

MONTANA LANDMARKS



Summer 2019

A Magazine of The Nature Conservancy in Montana

The Nature
Conservancy





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Letter From The Director



Dear Friends,

This spring, we have a lot of great conservation achievements to tell you about and celebrate. We’re conserving grasslands, helping make new scientific discoveries and doing exciting restoration of our rivers and forests.

We also want to mark a landmark victory on the policy front. After letting it come to the brink of expiration, Congress, at last, permanently reauthorized the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Many people don’t realize how much this relatively little-known source of our support means to Montana. In less than a decade, between 2005 and 2014, more than \$240 million dollars from LWCF were invested in Montana’s public and private lands, working forests and pristine rivers and streams—including tens of thousands of acres of TNC projects. The work isn’t totally over (see page 10), but we are pleased to be partway there.

As we swing into field season, our crews are continuing some of the work highlighted in this newsletter. We’re conducting prescribed burns on our Montana forests, volunteers are planting willows along rivers and streams and our ever-popular grassland science symposium will draw experts to exchange knowledge at the Matador Ranch later this month.

It’s my pleasure to temporarily lead our stellar Montana team. Everyone continues to keep all our projects moving forward without missing a beat. I thank the staff, our Board of Trustees and, especially, all of you who support our efforts to keep Montana a place where nature and people thrive.

Have a great summer,

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Dave Hanna
Acting State Director





Restoring Forests & Honoring Treaty Rights

An exciting partnership in the Lower Blackfoot River Valley will restore forests and meadows as closely as possible to their historic natural condition. The Nature Conservancy; the Confederated Salish, Pend d'Oreilles and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT); and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have joined forces to thin forests that are at risk of “high-severity” wildfires.

In 1855, the CSKT retained rights to use traditional, off-reservation lands for collecting berries and plants, hunting and other traditional activities. This project is restoring TNC and BLM lands where these Tribal rights apply. Some of the restoration work is being carried out with the help of CSKT equipment and crews, using funds from the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Reserved Treaty Rights Lands grant program. These funds are appropriated annually for restoring off-reservation lands where Tribal nations have reserved treaty rights—including millions of acres of western Montana.

“TNC is very excited to collaborate with the Salish, Pend d'Oreilles and Kootenai Tribes and the BLM to restore these important forests and grasslands to a healthier

condition,” says Steve Kloetzel, TNC's western Montana land steward. “With these long-term partners and critical Bureau of Indian Affairs support, we will, together, make a meaningful difference in managing for wildfire and native plant communities.”

When conditions are right, the group will use prescribed burns to reduce the danger of severe wildfires and increase the abundance of plants that are culturally important to the Tribes.

The team will also remove trees that are encroaching into historic meadows and carry out noxious weed treatments and burns. Later, culturally significant plants such as blue camas and bitterroot will be planted in appropriate locations.

In addition to the ecological benefits of this work, the CSKT will see economic gains, as Tribal crews and equipment are hired to perform the work. Some work will also be conducted by contractors from across western Montana, further contributing to the local economy.

A New Door Opens

The last remaining piece of the Montana Legacy Project in the Swan Valley now has a new owner. TNC has given 160 acres near Condon to Swan Valley Connections (SVC), a local group specializing in conservation and education.

SVC is still determining how to use the land to advance its goals of conserving nature and educating the next generation of public landowners. Montana Land Reliance holds a conservation easement on the land. The easement allows facilities to be constructed that will further education and allow certain recreational uses of the land, while still protecting wildlife habitat and other natural values. It also allows sustainable use of the forest.

The land was part of more than 310,000 acres of industrial timber land in the Crown of the Continent that TNC purchased from Plum Creek Timber Company in 2008. Most of the rest of the land has been transferred to public ownership, eliminating

vast portions of a public-private land ownership mosaic that had made it expensive and complicated to manage these forests for the needs of both people and wildlife.

“With this land under SVC's ownership, we can advance our goals of conserving the area's intact ecosystem and strengthen the connection between people and the natural world through collaboration and experiential learning,” says SVC executive director Rebecca Ramsey.

SVC will be evaluating the property for its natural values, considering current operations, needs and funding opportunities, as well as seeking community input, before determining how the land will be used.

TNC's main goal with our forest protection work is to ensure that the land remains viable for both people and nature, and that includes public use for both recreation and economic purposes. We are pleased that this gift will further our vision.



