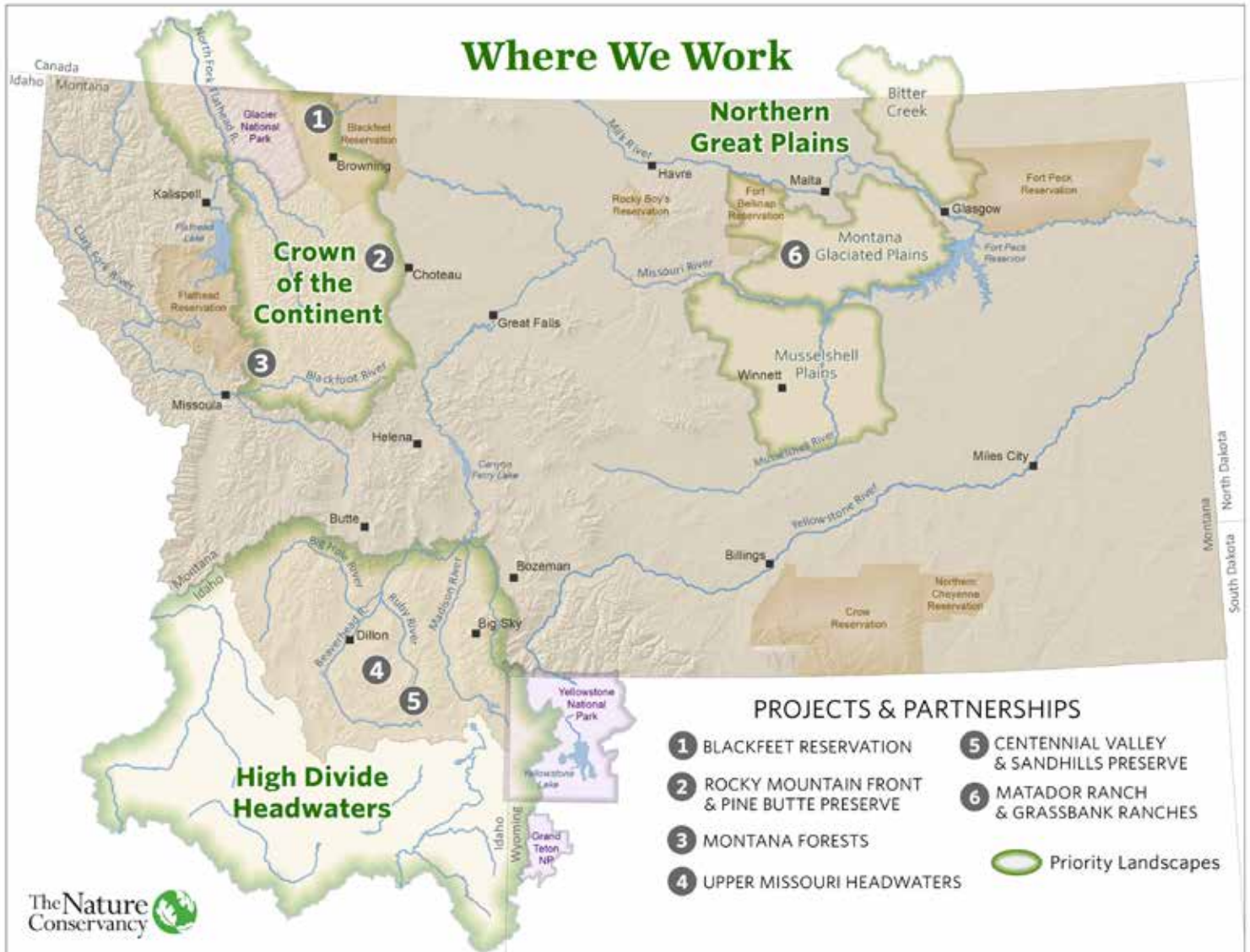


MONTANA LANDMARKS

Summer 2020

A Magazine of The Nature Conservancy in Montana

The Nature
Conservancy 



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Letter From The Director

Dear Friends,

It's so nice to, at last, welcome spring. Winter is long in Montana, and this year it closed with the extra challenge presented by the global pandemic. We hope that you and your loved ones are weathering these difficult times well. Despite the world changing around us, our staff remain committed to our mission of conserving the lands, waters, wildlife and all that you hold dear in Montana.

This edition of Montana Landmarks is a reminder of our continued commitment to that vital mission. We proudly highlight the accomplishments that have been possible with your support, projects such as restoring rivers, creeks, sagebrush country and forests to better withstand the impacts of climate change. We're engaging with partners, new and old, to establish a second grassbank on the Northern Great Plains and conserving more habitat on private rangelands for the benefit of both nature and the family ranchers who live there. We're also

continuing to strengthen ties with our Indigenous partners.

