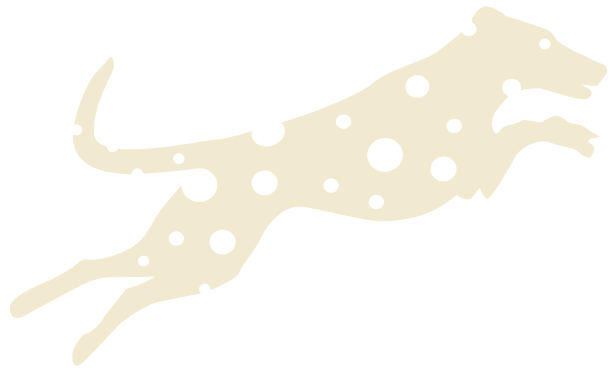




ON THE PROWL The author's sons, Liam and Jackson, head out across 58-square-mile Spotted Dog WMA near Deer Lodge in search of elk.

Up and Running

After a shaky start, Spotted Dog WMA is working out well for hunters, nearby landowners, and wildlife. Story and photos by Paul Queneau



Last fall, my sons Jackson and Liam, 12 and 14, spent most of the rifle season hunting white-tailed deer. Yet as Thanksgiving rolled up, our freezer stood empty. Both boys had made wise decisions to pass on iffy shots. Their restraint made me proud; I had less of it at their age. But I also dearly wanted their patience and persistence to pay off.

The 2017 season also offered Jackson his first chance to hunt an elk. Two years earlier, at age 10, he had killed his first whitetail doe, thanks to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' then-new Apprentice Hunter License, limited to deer and smaller game animals. Elk are reserved for hunters 12 and up, and finally Jackson was eligible.

Yet elk had eluded us all season. So on a sunny Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, we set out from Missoula on a last-ditch sortie to try out an elk mecca I'd heard great things about but never hunted: Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.

Wedged between Avon, Garrison, and Deer Lodge, this 37,616-acre (58-square-mile) WMA consists of golden grass hills and ridges dotted with occasional stands of bitterbrush, aspen, and conifer as the landscape rises toward the Continental Divide. In addition to elk, it's home to neotropical migrant songbirds, forest grouse, raptors, westslope cutthroat trout, mule deer, pronghorn, moose, and even the occasional grizzly bear. It's also less than an hour's drive from Helena, Deer Lodge, and Missoula, making it easily accessible to tens of thousands of hunters, anglers, hikers, and wildlife watchers.

Spotted Dog's main purpose is providing habitat to help migratory big game herds

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survive nasty winters. But enough elk congregate here each fall that the WMA has filled many a hunter's freezer since it opened to the public eight years ago.

BIRTH OF A WMA

The state purchased the Spotted Dog property in 2010 using Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP) money earmarked for restoring or replacing lands harmed by heavy metal mine waste in the Clark Fork River basin. This \$130 million trust (an amount the fund maintains today) is part of a court set-



GREAT PLACE FOR FLYING Bald eagles, golden eagles, and other raptors are among the 86 bird species that biologists have documented at Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area.

tlement with Atlantic Richfield Company for decades of pollution produced by mines and smelters in Butte and Anaconda. The money can be used to purchase wildlife habitat and lands that increase recreational opportunities to help offset losses to natural resources damaged beyond repair. FWP applied for funding to do just that, and received \$16.6 million to purchase Spotted Dog and fund its future management.

The Rock Creek Cattle Company (RCCC) had for decades leased 27,161 acres of the property from owner R-Y Timber Company. Bordered on the east by the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, that parcel was also checkerboarded with more than 10,000 acres of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) school trust land (see map on page 25). FWP wildlife managers had long known that the property housed wintering elk and a variety of other wildlife, so when the land came up for sale, the department took notice. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation paid for a land appraisal and supported the purchase, as did local conservation groups such as Anaconda Sportsman's Club and Hellgate Hunters and Anglers.

All involved feared that the land might otherwise be sold then subdivided into small lots for new homes—making it far less beneficial to wildlife, especially elk. “Elk spread out over a large area in the summer, but deep

snow forces them into a much smaller area where they eke out a living through the winter,” says Rick Northrup, chief of FWP's Wildlife Habitat Bureau. “Those bottleneck habitats are really vital to maintaining healthy herds. We wanted to purchase Spotted Dog primarily for its critical value to wintering elk.”

Biologists also knew the land was important to other species. Before her retirement this past spring after 30 years as an FWP nongame wildlife biologist, Kristi DuBois oversaw the department's initial assessment of Spotted Dog's smaller wildlife species. “The habitat for game and nongame species is off the charts,” DuBois says. “Water is all over the place—springs and riparian habitats interspersed with prairie and patches of aspen and other timber. It's kind of a picture postcard for what wildlife need.”

