



PIT STOP Snow geese and other waterfowl refuel during an April stopover in the grain-rich fields of North Shore Wildlife Management Area.

BIRDS *and a* BARN

North Shore Wildlife Management Area conserves critical waterfowl habitat while preserving a piece of the Flathead Lake region's agricultural heritage. *By Butch Larcombe*

It's about 5:30 a.m. in mid-June, and as the sun crawls up over the Swan Range to the east, sunlight slides across the valley floor at the north end of Flathead Lake. It first reveals the tips of tall stands of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir scattered amid a carpet of flowering canola. Moments later, as the light brightens, the century-old McClarty Barn emerges from the shadows.

This unveiling is repeated, with seasonal variations, on many mornings at the land-

mark barn. The iconic structure sits center stage on North Shore Wildlife Management Area just south of Montana Highway 82 between Somers and Bigfork. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks owns and manages the 427-acre wildlife area, a haven for migrating ducks, geese, shorebirds, and tundra and trumpeter swans, as well as white-tailed deer, upland birds, raptors, and dozens of songbird species.

In addition to its abundant wildlife and

colorful barn (more on that later), the North Shore WMA represents an important piece in a quilt of private and public land that adjoins the 1,704-acre Flathead Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) that's managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Together, the two public parcels, and smaller private holdings, comprise the largest stretch of undeveloped shoreline on Flathead Lake, one of the nation's largest and cleanest natural freshwater lakes.

The barn and WMA are testament to the power of foresight and collaboration that has preserved open space and benefited birds, hunting, wildlife watching, and water quality, all while honoring the Flathead Valley's agricultural heritage. In the eyes of many, including Gael Bissell, now a retired FWP wildlife biologist, North Shore WMA has achieved a key goal of "protecting some of the valley's most important wildlife habitat while allowing people to enjoy this area during much of the year," she says.

While employed by FWP, Bissell joined with individuals and representatives of other agencies and conservation groups to

help establish the wildlife area. Along with improving waterfowl and other wildlife habitat, those collaborators had an additional goal: Stave off some of the area's residential development, especially between the lake and Highway 82. North of the highway, subdivisions are gradually altering the character of the Flathead Valley, making it look more like a "suburban anywhere" rather than the rural Montana so many residents and visitors value.

SPURRED BY SUBDEVELOPMENT

Spurring efforts to protect the area was a proposal for a large subdivision that could have brought several hundred homes to the north shore near Somers. That plan was sidelined in part by the Great Recession of 2008-09. But subsequent new commercial development and For Sale signs sprouting on farmland along Highway 82 east of Somers fueled renewed protection concerns. "Keeping rich farmland like this in agriculture is important for sustaining local ag economies and protecting food security," says Laura Katzman, a land protection specialist with the Flathead Land Trust.

The North Shore WMA, coupled with the federal WPA and adjacent conservation easements "are a tremendous buffer between the rapid development happening in the valley



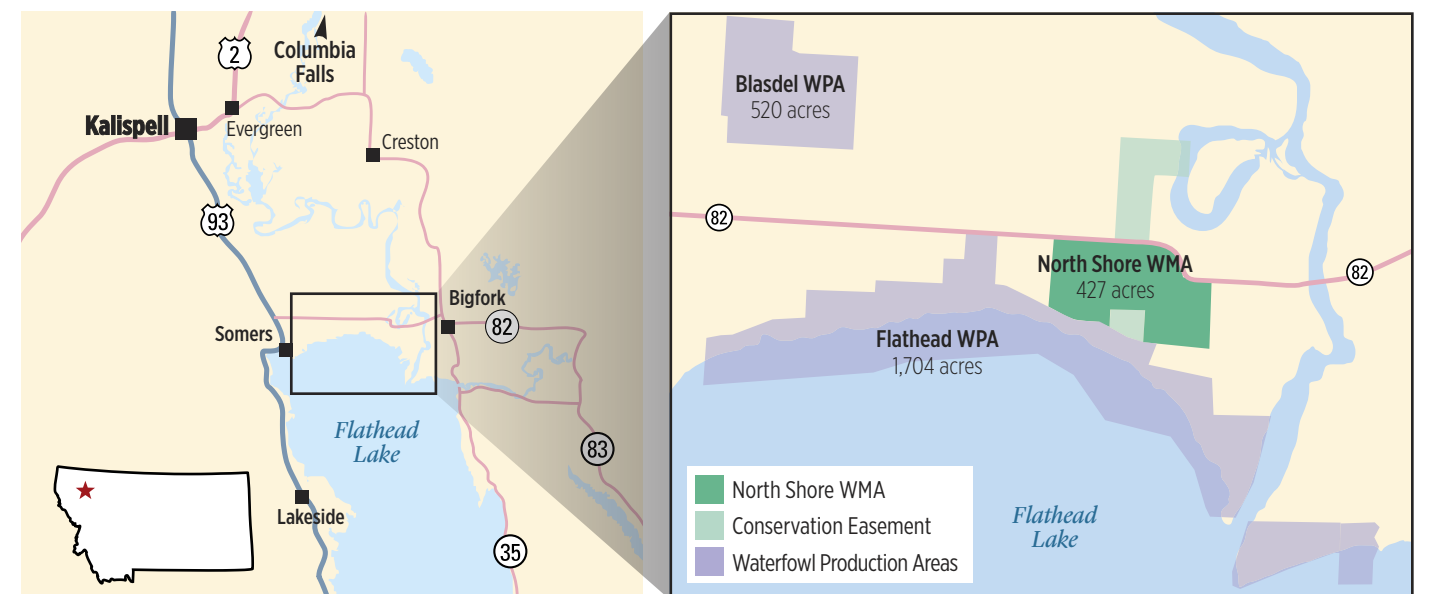
LOCAL ICON For more than a century, the McClarty Barn has stood as a landmark along Flathead Lake's north shore. Acquisition of North Shore WMA included the beloved structure.