RUBY RIVER

Setting the Standard for River Restoration

The Nature Conservancy is proud to lead the way with a pioneering project on the Ruby River. Our approach is not only innovative and cost-effective, it sets a new standard for river restoration in the face of our changing climate. It brings back the river's natural movements and dynamics, keeping more clean, cool water flowing longer and later into the season, despite increasingly hot and dry Montana summers.

Many restoration projects focus on preventing erosion by armoring banks with rocks or slowing water by installing boulders, logs and other hard structures. Such techniques can deepen channels and force the river's energy and water further downstream. Instead, on the Ruby, we're raising the riverbed and reconnecting side channels and wetlands to allow the river and its energy to disperse across the floodplain. This technique eases downstream flood risks while soaking wetlands, replenishing groundwater and enhancing fish habitat.

The work has broad community support and has been aided by an army of generous volunteers who have gathered and planted more than 5,000 willows to speed stream recovery. In addition to stabilizing banks, willows provide vital habitat for threatened birds, native fish and grizzly bears, among other wildlife.

Our vision is bigger than just the Ruby. We're also working with local watershed groups to apply these techniques to other important tributaries of the Missouri River in the Big Hole and Madison valleys.



TOP: This stretch of the Ruby River, before restoration, shows a straightened main channel and no-longer-functioning side channels. BOTTOM: This is the same section of river after restoration of natural meanders and side channels and elevation of the main channel. Streambanks were also stabilized with mats of willows, which will eventually take root and grow tall enough to provide water-cooling shade for fish and habitat for birds, beavers and other wildlife.



Wading into a Water Fund

It's still early, but The Nature Conservancy is excited about the prospects of a water fund for the Gallatin River in Big Sky. As with many resort areas of the West, Big Sky is seeing tremendous growth, which is putting huge demands on groundwater supplies. There are also concerns about how to deal with the wastewater that goes along with that growth.

The Gallatin River Task Force invited TNC to join the community planning effort to tackle these issues. The question was how to pay for systems and strategies that would ensure enough clean water for not only Big Sky, but users downstream. A water fund seems to be the way to go.

With most water funds, downstream communities pay for conservation of upstream, often undeveloped, habitat such as forests around the headwaters of a river. In this case, Big Sky is at the headwaters. So, conservation efforts need to focus there.

The fund would be used for projects such as water conservation, wastewater treatment and reuse, and groundwater monitoring. The goal is to use incoming water efficiently and to treat wastewater effectively so that it is clean and abundant enough for downstream communities, as well as the needs of fish, wildlife and river recreational users.

The fund is slowly moving from the feasibility phase toward design. That phase involves more complicated steps to determine governance, financial responsibility, scope and a long list of other considerations. Due to TNC's expertise and experience in designing innovative and successful water funds around the world, we will be a key player in the realization of this plan. With the right design and the commitment of the people who depend on this invaluable resource, we can ensure that the Gallatin River remains healthy for fish and wildlife, while meeting the community's growing needs.

Old Friends and New Deals

30,330
total acres enrolled
in the CCAA Program

We're pleased with the success of the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) program. These voluntary agreements among landowners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and TNC are incentives for ranchers to manage their lands for the benefit of the greater sage-grouse and four declining grassland songbirds. In exchange, no additional restrictions or conservation measures will be imposed on their land, should any of the subject birds be listed under the Endangered Species Act.



We're excited to announce an innovative partnership on the Northern Great Plains. In January, The Nature Conservancy purchased 4,340 acres of Second Creek Ranch, composed of 10 scattered parcels that are adjacent to land owned by some longtime Matador Grassbank members. We'll put conservation easements on the properties and then sell them to those neighboring ranches, on which the owners have also placed conservation easements.

The result: 120 square miles of conserved grassland for threatened birds and other prairie wildlife.

By working hand-in-hand with these longtime stewards, we are protecting vital grassland and precious wetlands by keeping them in the hands of Montana ranchers.

"These ranching families have been taking care of this land for generations through their good stewardship and their demonstrated commitment to conservation," says Brian Martin, grassland conservation director for TNC. "This is a leap of faith for TNC, but one based on the trust that we have forged with this ranching community over many years."

A plan like this is feasible only due to the strong spirit of cooperation and respect TNC has built with these ranchers.

It's a Bird. It's a Plane. It's Science!



Whether you like them or loathe them, drones are here to stay. Seven million are expected to be buzzing U.S. skies within a couple years' time. While that is causing headaches for regulators, researchers at our Matador Ranch have found them a valuable tool for studying greater sage-grouse.

