

# CREAM OF THE CROP

**Montana's wildlife management areas encompass some of the state's finest habitat communities.**

BY SAM CURTIS

**W**hen hungry elk began ransacking the haystacks and crops of Augusta rancher C. R. Rathbone, the depths of his frustration were evident in the advertisement he placed in the local newspaper: He asked for help from anyone willing to machine gun up to 1,000 of the ungulates.

That was in 1938. Whether the rancher found any takers or not, the elk massacre never took place. But the following year, still frustrated over increased depredation, Rathbone illegally killed an elk on his ranch. The case eventually went to the Montana Supreme Court, and in 1940 the rancher was convicted after the high court concluded that those who own land

in Montana must accept "some injury to property or inconvenience from wild game for which there is no recourse."

Though it agreed with the ruling, the Montana State Fish and Game Commission, which was responsible for managing the state's wildlife, did not want to alienate farmers and ranchers. The Montana Legislature had earlier passed laws requiring the state wildlife agency to help landowners suffering losses from big game. Also, wildlife populations were finally on the increase, after hitting dismal and historic lows only a decade earlier. The commission didn't want to antagonize the agricultural community upon whose land the



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**PUBLIC PASTURES** WMAs such as Ear Mountain, on the Rocky Mountain Front west of Choteau, were originally acquired in the 1940s and '50s as winter range for elk and deer herds. Today, wildlife managers view the wildlife areas as vital components of much larger habitat complexes for both game and nongame species.

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state's deer and elk freely roamed and fed.

To meet both the court and legislative mandates, and also the needs of the wildlife it was entrusted to manage, the commission decided to purchase ranchland that contained prime winter range. Held in trust for the people and wildlife of the state, this habitat would help feed the growing numbers of deer and elk during the harshest time of year and forestall them from heading to ranchlands.

The first acquisition was in 1940, when the commission bought 1,004 acres of big game winter range in the Little Belt Mountains. That land became the foundation of the Judith River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), part of what has grown into a statewide system with more than 300,000 acres of wildlife habitat in dozens of WMAs spread across Montana. WMAs encompass all four of the state's ecotypes: intermountain grasslands, montane forest, plains grasslands and forest, and shrub grasslands. These biologically rich lands provide habitat for big game animals, waterfowl, and upland birds. WMAs are also home to warblers, raptors, furbearers, federally threatened species, and dozens of state species of concern, including the pygmy rabbit, western toad, and greater sage grouse.

Funding for this vital game and nongame wildlife habitat has come from hunters, primarily through license fees and a federal excise tax on firearms and ammunition divided among states to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat. Montana's WMA network, like those in many other states, is part of a nationwide wildlife population restoration system known as the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Based on the objectives of protecting wildlife habitat and maintaining public access to wildlife, the North American approach has allowed the continent's wildlife populations to grow and expand despite growing and expanding human populations. "There's nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world," says Jim Posewitz, founder of Orion—The Hunter's Institute, a nonprofit organization promoting ethical hunting. "Hunters and hunting have created and sustained a conservation system that keeps wildlife as a public and

