

WHERE IT ALL COMES TOGETHER

Purchased last year with overwhelming local support, the new Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area is home to grizzly bears, lynx, elk, and bull trout. The area attracts thousands of hunters, snowmobilers, campers, and anglers each year, making it a boon to local businesses.

It's also one of the prettiest places you've ever seen.

BY TODD TANNER

AS THE TAMARACK TURNS Western larch, their golden needles aglow, reflect off still waters in the new Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area near Seeley Lake. The public land is open year-round for hiking, wildlife watching, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and other recreation.

CHUCK HANEY

Jay Kolbe and I started out below the clouds, down in the valley with the amber larch

rising into the pre-dawn fog and a couple inches of new snow muffling every sound. We drove up old switchback logging roads, gaining altitude and reading tracks in the virgin powder: deer, mostly, moving in and out of the timber in their rush to feed in the wake of the previous day's storm. We kept climbing, Kolbe's pickup breaking trail, until we hit an overlook where the symmetry and sense of it all suddenly became obvious. Clouds filled the valley below, an ethereal sea of fog and shifting light hiding Seeley Lake, while in the distance the western edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness framed a flawless Montana sunrise.

Kolbe, the local Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife biologist, was taking the day off to hunt with me. We climbed out of his truck and stood amazed—the towering Mission Range rising to our backs, the elk and deer

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we'd come to hunt temporarily forgotten—as we took in the spectacular birth of a new day. You couldn't be there on that November morning, watching a perfect sunrise paint the landscape with luminescence, and not be in awe. It was as if the entire world had been re-made while we slept and now all of existence was new and pure and white.

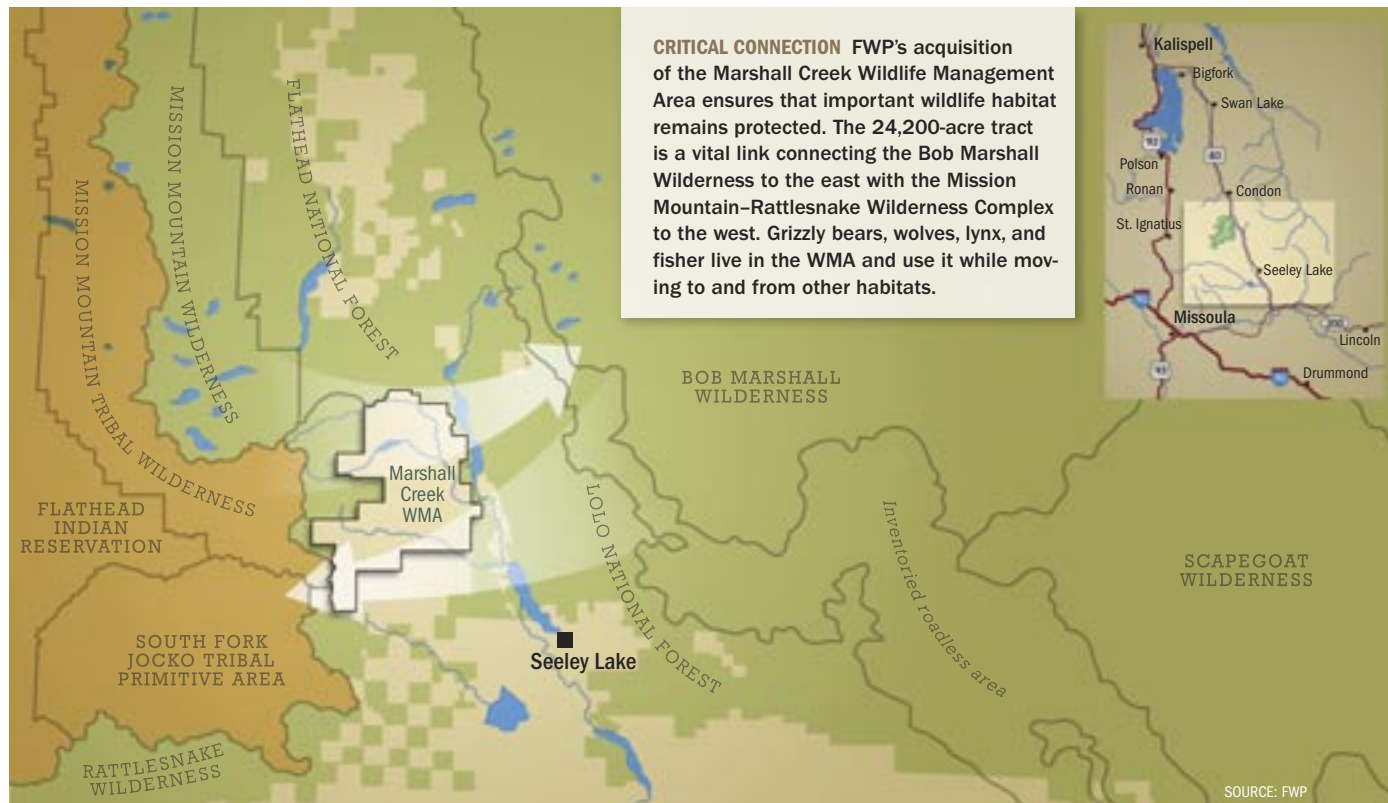
The word *nloloseótsnt*, used by the Salish people who live in this region, translates to “connect it together.” That idea sums up the landscape Kolbe and I explored that day: Montana's new Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Extending from the valley floor to the peaks of the Missions, the newly acquired 40-square-mile parcel features exceptional wildlife habitat and native trout spawning waters. In all, the WMA provides habitat for more than 160 native species, including wolverines and 36 other Montana “species of concern,” as well as three species listed as federally threatened: the Canada lynx, grizzly bear, and bull trout.

