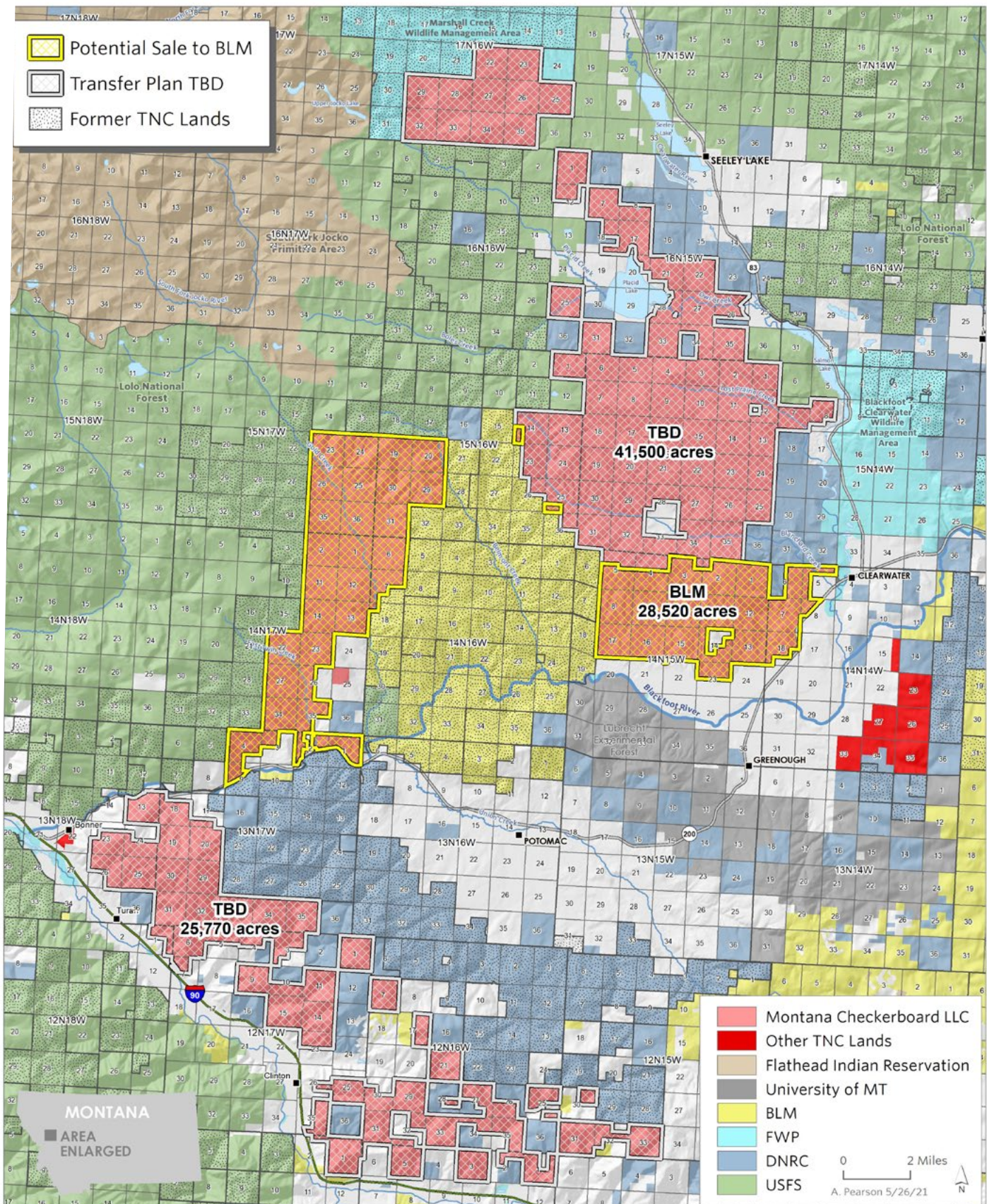
It's said that progress moves at the speed of trust. With strong partner relationships in place, TNC engaged a broad group of stakeholders in March to participate in a fast-paced assessment of 40,000 acres of TNC-MT Forest lands near Seeley Lake. Known as a "Design Sprint" – a methodology developed by Google Ventures and adapted by TNC's Agility Lab – the week-long process aimed to develop a community vision for the land's future use and ownership.

Small, cross-functional teams worked with a facilitator to build a framework and timeline for a permanent conservation solution for the land. Each team was immersed in a collaborative and rapid deep-dive experience to design and test ideas. TNC staff were joined by representatives from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the Blackfoot Challenge, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Seeley Lake Community Foundation.

"This was the first of a thousand steps," says MT state director Amy Croover, "but what was truly inspiring about the process was the realization of the trust our partners have in TNC."



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MONTANA FOREST LAND RESTORATION

Bringing Back Trees and Camas

It's hard enough to see big wildfires filing the skies with choking smoke. Besides worsening our fire season, the hotter, drier conditions brought on by climate change are also making it harder for forests to recover from severe fires.

TNC is working to improve forest recovery by growing and planting seedlings that are better adapted to altered conditions. With researchers at the University of Montana and six other state chapters, TNC is refining our tactics through computer models and field trials.

Using ponderosa pine seedlings grown by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, we're planting experimental plots in recently burned forests with seeds sourced from trees growing at lower elevations – in conditions more like those we're beginning to find in our higher elevation forests. The results will lead to more successful post-fire regeneration techniques. And since summers are becoming hotter and drier, the results can't come soon enough.

Our restoration work reaches beyond the forest. For centuries, Indigenous people and Mother Nature maintained meadows with frequent burning. The result was grasslands tinted a dusty lilac with the blossoms of blue camas. Camas roots were once a critical food source for Indigenous people, and roasting and preparing the bulbous roots remains an honored tribal tradition. By thinning out encroaching forests, prescribed burning, weed management, and planting camas, we hope to see this culturally important plant flourish again.

LAND TRANSACTIONS IN 2020

Three transactions utilizing Land and Water Conservation Funding resulted in more than 17,639 acres of Montana Forests being transferred to public ownership. The Bureau of Land Management acquired two parcels in the Blackfoot River Corridor, while the U.S. Forest Service purchased 12,000 acres in the Upper Twin Creek and Lake Placid areas – all of these lands will remain open for public access and recreation. "These sales represent a big step toward the vision of a secure future for these forests in transition" says TNC's Western Montana Land Protection Director Chris Bryant. "Outdoor enthusiasts, wildlife and local communities all benefit from the results of this partnership."