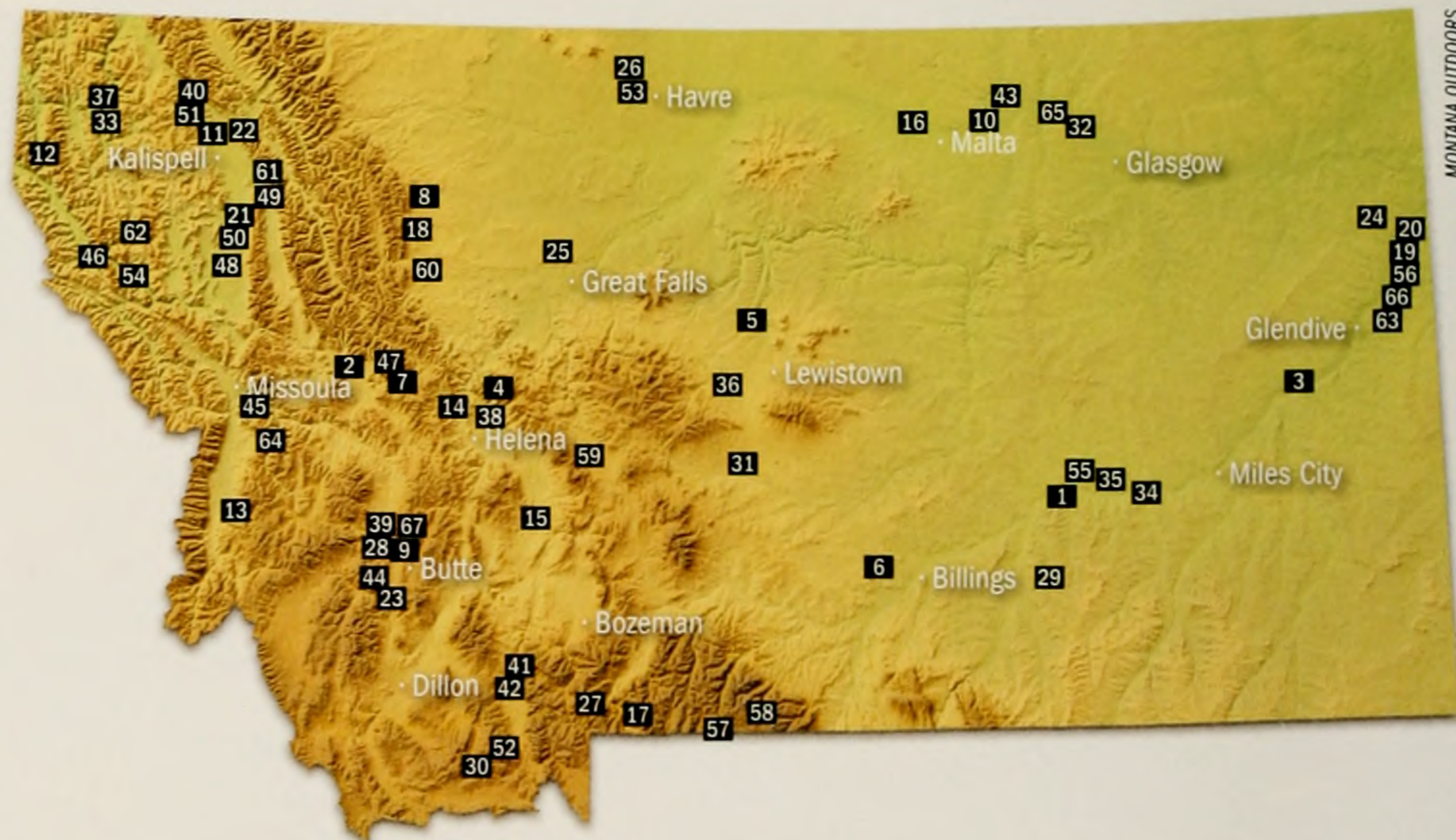
sustainable resource that is scientifically managed by professionals."

**W**hen Montana acquired the first WMAs, the idea of restoring wildlife by protecting habitat was just gaining currency. Today, habitat conservation is accepted as the foundation of all wildlife management. The idea of what habitat is and how it works continues to evolve. As wildlife biologists recognize the interconnectedness of animal species and plant communities, they have begun to talk about WMAs in terms of entire habitat communities. "Instead

of focusing just on elk winter range, we look at the broader intermountain grasslands," says Steve Knapp, chief of FWP's Wildlife Habitat Bureau. "Instead of just sage grouse habitat, it's the sagebrush-grasslands community. Instead of just pheasant hunting opportunities, we consider the entire riparian and wetland habitats and the great variety of wildlife all of these habitats support."

WMAs aren't just any old lands. "They tend to be cornerstones of larger complexes of wildlife habitat," says Mike Thompson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Missoula. "The WMA itself may comprise only 5 or

## Montana Wildlife Management Areas



(Acres in parentheses)

- |                                 |                                |                                 |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 Amelia Island (239)           | 22 Flathead River (296)        | 45 Mount Jumbo (120)            |
| 2 Aunt Molly (1,184)            | 23 Fleecer Mountain (7,394)    | 46 Mount Silcox (1,552)         |
| 3 Badlands (2)                  | 24 Fox Lake (1,546)            | 47 Nevada Lake (740)            |
| 4 Beartooth (31,947)            | 25 Freezout Lake (11,466)      | 48 Ninepipe (3,880)             |
| 5 Beckman (6,568)               | 26 Fresno Reservoir (2,802)    | 49 North Swan Valley CE (7,204) |
| 6 Big Lake (1,964)              | 27 Gallatin (8,611)            | 50 Pablo (416)                  |
| 7 Blackfoot-Clearwater (43,761) | 28 Garrity Mountain (9,475)    | 51 Ray Kuhns (1,530)            |
| 8 Blackleaf (10,397)            | 29 Grant Marsh (99)            | 52 Robb-Ledford (28,097)        |
| 9 Blue Eyed Nellie (164)        | 30 Gravelly-Blacktail (17,781) | 53 Rookery (2,277)              |
| 10 Bowdoin (156)                | 31 Haymaker (1,321)            | 54 Roundhorn (27)               |
| 11 Buffalo Head Park (4)        | 32 Hinsdale (255)              | 55 Sanders (1)                  |
| 12 Bull River (1,330)           | 33 Horseshoe Lake (41)         | 56 Seven Sisters (560)          |
| 13 Calf Creek (2,333)           | 34 Howard Valley (1)           | 57 Silver Gate (3)              |
| 14 Canyon Creek (2,210)         | 35 Isaac Homestead (1,169)     | 58 Silver Run (638)             |
| 15 Canyon Ferry (5,129)         | 36 Judith River (9,408)        | 59 Smith River (3,312)          |
| 16 Dodson Creek (934)           | 37 Kootenai (2,549)            | 60 Sun River (19,771)           |
| 17 Dome Mountain (4,789)        | 38 Lake Helena (157)           | 61 Swan Lake (2)                |
| 18 Ear Mountain (3,047)         | 39 Lost Creek (1,403)          | 62 Thompson-Fisher CE (142,000) |
| 19 Elk Island (948)             | 40 Lower Stillwater Lake (2)   | 63 Three Mile (8)               |
| 20 F Island (119)               | 41 Madison-Bear Creek (3,458)  | 64 Threemile (6,089)            |
| 21 Flathead Lake (137)          | 42 Madison-Wall Creek (7,067)  | 65 Vandalia (310)               |
|                                 | 43 Milk River (1,310)          | 66 War Dance Island (12)        |
|                                 | 44 Mount Haggin (58,188)       | 67 Warm Springs (1,563)         |