and around Flathead Lake," says Bissell.

Many of the WMA's supporters—individuals, public agencies, and nonprofit groups—are part of the broader River 2 Lake Initiative. R2L works to protect land and water between Columbia Falls, where the Flathead River's three forks converge, and the lake. Projects focus on wetlands, floodplains, and vegetated river and stream beds that naturally filter agricultural and pave-

ment runoff before it reaches the lower river and lake, helping keep water clean.

North Shore WMA was formed from 2008 to 2016 with three land purchases totaling nearly \$3.9 million. The money came from FWP, the Bonneville Power Administration's Fisheries Mitigation Program, The Nature Conservancy, and the Pittman-Robertson Program (which redistributes a longtime federal tax on the sale



SAVED FROM DEVELOPMENT North Shore WMA sits just south of Highway 82 between Somers and Bigfork, abutting Flathead Waterfowl Production Area. Acquisition of the wildlife area was spurred by growing residential development south of the highway in the early 2000s.



BIG BIRDS Among the waterfowl species using North Shore WMA are trumpeter swans and far-more-common tundra swans (shown here, identified by their yellow beak patches).

of firearms and ammunition). Supporting the project were hunters, bird watchers, local landowners and residents, and Flathead Lake fans.

ACCESS TO OPEN SPACE

Some parts of the WMA and adjoining WPA are closed in the spring and early summer to protect nesting waterfowl. Hunting is allowed in the fall, and the small areas near the barn and a hay shed to the west offer year-round access for birders and history buffs.

Prime wildlife beneficiaries of the protected wildlife area are vast flocks of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. FWP restoration ecologist Franz Ingelfinger explains that the WMA sits in a shallow basin where spring runoff creates flooded fields of spent grain from the previous year's harvest, attracting geese, ducks, and swans heading north. "They use the area as a refueling station," he says.

Anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 waterfowl briefly use the area each spring, followed by smaller numbers of diverse shorebird species, says Bissell, who heads the Flathead Audubon Society chapter. "The intense waterfowl and shorebird use often lasts just a few weeks each spring, but it's very important," she says.

To ensure adequate "fuel" for the birds,

FWP contracts with an area farmer who plants and harvests the fertile land in exchange for leaving a portion of the crops unharvested with high stubble, for wildlife food and cover. Typical crops include canola, spring and winter wheat, peas, and lentils, often separated by buffer strips of taller vegetation.

Ingelfinger talks with the current farmer regularly to discuss how best to raise crops that benefit wildlife. "We were recently discussing creative ways to improve wildlife cover and forage in an area that's typically hard to farm and has been trending toward less desirable species like foxtail and canary grass," Ingelfinger says.

A CENTURY OF FARMING

Joseph and Kate McClarty put down homestead stakes on 160 acres of fertile soil along Flathead Lake's north shore in the early 1900s, growing crops and operating a well-drilling business. Joseph and Kate eventually moved back to Canada, but their son Percy and his wife Esther continued to farm the land while raising a family. They added the hay barn to the homestead, likely between 1912 and 1915, according to state historic preservation records.