Our work to protect land and fresh water continues, as we also acknowledge our social responsibility to ensure the safety of our staff, volunteers, supporters, trustees and the communities we call home. We are proceeding with mission-critical spring field work, with safety plans in place to ensure our staff and partners are protected.

We remain here for nature, as nature is here for us.

Thank you for your dedication to Montana and to nature.

Be well,



Amy Croover, State Director



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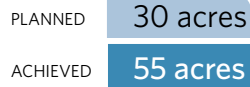
As We Went to Press

With the completion of a pair of easements this spring—including one on the McCoy family ranch—we have conserved nearly 40,000 acres of habitat in the High Divide Headwaters since the winter of 2018. This private ranch land is intermingled with hundreds of thousands of acres of public land, which exponentially multiplies its value to wildlife such as greater sage-grouse, grizzly bear, pronghorn, moose and a host of other wild creatures.

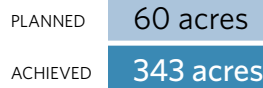
Using the Power of Nature

As the climate changes, bringing increased drought, holding on to the water from our precious winter snowpack is more important than ever. Rather than building massive and costly dams and reservoirs to capture runoff, The Nature Conservancy is employing the power of nature to do the job. Since 2016, we've built more than 100 beaver mimicry structures in the High Divide Headwaters, which help keep water in natural underground reservoirs. We've also removed thirsty trees that were robbing water from vital sagebrush habitat (see related story, next page) and built small rock and log structures to slow stream flow and revitalize wet meadows. These are simple, inexpensive solutions that yield big results. On a grander scale, we completed a massive restoration project on two miles of the Ruby River, restoring the function of the stream and improving fish habitat. Thanks to your support, we've exceeded nearly all our 3-year goals.

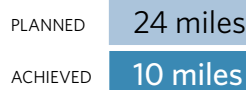
WETLANDS RESTORED



WETLANDS RESTORED THROUGH CONIFER REMOVAL



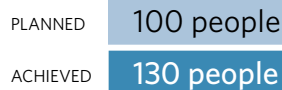
RIVERS RESTORED TO MORE NATURAL CONDITION *



BEAVER MIMICRY STRUCTURES INSTALLED



VOLUNTEERS ASSISTING WITH RESTORATION EFFORTS



* Although we fell short of our short-term goal, we learned a lot about the complexity and time needed to fully restore the shape and function of altered river channels. That's science at work!



Cutting Trees to Conserve Water

Greater sage-grouse live a sort of boom-and-bust existence in the West’s sagebrush country, and the deciding factor is largely water. When there is more rain and snowpack, they thrive and their young flourish. During times of drought, they count on the hardiness of stable adult populations. But climate change spells more of those bust years, with rapid loss of snowmelt and increasing periods of drought.

The good news is that the high-elevation sagebrush habitat in Montana’s High Divide Headwaters is relatively healthy. It’s some of the most resilient in the West to drought, fire and invasive weeds. The bad news is, that could change if we aren’t vigilant and proactive.

Rural subdivision and conversion to crops are both threats to sagebrush health. So is a century without natural fire. Without periodic fire, water-loving conifers such as juniper and Douglas-fir are rapidly expanding into significant areas of sagebrush habitat (see graphic below). In addition to reducing the value of this habitat to wildlife, conifers draw out moisture that otherwise would have stayed in the soil, maintaining wetlands and wet meadows—the green groceries of sagebrush country. The science of how trees alter the balance of water in this habitat is complicated, but the bottom line is, if we don’t take action, we’ll have more challenging problems down the road.