The parcel connects the Bob Marshall

Wilderness to the east and the adjacent Mission Mountain–Rattlesnake Wilderness Complex to the west. “It's a critical piece to the overall landscape connectivity between the Swan Range and Mission Mountains,” says Ken McDonald, chief of the FWP Wildlife Bureau. Kolbe, who once spent a decade researching lynx for the U.S. Forest Service, says, “It was also the most important unprotected lynx habitat in the western United States.” According to McDonald, the Marshall Creek lands have been among FWP's highest statewide priorities for native fish and wildlife that depend on forested landscapes. “It has pretty much everything we were looking for when it came to making an acquisition of this size and scope,” he says.

“A GOOD BALANCE”

Marshall Creek WMA comprises 24,200 acres, with elevations ranging from 4,000 to 6,800 feet. The area is a short drive northwest of Seeley Lake in a perpetually moist forest of spruce, fir, and western larch, with lodgepole pine growing on drier slopes. Though most of the WMA has been logged at one time or another, the area is now thickly forested. Trees grow quickly in the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; TONY BYNUM; ROB CHANEY/MISSOULIAN



fertile soil, and a diverse mix of mature and younger stands provides excellent habitat for species like white-tailed and mule deer, moose, elk, snowshoe hares, mountain grouse, great gray owls, mountain lions, wolves, and fisher. Bald eagles, osprey, and loons search for fish in 80-acre Lake Marshall, the largest waterbody on the WMA.

FWP's acquisition of the parcel in 2011 came with strong backing from a wide range of local and state interests, including the Seeley Lake Community Council, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, the Seeley-Swan ATV Club, Montana Trout Unlimited, the Montana Wildlife Federation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Rick Morvilius, president of the Seeley Lake Driftriders Club, says his members were “one hundred percent behind” FWP's acquisition of the Marshall Creek property because the area is a premier site for winter sledding.

One reason for the overwhelming support was FWP's decision to maintain abundant public access on 30-plus miles of logging roads open to vehicles and hundreds more open only to foot traffic. “We have a good balance here between well-maintained open roads and walk-in areas,” says Kolbe. “This area also provides public

CAT WALK Lynx require snowy, heavily forested landscapes. Before FWP acquired Marshall Creek WMA, says the local wildlife biologist, the area was considered “the most important unprotected lynx habitat in the western United States.”

