

Securing Homes for Montana's Wildlife

For 30 years, Habitat Montana has conserved living spaces for game, nongame, and endangered species. Will it survive? *By Greg Lemon*

With its abundant game, vast tracts of public land, and a sparse human population, Montana is a hunting and wildlife-watching paradise. But it wasn't always so.

As in much of the West, Montana's wildlife was nearly wiped out in the late 19th century. Market and subsistence hunters killed tens of thousands of elk, bison, and deer to feed the miners, loggers, and settlers pouring into the territory. One photo from the 1909 Montana Fish & Game Commission's Biennial Report (below right) shows two hunters at their camp near Boulder with 22 dead deer. Ducks and geese were harvested with nets. Butcher shops in Butte, Missoula, and Great Falls regularly stocked fresh carcasses of bighorn sheep, pronghorn, elk, and waterfowl. Big game that avoided the onslaught faced fierce competition from vast herds of cattle and sheep.

The decline was rapid, tragic, and nearly absolute. Bison that once covered the plains dropped to fewer than 1,000 by 1890, and the species suddenly faced extinction. In the early 1920s, state officials estimated that only 3,000 pronghorn and 3,500 elk remained in the entire state. Deer were so scarce that residents called local newspapers to report a sighting. Trumpeter swans and Canada

geese all but disappeared.

How did wildlife rebound so remarkably that Montana is now home to record numbers of elk, a state where deer and geese are so common as to be nuisances in some places, and pronghorn herds hardly garner a glance from passing motorists?

Most of the credit goes to science-based hunting seasons and limits that regulate harvest, along with game law enforcement and big game reintroductions. But sustaining that recovery in later years required restoring the places where wildlife live. Starting in the

1940s, FWP, hunters, and landowners began working together to secure essential habitat to conserve big game and waterfowl species, provide public hunting access, and reduce depredation problems on private land.

In recent years, that work has been funded by an essential program called Habitat Montana. How the program came about, and what it has accomplished, exemplify Montana's commitment to wildlife. "In my 30-year career, I've seen very few states with the foresight to create a fund like Habitat Montana, one that is paid for strictly



NO LIMIT To feed hungry pioneers, miners, loggers, and others pouring into Montana Territory, unregulated commercial hunters decimated big game populations in the late 19th century.

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PLACES TO LIVE Big game populations recovered thanks to regulated harvest and reintroduction efforts. But starting in the mid-20th century, biologists saw that fast-disappearing habitat was thwarting full recovery. With support from hunters and landowners, FWP began securing prime wildlife habitat such as the Sun River Wildlife Management Area, which provides essential winter range for elk moving down from the high country.

through license sales," says Mike Mueller, Land Program manager with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), in Missoula. "There isn't much other money out there to conserve prime wildlife habitat and public access."

RESTORATION BEGINS

Montana began protecting wildlife habitat in 1940 in the Judith River Basin between Lewistown and Great Falls. Years earlier, in 1915 and 1917, ranchers concerned by low elk numbers in the Little Belt Mountains led an effort to transplant Yellowstone National Park elk into the area. They and their predecessors had been drawn to the Little Belt foothills by the region's lush grass, but the cattle operations and overhunting had decimated the resident elk herd. The citizen-led elk reintroduction

effort was almost too successful. By 1938 elk were so plentiful they competed with cattle for winter range on private land.

In 1940, using hunting license fees and funds from a new federal excise tax on sporting equipment, the Montana Fish and Game Department, as it was then called, bought



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237 acres of prime winter range where elk could come down from the Little Belts to feed without encroaching on adjacent ranches. The parcel was the heart of what would become the 9,400-acre Judith River Wildlife Management Area. The purchase was the first in Montana made with hunter dollars, in the spirit of neighborliness with area ranchers, to benefit wildlife and public access. Today the Judith WMA continues to provide critical winter range for elk and deer herds, diverse hunting opportunities, and grazing for cattle from a neighboring ranch.

For the next half century, similar habitat projects in Montana happened in fits and starts. Wildlife managers and sportsmen's groups cobbled together money for a parcel of wetland habitat here or a chunk of winter range there. But FWP lacked a dedicated

PHOTOS: MONTANA FWP



source of funding for habitat. That was about to change.

BUYING EASEMENTS AND PROPERTY

In 1987 the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 526, creating the Habitat Montana Program. It set aside money from the sale of big game hunting licenses for the purpose of conserving “important [wildlife] habitat that is seriously threatened.” Habitat Montana initially accumulated \$2.8 million annually, more than 90 percent from non-resident license sales. By 2015, the program was receiving roughly \$4 million per year.

To use the funding wisely, FWP identified the most important and imperiled habitat types in Montana, such as wetlands and intermountain grasslands. One potent tool for protecting those habitats was acquiring conservation easements. Easements are voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and FWP. An easement restricts certain development on the property, such as subdividing parcels, plowing native grasslands, or leasing land for hunting, and requires some form of public hunting. In

return, the landowner receives a one-time payment of roughly 40 percent of the property’s value. That money allows ranchers to stay on their land and improve the ranch operation. For instance, after Donna and Les Hirsch sold FWP a conservation easement along ten miles of the wildlife-rich Tongue River near Miles City, the couple used some of the proceeds to purchase additional ranchland.