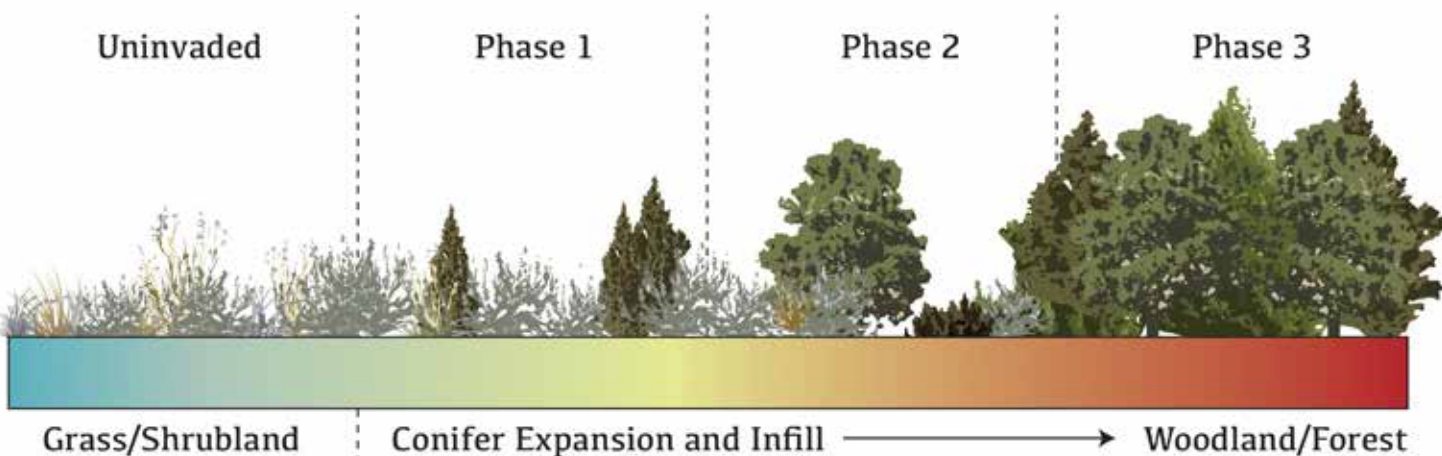
That’s why The Nature Conservancy is working with a diverse partnership of landowners and public agencies to push back the spread of these trees. And though it may seem odd for a conservation organization to be cutting down trees, this work will maintain the ability of a habitat



that supports both local economies and hundreds of native plants and animals to bounce back and thrive in the face of climate change.

Along with this forest work, we are also restoring areas that have lost their vibrancy and ability to hold water. We are erasing the deep channels carved into the land that funnel melting snows into fast-moving runoff. Removing these channels will let streams naturally spread and meander, replenishing the groundwater reservoirs that sustain life in the driest months.

Armed with simple materials, good science and dedicated crews, we are healing past damage and preventing future threats to this iconic Western landscape.



Credit: USDA-NRCS, Working Lands for Wildlife

A Bold Vision for Montana Forests

Imagine trying to hike to your favorite camping or fishing site, only to encounter “No Trespassing” signs every mile along the trail.

The Nature Conservancy and our partners have ensured that this won't happen on nearly 24,000 acres of former industrial timber land in Montana Forests. Through a pair of sales to the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, we are transferring this land to public ownership and preserving access to hundreds of thousands of additional acres of public land.

TNC took a bold leap of faith when we began buying land from Plum Creek Timber Company more than two decades ago. On through the Montana Legacy and Clearwater Blackfoot



Projects, we took ownership of more than half a million acres. But we never planned to hold onto it forever.

Our vision was always to see this land conserved for public use—for recreation and wildlife habitat and to provide economic benefits to local communities. It's a vision forged in collaboration with the community that has helped to craft plans for a future that enables both people and nature to thrive.

Erasing the Checkerboard

This land was part of the so-called “checkerboard”—millions of acres that were carved into alternating 1-mile-square parcels and divided between private railroads and the public during the settlement of

the West. Under various owners, it was logged heavily in the decades prior to TNC's purchase. But that intermingled public-private ownership remained, making it difficult to manage the land effectively.

Over the years, TNC has moved the lion's share of the land to the public domain. We removed poorly located roads, treated noxious weeds and restored forests recovering from their industrial past, passing the land on in better shape than we'd received it.

Today, TNC remains the caretaker of about 125,000 acres of the old Plum Creek forests. We're continuing to place land in the hands of the public, with more sales planned this year.

Partners on the Fire Lines

Long before European settlers arrived in the West, Native Americans were using fire as a tool. They burned meadows to improve the quality of the grass, draw wildlife for hunting and encourage the growth of culturally important plants such as camas and bitterroot. They burned to keep open clearings for trails and campsites and to improve conditions for seasonal foods like the “sugar tree”—the ponderosa pine whose inner bark yields a sap that was used as a sweetener.

Today, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe (CSKT) uses fire for those same goals. Restoration and protection of property also play a big role in their modern burns. Each year, the CSKT burns anywhere from 3,000

to 6,000 acres of forest and grasslands on the Flathead Reservation.

“We don’t get much opposition to burning. People understand the need for it. It’s just a part of our culture,” says Darrell Clairmont, prescribed fire and fuels manager for the CSKT.