Right: To keep habitat for lynx, elk, and other wildlife secure—and to improve bull trout spawning success in streams—FWP has hired local contractors to close off numerous logging roads lacing the WMA and restore them to a natural state.



access to tens of thousands of acres of adjacent federal land.”

Though the Marshall Creek area is no longer in private hands, FWP manages the property in ways that benefit the local economy. Last summer the department contracted with Chris Koppenhaver, owner of an excavation company in Seeley Lake, to close off miles of roads that threatened bull trout spawning streams, pull dozens of culverts, and construct a trailhead complete with horse trailer parking slips. Future plans include more road removal as well as timber management that benefits fish, wildlife, and the local

economy. “One reason we lobbied for [the acquisition] is that we knew FWP would maintain that forest in a productive working condition,” says Gordy Sanders, resource manager for Pyramid Mountain Lumber.

As with all other WMAs, FWP pays the same property tax to the county as was required of previous owners.

According to Ladd Knotek, FWP area fisheries biologist, some of the most important new management work is aimed at reducing cumulative effects of old logging roads on trout spawning streams. Knotek explains that

the dirt roads bleed sediment and excess nutrients into the creeks. Roads too close to streams deprive the water of shade, causing temperatures to rise above what bull trout require. And small (12- to 36-inch) culverts that function as logging road stream crossings concentrate water flow like a fireman's hose, preventing trout from moving upstream to spawn. "Our goal is to keep the existing open roads while restoring many of the closed ones to a more natural state," says Knotek. That includes replacing dozens of culverts with natural stream crossings that reduce maintenance and allow for fish passage.

LASTING BULL TROUT RECOVERY

The actor Harrison Ford once told a reporter that "the best thing about trout is where they live." That helps explain why the first time I saw Lake Marshall I fell in love. It's a gorgeous mountain lake, the kind that makes you want to climb into a canoe and see if the trout are biting. It also has one of the nicest picnic spots in western Montana. While acknowledging the lake's beauty and hungry resident trout, Knotek says the WMA's most valuable coldwater treasures are 25 miles of clear and icy bull trout spawning and rearing streams: Marshall Creek, Deer Creek, and the West Fork of the Clearwater River.

When FWP removed a fish-blocking dam on the main stem of the Clearwater in 2010, bull trout in that river and the Blackfoot were able to swim upstream for the first time in decades to reach spawning and rearing

waters in the Marshall Creek WMA area. "In much of western Montana, we're struggling to hold on to our remnant bull trout populations," says Knotek. "But in the Clearwater drainage we've moved toward lasting recovery and long-term protection."

Though the federally protected bull trout are still off-limits to anglers in the Clear-



BULLS CAN COME HOME Critical to the WMA acquisition was removing a dam (above: before, in hand-held photo, and after) on the Clearwater River that had blocked bull trout from reaching spawning streams in the Marshall Creek drainage.

water drainage, Knotek points out that many native cutthroat trout, which also spawn in the WMA creeks, migrate downstream and grow healthy and large in the Clearwater River, Lake Inez, Lake Alva, and Seeley Lake. "Those migratory cutts augment the resident trout populations and provide a real boost to local fisheries," he says.

YEAR-ROUND RECREATION

I never would have guessed it, but it turns out the coldest, snowiest weather of the year ushers in Marshall Creek's busiest season. During the peak of winter, more than a hundred snowmobilers each day ride the property's groomed trails and enjoy the area's stunning scenery. The WMA's snowmobile trails form the core of the Seeley Lake trail system, which *SnowWest* magazine ranks among the best in the nation. I was also surprised to learn that the wildlife area can host so many motorized snow sleds without overly stressing wildlife. "During winter, elk and deer move to their winter ranges down in the valley, bears den, and streams are protected by a thick blanket of snow," Kolbe explains. "My research for the Forest Service several years ago confirmed that lynx and other wildlife that remain on Marshall Creek WMA through the winter aren't harmed by recreational snowmobiling."

Much of the WMA's public appeal is its wide range of year-round recreation. In addition to snowmobilers, trappers use it during the snowy months. Anglers, hikers, horse-

back riders, and wildlife watchers take over in spring and summer. Hunters start showing up around Labor Day for mountain grouse and archery seasons and stay on through the end of big game season. They share the roads in early October with carloads of scenery seekers gawking at great swaths of gold created by the changing needles of larch, known locally as tamarack.