To assess Spotted Dog's diverse plant communities, FWP contracted with ecologists to survey its forests, grasslands, shrublands, and wetlands. The WMA contains the largest contiguous native grassland in western Montana under public ownership, including vast stands of rough fescue, a grass that elk love. Dense stands of timber provide critical thermal cover for elk in winter.

Over several years of surveying, FWP wildlife biologists and technicians, along with crews from the University of Montana's Avian Science Center, recorded 183 wildlife species. Among the 86 bird species were state “species of concern,” such as golden eagles, Lewis's woodpeckers, and long-billed curlews. FWP fisheries biologists identified native west-slope cutthroat trout in several streams that weave through the property.

The habitat news wasn't all good. Some areas had been damaged from overgrazing by cattle, especially along stream corridors. Roughly 6 percent (2,000 acres) of the WMA was infested with spotted knapweed or other invasive plants. But overall, Spotted Dog remains a wildlife wonderland. “It gives you an appreciation for what this country used to look like,” says Mike Thompson, wildlife manager of FWP's west-central region in Missoula.

After approval from the Montana Land Board, FWP purchased the property from R-Y Timber. “Spotted Dog is a great example of what Montanans do,” says Chris Marchion, a board member of the Anaconda Sportmen's

WORKING THE WMA Right: In 2011 FWP regional wildlife area manager Dave Dziak (since retired) released insects as one way to control spotted knapweed on Spotted Dog WMA. Roughly 6 percent, or 2,000 acres, of the wildlife area is infested with knapweed and other invasive species. Below: FWP area biologist Julie Golla talks with a rancher about elk near Spotted Dog. Local landowners maintain a keen interest in elk numbers because overabundant herds can cause economic hardship by grazing crops and trampling fences.



Club. “The public stands up and says, ‘We want wildlife on the landscape, and this is our contribution to accommodate that wildlife.’”

TWO-WAY LEARNING

FWP's purchase of Spotted Dog was not welcomed by all. Ranching has long been the lifeblood of the Deer Lodge area, as commemorated by the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site at the edge of town. Despite ownership changes since the 1880s, ranchers have always run sheep or cattle on the property, supporting livelihoods and a proud heritage. Some saw the FWP acquisition as signaling the end of a cherished era. Through an agreement with FWP, RCCC retained cattle grazing rights through 2013. After that, the department wanted to rest the land from grazing to allow overgrazed areas to recover.

It didn't help that local ranchers suspected that the state was eyeing Spotted Dog for a bison introduction, and relation-

ships grew more strained when their fears were confirmed. Few wildlife species concern Montana ranchers as much as bison, and after a flood of negative public comments, the idea was taken off the table in 2011. Understandably, tensions remained.

To resolve these conflicts, in 2013 FWP began meeting with 18 area residents who had applied to serve on the Spotted Dog WMA Working Group. The group, which has met 30 times over the past five years, included neighboring ranchers, hunters, anglers, other recreational users, educators, community leaders, and DNRC staff. At its first meeting, members selected Gold Creek rancher John Hollenback as chair and Anaconda businessman and past FWP director Jim Flynn as vice chair.

“The process has been one of learning a lot, on both sides,” Thompson says. “And I cannot emphasize ‘both sides’ enough. It helped FWP understand what the community values most about this landscape, and



WINTER AND SPRING ON THE WMA A herd of elk rests at Spotted Dog near the iconic summit of Rocky Ridge, visible in the background. The wildlife area contains prime winter elk range. Above: A mountain bluebird arrives at the WMA in early spring.

how to incorporate that as much as possible into our fish and wildlife management—and in the process, develop a level of trust with each other.”

The most immediate need, according to the working group, is to lower the number of overabundant elk, which can eat ranchers’ hay and knock down fences (see “Lowering elk numbers,” below).

Though some streams and wetlands on the WMA are still recovering from cattle overuse, selected stands of grasses in the uplands may attract more elk if they are grazed by cattle periodically.

Elk resist eating old, tall grasses. Cows are less picky, and can be used to “mow” down old stands and rejuvenate new growth. But the grazing needs to be managed. “If you just graze an area constantly, the vegetation never has time to recover,” explains Julie Golla, FWP area biologist for

the upper Clark Fork. “But if you do it in intervals, the grass and forbs are more attractive to elk in the spring when they green up. Grazing off all the dead stuff allows it to grow back anew.”