The Nature Conservancy has had a tougher time getting fire on the ground. For more than a century, most people in the United States saw forest fires as bad and rushed to extinguish them. But that perspective is changing in Montana as an exciting partnership gets underway between TNC, the CSKT and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Since 2015, the partners have been thinning trees and using prescribed

fire on TNC and BLM land where the CSKT retains treaty rights for their traditional uses (known as Reserved Treaty Rights Lands). Among others, those uses include hunting and gathering wood and culturally important plants. The outcome is forests that are healthier, more productive and more resilient in the face of wildfire and climate change.

The partnership is also helping manage roads and recreational use, treating weeds and planting bitterroot and camas.

This work shows the power of partnership, which TNC believes is essential to conservation that will stand the test of time.



Grassbanking Expands

by Kelsey Molloy, *TNC range ecologist*

The population of Petroleum County might be the smallest in the state, but the people who live there have plenty of drive and determination. That motivation to solve rural problems drew them to talk with The Nature Conservancy about starting a second Montana grassbank. (TNC started the state's first grassbank at the Matador Ranch in 2000.)

What began in 2016 as a small community conversation about wildlife issues evolved into a group of 50+ members with an ambitious mission. Calling themselves the Winnett ACES (Agricultural Community Enhancement and Sustainability), the group wants to “strengthen our community by sustaining the health of our land, economy and traditions for future generations.”

One of ACES' biggest concerns is providing economic opportunities, especially for young people in the community. They believe that supporting young ranchers and a ranching economy is the best way to stop native grassland from being converted to crops, subdivided or developed. Looking for opportunities for younger ranchers who don't own land led them to the Matador

Grassbank and Brian Martin, director of grassland conservation at TNC. Until then, they had been unfamiliar with the Matador, even though it was less than 100 miles from Winnett—a relatively short distance in a county where the closest neighbor might be 10 miles away.

It turned out to be a fortunate connection, according to ACES member Laura Nowlin, who says, “TNC has been a resource for us to figure out how to run a grassbank.”

Last year, ACES made a trial run, starting their own grassbank with six ranchers who didn't yet own their own land. They grazed their cattle together on land leased by ACES. It was a good start and one that encouraged ACES to explore options for buying their own property and solidifying their new grassbank.

The group has also worked on projects like getting local beef into the Winnett public school, starting a community center and securing foundation funding for other projects. TNC is excited about this community-driven effort, and we're doing all that we can to help ACES achieve our shared goals.



The Matador Grassbank allows private ranchers to graze their cattle on land owned by TNC, at discounted grazing rates. Discounts are based on the number of conservation measures they put into place on their own ranches. So far, the grassbank has conserved more than 320,000 acres on Montana's Northern Great Plains.

Ranchers Stewardship Alliance

by Kelsey Molloy, *TNC range ecologist*

Their vision is as broad as the prairies where they live: “Feed the world, preserve our prairie neighborhood and nurture the next generation. We believe this is conservation done right.”

The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance (RSA) has no problem calling themselves conservationists. But there was a time when ranchers and conservationists staked out very different camps—until they realized how much they had in common. The way RSA members see it, if their families hadn’t been conserving this land for generations, it wouldn’t be one of the last, intact stretches of grassland left in the country today.

Launched in 2003 over concerns about endangered species and outside interest in the region, RSA has become a driver of community conservation on Montana’s Northern Great Plains. At the heart of the work is their Conservation Committee, which has built a cohesive conservation community by bringing ranchers together with nonprofit organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy, and state and federal agencies. The Committee provides a forum for these partners to share updates and program information, discuss conservation issues and apply for grants together.

“The best part of the Conservation Committee is working with all of the partners that have come together for a common cause, with common values, to help both the ranching and wildlife communities,” says Sheila Walsh, Committee chair. Sheila and her husband Bud ranch on land adjacent to TNC’s Matador Ranch. She feels that

her committee’s work is essential. “It’s a great role we play in the community,” she explains. “We’re able to help ranchers stay viable and profitable on their lands and implement management practices” while also achieving benefits to nature.

Since its formation in 2017, the Committee has improved grazing

practices on more than 20,000 acres and restored another 10,000 acres of grassland across three counties. RSA has also formed the first Weed Prevention Area in the country.

RSA has been an important bridge between ranchers and TNC, helping both people and nature thrive on the Northern Great Plains.