By keeping the property open to the public, FWP ensures that local recreation-based businesses remain viable. "And it's not just local use," adds Kolbe. "This is a destination area for hunters and snowmobilers from across Montana. They come here and bring their wallets with them."

The area's wide range of recreational use is mirrored by its varied landscapes and vegetative communities. In addition to the streams and lake, Marshall Creek WMA contains extensive shallow wetlands, brushy avalanche chutes, open grasslands, and a wide range of forest stands. The streams and wetlands are bordered by dogwood, alder, and willow. Tree species and age vary throughout the forest. All this diversity creates a mixed bag of interconnected habitat types. You might find yourself picking your way through a stand of mature boreal fir or spruce and then, out of nowhere, you step into a ten-year-old cut where larch and alder predominate. Hunters know where to find the specific game species they're after in these forested medleys.

I spent a blissful hour last October wandering through gorgeous, low-elevation aspen groves with one of my golden retrievers. Marshall Creek WMA has abundant ruffed grouse, and, unlike some of the impenetrable thickets I find closer to my home 50 miles away in the Flathead Valley, its coverts are ideal for hunting. Aspen stands provide the birds with plenty of food and protection from avian predators. But they also offer enough open spaces where a hunter can squeeze off a shot before a flushing grouse disappears into the timber.

The big game hunting at Marshall Creek WMA is outstanding. "Some great whitetail bucks and bull elk are taken on this area every year," says Kolbe. "It also winters a good number of moose, and the bear and lion hunting can be fantastic. The views are pretty spectacular, too."



HAPPY ENDINGS The scenic Swan Mountains rise up to the east of the WMA. Dense forests of fir, spruce, pine, and larch provide excellent cover for big game species including elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. Below: Taking a day off of work to explore Marshall Creek's diverse hunting opportunities, Jay Kolbe hauls a whitetail buck back to his vehicle.



Which brings us back to that November dawn, a world covered in white, and a landscape too beautiful to believe. Kolbe and I were the only hunters out that morning. We stood on the overlook and marveled at how the light framed the horizon and played across the tops of the clouds, and at how lucky we were to see it all.

But we were there, after all, to hunt, so we climbed back into the truck and drove a mile or two farther up the road and parked. Kolbe, long-legged and fit like the elk he

loves to hunt, led me up into the high country, where we spent a few hours glassing distant ridges. We eventually split up, and before long I found a lone bull's track. I never did catch up with that elk, but I tracked him in a foot of new snow, under blue skies and sunshine, through some of the prettiest country I've ever seen. It was an incredible hunt. As for Kolbe—well, he happened to run across a handsome whitetail buck, and where two of us went up the mountain, three of us came down. 🐻

Many Hands Make Great Work

Marshall Creek WMA's federally listed or potentially threatened fish and wildlife—including bull trout, Canada lynx, grizzlies, and wolverines—also attracted the attention of federal agencies and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). They recognized the area's enormous ecological value and worked with FWP to protect the critical fish and wildlife habitat. "This project wouldn't have happened without these partners pulling together and working with us to get it done" says Jay Kolbe, FWP wildlife biologist. "We were able to leverage sportsman license dollars with other federal and private conservation funds because we all recognized just how critical this habitat is." FWP bought the 24,200-acre Marshall Creek tract in 2011 from TNC, which had earlier purchased it from Plum Creek Timber Company as part of the conservation organization's Montana Legacy Project. About 70 percent of the roughly \$18 million purchase price came from federal grants and programs. FWP paid approximately 30 percent with the hunting license-funded Habitat Montana Program.



The Funding Breakdown:

FWP Habitat Montana Program	\$6 million
U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program	\$5.9 million
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat Conservation Plan Land Acquisition Program	\$5.6 million
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service State Wildlife Grant	\$640,000
The Nature Conservancy	\$220,000

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ROB CHANEY/MISSOULIAN; TODD TANNER