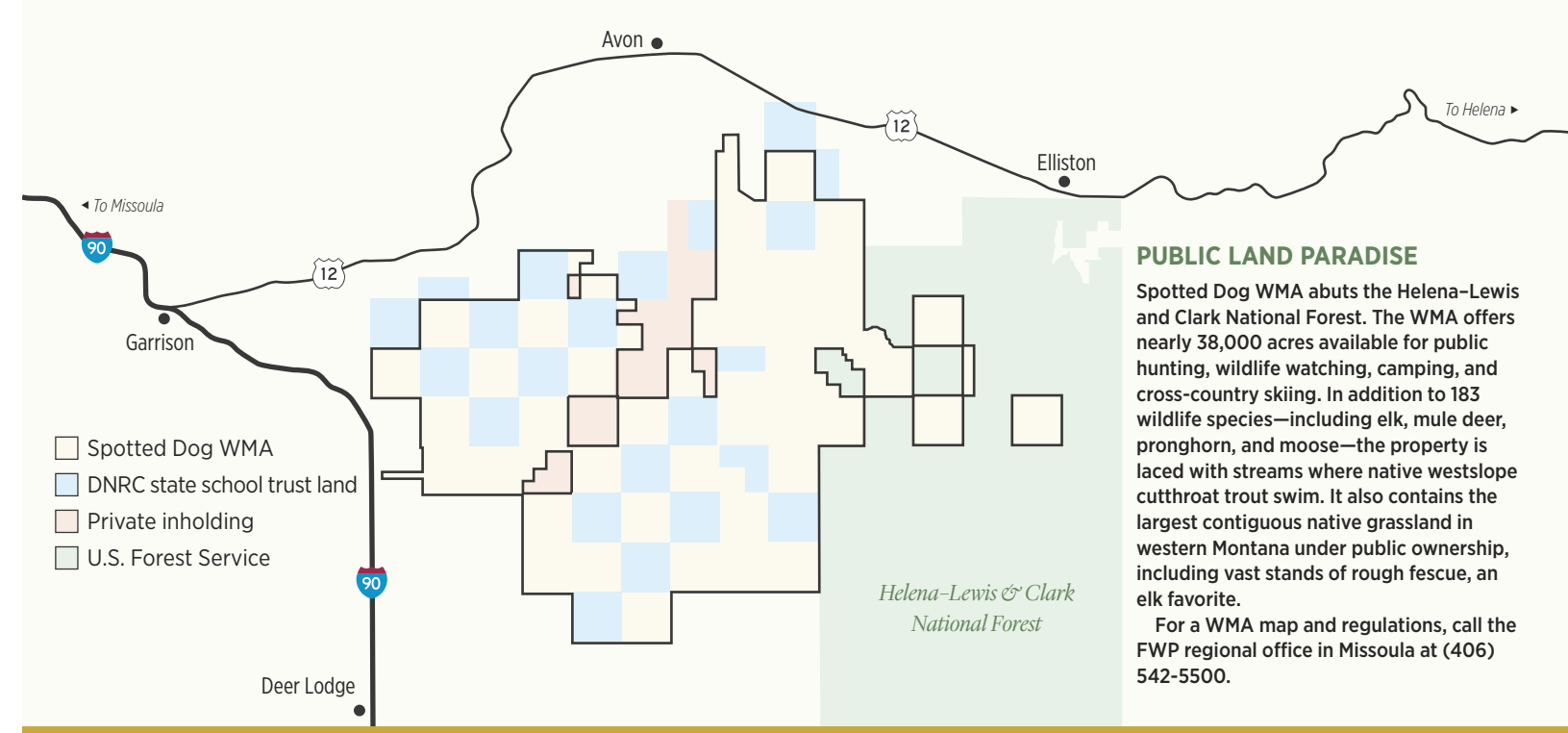
The WMA grazing is a good deal for both ranchers and wildlife. “No money changes hands,” says Golla. “If you’re grazing on Spotted Dog, you’re resting grass on your own property. And that benefits elk and cattle in both places.”

FWP issued a final management plan for Spotted Dog in early 2018. The document, a collaboration between the department and the working group, calls for improving public access, thinning conifers to help increase aspen stands (a food preferred by deer, elk, songbirds, and woodpeckers), restoring stream sections to increase prime trout habitat, and enhancing streamside wildlife corridors. The plan

also calls for continuing to control spotted knapweed and other noxious vegetation to protect grasslands and neighboring properties. Another focus of the plan is mule deer, a popular species whose population has declined in western Montana. FWP is looking to increase antelope bitterbrush, one of the species’ favorite foods, and find other ways to increase the WMA’s mule deer and pronghorn populations.

“The plan is definitely ambitious,” Golla says. “It aims to preserve a wide array of wildlife habitat, provide awesome recreation potential for a place that wasn’t accessible to the public before, and be a good neighbor—all the while not causing any headaches for anybody.”

