

# Preserving Montana's unique appeal

**N**ot long ago while picking up my luggage at the Helena Regional Airport, I saw a newly arrived group of hunters waiting for their backpacks, duffle bags, and rifle cases. Men and women, teenagers and adults, they were all obviously thrilled to be in Montana. As they looked out the windows at the snow-dusted Big Belt Mountains in the distance, I could see awe in their grinning faces.

They were about to embark on the Montana outdoor experience. One way to think about Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is that we exist to protect the “integrity” of that experience.

That experience covers a lot of ground. Bordering Canada, we're a northern state, with frosty winter mornings, frozen lakes, and even a few glaciers. Our unique and diverse landscape consists of one-third mountains, one-third foothills and breaks, and one-third open range and grassland.

We're also a western state, with all the romance and lore that

68 state wildlife management areas.

The Montana experience means a person arriving here from Chicago or Houston can, within hours, head out to hunt elk, fish for trout, or backpack in some of the most beautiful surroundings in North America. It means that people who live here can hunt for subsistence, stocking the freezer with venison, waterfowl, and fish filets. It means we can enjoy the outdoors year round by hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, skiing, boating, hiking, backcountry camping, and more.

This can be done in places resembling what the land looked like 100 or even 10,000 years ago. Montana still retains the Old West and the ancient. We're home to streams where prospectors panned for gold, the Old North Trail where First Peoples traveled for thousands of years, and foothills where saber-toothed tigers stalked giant sloths.

Add all that up and you have the Montana experience.

It takes concerted effort to maintain the integrity of that experience. By integrity, I mean that Montana's outdoor recreation is based on healthy habitat, well-managed fish and wildlife populations, and customer-friendly state and national parks. Integrity is integral to the science that FWP uses to inform management decisions, the intact ecosystems that sustain fish and wildlife, and the personal honor and professionalism of our biologists and game wardens, who make sure the land and waters support the species people want to see and catch and that outdoor recreation is legal and safe. Integrity also applies to the relationships among land-owners, agencies like ours, and the people who recreate in Montana's outdoors that lead to public access to private land, conservation easements that protect habitat and open space, and continued public support for ranching and farming.

Finally, from my perspective, there's the integrity of this agency itself, and our dedication to public service and our promise to be forthright, transparent, and trustworthy.

The Montana experience cannot be taken for granted. Preserving it requires work: conserving fish and wildlife habitat; protecting and preserving public lands and waters; repairing and replacing aging trails, access roads, sewage and electrical systems, and other infrastructure; and managing the growing number of conflicts among the growing number of people enjoying Montana's outdoors.

At FWP, we can't protect the integrity of the Montana outdoor experience alone. In my next column (March-April 2019), I'll explain how we bring Montanans of diverse walks of life together to help us achieve that goal and ensure that, years from now, people arriving in Montana will still step off the plane with a huge grin, knowing they are about to experience something remarkable.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Maintaining the integrity of the Montana experience requires conserving habitat, protecting public lands, maintaining infrastructure, and managing conflicts.

comes from a heritage forged by Native Americans, cowboys, miners, and loggers. Montana is a wild place, too, where you can still see herds of pronghorn race across a prairie, or hike a wilderness mountain trail knowing that somewhere up there lives a wolverine or a lynx, or bull trout spawning in an icy tributary.

But the Montana experience is also about what Montanans and others have chosen to preserve here through conservation laws and coalitions that work hard to preserve much of what we cherish. That includes our renowned stream access law, 7 million acres of Block Management lands, 55 state and two national parks, 340 fishing access sites, eight national forests, 8 million acres of Bureau of Land Management property, 3.4 million acres of wilderness, and