An Inquiring Mind

by Larisa Bowen, TNC marketing manager

Sally Schrank is asking questions again. “The scientists are used to me by now,” she chuckles. “They’re so kind to me and knowledgeable. They always answer my questions and even invite me to go out with them to project sites.” As the director of development for The Nature Conservancy’s Montana chapter, Sally spends most of her time engaging with supporters, but her past life as a fish biologist keeps her drawn to TNC’s project work on the ground. “I’m curious, and that’s why this job is so perfect,” Sally explains. “I still get to think about science and ask ecological questions. I absolutely love that TNC’s mission is driven by science.”



Sally’s scientific journey began in the water. “As a kid, we moved a lot,” she remembers. “No matter where we were, my parents would get us out onto a nearby body of water.” In Miami, it was boats in Biscayne Bay. In New Jersey, it was river trips on the foggy Hudson. In Cleveland, it was sailing on Lake Erie. Sally recalls that water, and her parents’ devotion to it, inspired her lifelong fascination with nature.

By 2003, Sally was spending her pre-Montana years studying the migration of salmon and steelhead on the Columbia River. Then life changed, and she found herself raising two small boys in Helena. Searching for more flexible work, Sally discovered a new talent and passion: inspiring support for science and nature.

What began as grant writing 12 years ago has blossomed into Sally’s current role, leading TNC’s philanthropic team in Montana. One of her teammates, Helen Jenkins, puts it this way: “Sally is smart, energetic and compassionate. She serves as a real champion for all of us.” And for nature.

Today, Sally the fundraiser—and the scientist—still thinks a lot about water. “Water from winter snowpack will be our big issue,” she says. “And the way TNC is tackling climate change will impact all of us.” As TNC’s Montana team meets the challenges ahead, everyone hopes Sally keeps asking questions—and inspiring donors in her search for answers from the natural world.

The Legacy Club is a group of special supporters who have made a life-income gift with The Nature Conservancy or named us as a beneficiary in their estate plans. Members receive exclusive benefits such as a semiannual newsletter, TNC’s annual report and invitations to trips and events. But the real benefit is knowing you’ve helped keep Montana a place where people and nature thrive.


We thank all our Legacy Club members for your gifts to future generations.

For more information:

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Guardians in the Crown of India

by Chris Bryant, *TNC western Montana land protection director*

India is well known for its work on wildlife conflicts between people. When a farmer runs into a tiger, the encounter can be deadly. An elephant herd can destroy a year's worth of a family's food crops in the blink of an eye. Now, Himalayan brown bears are increasingly running into trouble with people and their livestock. That's something Montanans like me understand well.

Protecting bear habitat and preventing human–bear conflicts are big parts of The Nature Conservancy's work in the Crown of the Continent, where I work. So, in February, I was lucky to be part of a group of TNC staff and partners who traveled to India to participate in an innovative planning exercise focused on protecting these bears.

Scientists estimate there are about 100–500 brown bears roaming the high-elevation habitat of India's northern states—territory that overlaps with that of the rare snow leopard. But that's only an educated guess. Brown bears have never been collared in India for research, so their numbers, range and behaviors are only vaguely understood.

To imagine a solution to the human–bear conflicts, the team took a cue from the tech world, employing a process known as a “Sprint.” The idea of a Sprint is to assemble a small group of people, in our case for only three days, and follow a multi-step process to build a “prototype” solution. Part of the process is testing the group's ideas with outside stakeholders—which we did via videoconferencing to the United States, London and India.

The solution we reached includes building a program for sharing information and collaring bears to better inform existing conflict management efforts. It would also include an outreach program employing “Guardians”—locals who could gather information from conflict hotspots and build solutions with communities. For example, the Guardians could help people change practices that attract bears and provide tools to enable bears and people to coexist. These are solutions TNC has used in places as far-ranging as Tanzania and Montana, proving the power of our “One Conservancy” ethos on the small planet we all share.

OUR MISSION:

TO CONSERVE THE LANDS
AND WATERS ON WHICH
ALL LIFE DEPENDS.



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The Nature Conservancy's Clearwater Blackfoot Project in Montana. © Steven Gnam

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Revive and Thrive 2020

We are hoping we can still hold the 6th annual Revive and Thrive. If safe, we plan to work on new trails and forest restoration at Hill 16 near Placid Lake. Get outside, do some good and enjoy spending time with folks who love our Montana Forests. This event is sponsored by The Nature Conservancy, Five Valleys Land Trust and The Blackfoot Challenge.

WHERE: **Hill 16, along Placid Lake Road, near the state park**

WHEN: **Sunday, July 12, 2020**

Work party begins at 10 a.m. with lunch and brews to follow.

We'll supply the tools, food and drink; you bring your energy and community spirit.



LEARN MORE

Given recent health advisories, please check nature.org/events for updates on this event.

PHOTO: © Chris Bryant/TNC