Key to the plan’s success, Thompson says, is FWP’s decentralized operational structure. The WMA’s maintenance supervisor lives close by in Warm Springs. The



PUBLIC LAND PARADISE

Spotted Dog WMA abuts the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. The WMA offers nearly 38,000 acres available for public hunting, wildlife watching, camping, and cross-country skiing. In addition to 183 wildlife species—including elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and moose—the property is laced with streams where native westslope cutthroat trout swim. It also contains the largest contiguous native grassland in western Montana under public ownership, including vast stands of rough fescue, an elk favorite.

For a WMA map and regulations, call the FWP regional office in Missoula at (406) 542-5500.

local game warden lives almost within walking distance in Deer Lodge. And the area fisheries and wildlife biologists are based in Anaconda. “Program direction comes from our offices in Helena and Missoula,” Thompson says. “But the day-to-day decisions on Spotted Dog are made by FWP staff who are part of the local community. That makes a big difference in helping us build the trust-based relationships that are essential for managing such a large area that affects so many people.”

BACK ON THE HUNT

As I drove toward Spotted Dog last fall with sons Jackson and Liam, I was looking forward to experiencing the WMA’s “awesome recreation potential,” as Golla had put it. We headed from Avon up Spotted Dog Creek and began glassing forest openings. Then we hiked along some fingers of high-altitude spruce, hoping to surprise an elk herd.

We cut plenty of tracks in the aging snow among the trees but didn’t bump any elk. Nor did we glass any on dozens of forest openings and vast grassy savannahs within the massive wildlife area. As we made our way back to the vehicle, the sun dropping below the horizon, I suggested we slowly start driving home, stopping to glass from overlooks to see if we might catch some elk slinking out of the trees for their evening meal. After just a few minutes of driving, there came word from the back seat.

“Dad, I might see an elk,” Jackson said. Sure enough, a cow had just popped up



Julie Golla, FWP area wildlife biologist

“If you’re grazing on Spotted Dog, you’re resting grass on your own property. And that benefits elk and cattle in both places.”

in a meadow about 300 yards away. I stopped the vehicle. With only 15 minutes of legal shooting time left, I knew our chances were slim. But if we walked directly toward the elk, maybe it wouldn’t perceive us as moving.

As we began our stalk, the cow turned toward us and began to amble closer. At 200 yards, I set up shooting sticks and Jackson knelt to perch his rifle. I glanced at my watch—only seven minutes left of legal shooting time. Then the cow, standing atop a rise, turned broadside and began to feed.

“If you’ve got a clear shot and can hold your crosshair steady on its vitals, flip off the safety and just gently squeeze the trigger,” I said. Jackson looked up at me and shook his head.

“It’s just sky behind her, Dad.”

I took a moment to respond, knowing that if faced with that shot I’d have a hard time not taking it. But I also knew I needed to respect and adhere to the rules that Hunter Education had drilled into my boys: “Always be sure of your target and beyond.”

We repositioned a bit in those last few minutes, but the cow never presented a safe or ethical shot. Finally, looking at my watch, I told the boys we’d have to call it a day. Jackson took the news without anger or sorrow, making me a proud dad.

As we headed home, we talked about our day at Spotted Dog and all we’d seen and discovered.

Count on us being there well before sunup this October 20. 🐾

Lowering elk numbers

FWP bought Spotted Dog primarily to help elk. Yet the larger Hunting District 215 currently contains twice as many elk (roughly 2,650 animals) as the population objective, which FWP established based on comments by hunters and landowners.

So while the long-term plan for Spotted Dog is to help sustain a healthy elk herd that migrates to and from nearby Helena-Lewis and Clark and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests, the more immediate concern in HD215 is to significantly reduce elk numbers. The elk graze on pasture meant for cattle, trample fences, and eat crops.

“The biggest barrier to the wildlife management area fitting into the community has been the overpopulation of elk, because that creates an economic burden for landowners,” says Mike Thompson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Missoula.

FWP is attempting to tackle the problem in 2018 by offering either-sex (except spikes) “A” tags for elk throughout the hunting district and over-the-counter “B” licenses (cow and calf elk) for use only on private lands, with some exceptions. The “B” tags, which must be purchased before the general season, give hunters with access to private land the potential to bring home two elk.

Julie Golla, area wildlife biologist, says the “B” tags will also let ranchers with concerns about overpopulation play a key part in trimming the elk herd while moving elk off private lands. “One goal here is to keep the elk moving so that hunters have a crack at them,” she says. “That’s really the only way we can bring numbers down to a reasonable level.” ■



FWP is helping hunters reduce elk numbers in HD215.