Habitat Montana helped FWP acquire, from F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber, the recent Trumbull Creek Conservation Easement near Whitefish—7,068 acres of wildlife habitat, public hiking and snowmobile trails, and mountain streams that otherwise could have been sold for subdivisions. “This is definitely a win-win arrangement,” says Chuck Roady, the company’s vice president and general manager. “The easement lets us continue to sustainably manage the forest and allow public recreation while at the same time protecting it from development.”

FWP also uses Habitat Montana to make fee-title purchases from willing sellers to

LITTLE BELT ELK PARADISE Montana’s successful tradition of acquiring wildlife habitat began on the Judith River WMA. Over the past 30 years, Habitat Montana has helped improve and maintain this and other state wildlife lands with fencing, signs, and weed control.

create new wildlife management areas (WMAs) or add to existing areas. Examples include adding 650 acres of wildlife-rich wetlands to Ninepipe WMA north of Missoula, doubling the size of Dome Mountain WMA in the Yellowstone Valley, and purchasing Marshall Creek WMA in the Seeley-Swan Valley.

To ensure public representation, these and other large acquisition projects must be approved by the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the State Land Board.

So that FWP can maintain and improve WMAs, Habitat Montana provides critical funding—about \$800,000 per year—for that work. As a good neighbor to adjacent landowners, FWP controls spotted knapweed and other invasive plants, builds boundary fences, posts signs, and maintains

roads and other infrastructure with this money. The program also pays for crews to enhance and restore wildlife habitat with vegetation plantings, irrigation, and even cooperative grazing agreements involving FWP and neighboring landowners.

Nongame and endangered species benefit, too. For instance, the 24,000-acre Marshall Creek WMA contains prime whitetail habitat and is also home to federally protected grizzly bears, bull trout, and Canada lynx.

TURNING \$1 INTO \$4

Savvy FWP wildlife managers leverage Habitat Montana funds to secure millions of additional dollars for wildlife habitat. Many federal habitat programs must be matched by nonfederal funds. The Forest Legacy Program, for instance, provides \$3 for every \$1 FWP makes available. “Without Habitat Montana, we’d have to seek special funding from the legislature for that match each time a priority habitat project became available,” says Ken McDonald, head of FWP’s Wildlife Division. “Most likely, we’d lose our opportunity to secure that habitat because of the time it would take to request and have the necessary funds appropriated.”

Until recently, FWP could decide whether to purchase conservation easements—there are currently 63, totaling 440,000 acres—or make fee-title purchases. “Sometimes it makes more sense to

“**That’s the beauty of Habitat Montana. Each landowner is different. Each parcel of ground is different.**”

buy the land outright, because then we can do prescribed burns, selective logging, tree plantings, and other management work that can really benefit wildlife,” says McDonald. “But other times we get a lot more bang for the buck with easements. Ultimately, we do what’s best for habitat, because that’s what the legislation stipulates.”

Two years ago, FWP lost its ability to make fee-title acquisitions. The 2015 Montana Legislature scrutinized fee-title purchases that used Habitat Montana funds. Some lawmakers wanted the department to retain its acquisition option because the price of key properties in Montana, especially critical habitats along rivers, was skyrocketing. Others argued that FWP owned enough property and should maintain and manage the lands it already had. In the end, the legislature revoked the agency’s authority to use Habitat Montana funds for fee-title purchase. FWP acquisition projects

already under way could move forward, but new fee-title projects were disallowed.

Mueller says the restriction has hampered RMEF’s ability to help FWP conserve elk habitat. Opportunities to work with landowners who want to conserve their property or improve public access are fleeting. Success depends on the organization’s ability to move quickly and secure funding, such as from Habitat Montana, to complete projects, he says.

According to McDonald, FWP wildlife managers have had to turn down several landowner offers to sell prime wildlife habitat and hunting lands to the department. “We can still use Habitat Montana for conservation easements, and we’re pursuing those, but some landowners want to sell outright,” he says. “Because of the fee-title restriction, we can no longer offer that option.”

PROVIDING OPTIONS

Landowners who want to stay on their land, conserve its wildlife values, or both, want options. Those who prefer a conservation easement that doesn’t require public access can sell to a nonprofit land trust. For those who don’t mind allowing public access, selling FWP a conservation easement funded by Habitat Montana is another option. Still others may want to sell their land to the department to enhance public access and protect and improve the habitat they’ve worked hard to manage.

“Habitat Montana is based on voluntary decisions by landowners,” says Glenn Marx, executive director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts. “That’s the beauty of the program. Each landowner is different. Each parcel of ground is different. Habitat Montana is one more option for landowners to consider when evaluating different ways of conserving their land.”

Over the past 30 years, Habitat Montana has proved successful, generating praise from landowners and conservation groups alike. “If it weren’t for this program, we couldn’t have done anywhere near the number of acquisitions and easements in Montana that we’ve done over the past 30 years,” Mueller says. If the program were to ever disappear, he adds, “we’d lose a very effective tool to conserve the best of Montana’s elk country and add essential new public access.”

HABITAT HERO Cattle rancher Henry Gordon of Chinook on the 15,000-acre Blaine County conservation easement that FWP purchased using Habitat Montana funds. “I thought it was a good way to save our prairie grass,” he says. “It’s worked out well.”



LEFT TO RIGHT: CHRIS MCGOWAN; JOHN WARNER