The McClarty family sold the farm to Montana Power Company when construc-

tion of SKQ Dam (originally Kerr Dam) near Polson threatened to raise lake levels and submerge the property. After the dam was completed in the late 1930s, it turned out the land didn't flood, and the power company sold the farm in the 1950s to Edward and Mabel Wittlake. The Wittlakes added a metal Quonset structure to the west side of the barn as part of a short-lived hog operation.

About four decades later, Kalispell attorney Darrell Worm bought the farm and its highly visible barn from the Wittlake family. "I had always admired the property," Worm says. "I drove by there every day and didn't want to see it deteriorate."

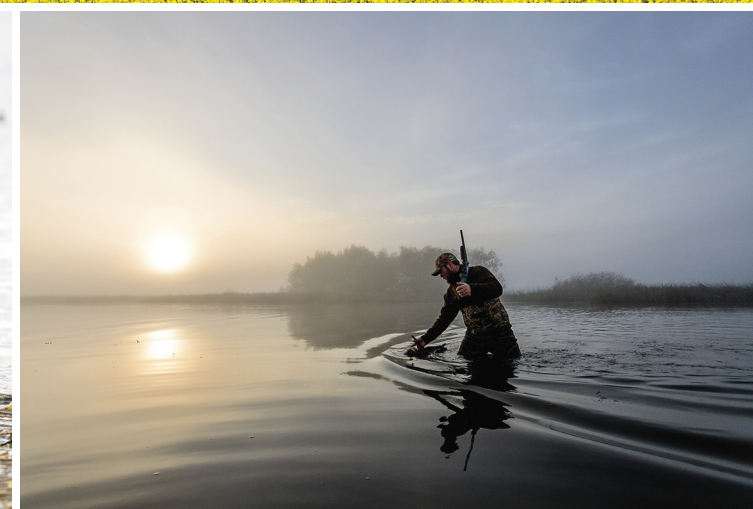
While he rented out the farmland, Worm eventually began talking with the Flathead Land Trust about the future of the property and barn. In 2013, he agreed to sell the farm to FWP in a deal that also involved the land trust and funding from the Bonneville Power Administration. Among its many responsibilities, the federal agency pays to mitigate fish

“**We’re hoping that once people stop to look at the barn they also can learn about migrating waterfowl, FWP habitat management, and the importance of protecting critical habitats.**”

and wildlife habitat lost from constructing hydropower facilities in the Northwest. "Darrell agreed to sell the land at a bargain rate in order to achieve a conservation outcome and future public ownership," says Paul Travis, executive director of the land trust.

Bissell says the main draw for FWP was the property's enormous potential to benefit migrating waterfowl and provide an important buffer along Flathead Lake's shore.

In addition to cutting the wildlife agency



WMA OF MANY USES Clockwise from top: Canola is one of several crops grown on the WMA. Rather than pay FWP to farm the land, a local farmer agrees not to harvest a portion of the crops and leave high stubble for food and cover. The new wildlife area benefits duck hunters, like this one shown on Flathead Lake, and bird watchers who delight in seeing waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds such as the white-faced ibis.

a deal on the property, Worm paid to help restore the barn, the last structure remaining from the original McClarty homestead. That eased concern among the barn's many fans that the 100-year-old landmark would be torn down.

A local contractor was hired to repair, replace, and paint the barn's siding, re-install and repair a damaged metal roof, rebuild the original cupola, restrict pigeon access, and build an interior stairway. Volunteers, including neighbors, Worm, and members of Ducks Unlimited and the Flathead Land

Trust, helped clean the barn, shoveling out a dump-truck load of pigeon droppings.

FEELING AN ATTACHMENT

Chere Justo, executive director of the Montana Preservation Alliance and co-author of *Hand Raised*, a book about Montana's historic barns, says "heritage barns" like the McClarty structure hold a powerful allure and are worth saving. "They are honest buildings," she says. "People just feel an attachment to the story of these barns."

The red-and-white structure, a few wind-

mills, and pieces of old machinery on the property are reminders that farming and family life are deeply rooted along the north shore of Flathead Lake. And for Ingelfinger, the barn provides an opportunity to attract people to a public site they might otherwise drive past. "It's definitely an attraction," he says. "We're hoping that once people stop to look at the barn they also can learn about migrating waterfowl, FWP habitat management, and the importance of protecting critical habitats like the ones surrounding the barn." 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: DAVID R. ARMER; MICK FUCCI; WILL PHELPS; DICK WALKER