The courtship ritual of greater sage-grouse is something to see. Around sunrise, males smack together puffed-up gold air sacs on their chests, strutting and circling their dancing grounds (known as leks). These birds may be some of nature's biggest exhibitionists, but if you get too close, they'll quickly shut down the show and take flight. If you're a field biologist trying to count the birds in the low light of dawn, that skittishness can be a problem. Not only that, the leks may be miles from the nearest road or located in a geographic setting that makes it nearly impossible

to approach without being seen and flushing the birds. That's where the drones come in.

It wasn't as simple as just launching the drones. The team spent hundreds of hours testing how low the drones could fly without spooking the birds. They also employed artificial intelligence to process the video.

In their studies, researchers found that drones using thermal infrared video produced groundbreaking results. Not only were they able to spot and count the birds, they were also able to determine their body size.

This study is the most exhaustive effort yet to demonstrate that counting and tracking sage grouse is possible using drones. With a bit more refinement, this set of tools could help augment or replace time-consuming and labor-intensive strategies for monitoring wildlife, vegetation and other important indicators of ecological conditions.



Safe at Last!

In February, Congress approved permanent authorization of one of the nation’s—and Montana’s—most valuable conservation tools, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). If you like to fish, play ball or enjoy the wonders of Montana’s outdoor bounty, the LWCF has probably touched your life. For the last 50 years, this little-known source of funding has helped to shape Montana’s open spaces and vibrant nature-based economy.

LWCF directs money from offshore oil-drilling federal royalties—not tax dollars—to conservation, public access and recreation priorities across America. Over the last decade, more than \$240 million dollars from the LWCF was invested in access to public land, easements for family ranches, working forests and clean water across Montana.

As exciting as permanent authorization is, our job isn’t over.

Congress must still appropriate money to the fund. The current Trump budget allocates about \$20 million for LWCF projects. By comparison, in 1964 full funding was set at \$900 million. Congress can and must do better. TNC is working with our Montana delegation to obtain full and dedicated funding.

Did You Know...

You can make a tax-efficient gift for nature with resources other than cash?

You can support The Nature Conservancy with a gift of appreciated stock or a distribution from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA).

A gift of assets can have a big impact.

APPRECIATED SECURITIES

Give securities such as stocks or mutual funds and avoid capital gains.

nature.org/stock

IRA DISTRIBUTION

You must be older than 70½. You can make a gift of up to \$100,000 and can receive federal tax savings.

nature.org/ira

To learn more and speak directly with a trained giving specialist:
(877) 812-3698 or legacy@tnc.org

DONOR PROFILE



Jonathan & Nancy Lippincott

Drawn to the vast wilderness and the serenity and balance of nature, Jonathan and Nancy Lippincott, retired Ohioans, have a seasonal home in the northern Rocky Mountains of Montana. Their appreciation for the natural wealth of the Crown of the Continent is one reason they have supported TNC in Montana for over a decade.

“We became involved with the North Fork campaign in 2008 to protect the Flathead River headwaters from gold and coal mines,” says Jonathan. “It took a number of years, but the entire watershed was protected on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border. TNC played a significant role in mobilizing, educating and leading the charge.”

Jonathan and Nancy continue to make lasting change through giving and fundraising. “We have hosted TNC trips to Matador Ranch with our friends, many of whom have also contributed to TNC,” says Nancy. “It’s wonderful to learn about the different ecosystems and abundance of wildlife from staff.”

In addition to supporting Montana’s projects, Jonathan and Nancy are deeply committed to protecting Ohio’s biodiversity and natural places, such as the 20,000-acre Edge of Appalachia Preserve. They say TNC’s science-based and collaborative approach inspires trust and achieves conservation goals.



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

Income for Life. Tax Savings. A Lasting Legacy.

The Nature Conservancy is working harder than ever to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends. But we need your help. Find out how you can give a gift that protects the world you love, provides tax savings and pays returns for life.

Contact Amy Sheppard at:

 (406) 602-4147  amy.sheppard@tnc.org

 nature.org/incomegifts

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY CANNOT RENDER TAX OR LEGAL ADVICE. PLEASE CONSULT YOUR FINANCIAL ADVISOR BEFORE MAKING A GIFT. PHOFQ19FY02APGH0XX

Revive and Thrive 2019

Celebrate the 5th anniversary of Revive and Thrive with friends and neighbors who love our Montana forests. This community work day is sponsored by The Nature Conservancy, Blackfoot Challenge and Five Valleys Land Trust and is open to all.

WHERE:

Hill 16 near Owl Creek Road

WHEN:

Sunday, July 14, 2019

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

For more details, visit
nature.org/montana