Writer Sam Curtis lives in Bozeman.





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**A MODEL WORTH MODELING** Montana's WMA network is part of what's known as the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Under this management system, which has restored wildlife populations to previously unimaginable levels, hunters have helped purchase critical wildlife habitats such as Mount Haggin WMA (above) and supported the science-based management of mule deer and other game species.

**“Hunters and hunting have created and sustained a conservation system that keeps wildlife as a public and sustainable resource that is scientifically managed by professionals.”**



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10 percent of that complex, but it provides a key component for wildlife survival.”

Thompson, previously manager of the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA near Seeley Lake, says the same habitat that benefits deer and elk herds also benefits a wide range of other wildlife species, including those FWP has identified as “species in greatest need of conservation.” For example, the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA contains critical elk winter range but is also home to griz-

elk crowd together to eat state-provided food. The areas were established to block migrating elk from reaching historic winter ranges, where the wild ungulates compete with cattle for forage. The crowded conditions on feeding grounds make the elk more susceptible to diseases such as brucellosis. Montana chose a different approach by purchasing WMAs, which are natural feeding grounds.

That’s not to say free-ranging wildlife stay off private land. Deer and elk are oblivious

WMAs improves the forage on private land both for the rancher’s cattle and the deer and elk that feed there in winter. Another benefit is that cattle grazing, in some cases, actually improves wildlife forage on WMAs. “When we have a lesser-quality grass such as smooth brome that gets too coarse for elk and deer, having it periodically grazed down by cattle improves the palatability, and game animals will go in and use it,” Frisina says. Over the past 20 years, several ranchers with lands next to WMAs have entered into grazing agreements with FWP that improve the quality of forage for both cattle and wildlife over entire landscapes. “I guess we’ve matured along with our WMAs,” says Frisina. “By integrating management of our WMAs with adjacent private lands, we’re improving the situation for wildlife.”

Another way FWP integrates WMAs into local neighborhoods is by making property tax payments and aggressively controlling weeds to prevent their spread to nearby agricultural lands.

**B** iologists and scientists with FWP and other agencies and institutions often conduct research and habitat management experiments on WMAs. In one study, University of Montana researchers discovered that aspen stands on the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA provide essential habitat diversity for a variety of wildlife species, including cavity-nesting birds. FWP wildlife managers responded by fencing many stands to prevent elk from browsing the trees. Also on the Blackfoot-Clearwater, FWP has been studying the use of insects to control knapweed and other harmful invasives without damaging native flowering plants. “We’re transitioning to what is called ‘biological control’ in areas where chemicals are harming forbs,” says Thompson. “Forbs are part of the food chain for insects and a variety of wildlife.”

Though managed foremost for the benefit of wildlife, WMAs accommodate a wide range of recreational uses. Ninepipe WMA, south of Pablo, has outstanding pheasant and waterfowl hunting on its 3,950 acres of restored and enhanced wetlands and the adjoining grain fields sharecropped by local farmers. Archery and rifle hunters stalk elk, moose,



**NO STATE TAXES USED** Most of Montana’s WMA units across the state were purchased by FWP using hunter license dollars and money from a federal excise tax on hunting equipment. All WMA acquisitions come from willing sellers, and many units contain sizable parcels donated by landowner-conservationists.

zly bears, bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and flammulated owls.

“WMAs can benefit species that are of growing concern to us today and still maintain our original objectives for species that first caught our attention, such as elk and waterfowl,” says Knapp. “They really fit in well with the department’s comprehensive approach to managing all wildlife species by managing broad ecological landscapes.”

Montana’s WMAs still help alleviate conflicts between agriculture and wildlife. That value is underscored each time Wyoming reports incidents of brucellosis in elk using feeding grounds. Wyoming maintains 22 of these public feeding areas, where wintering

to boundaries, and many continue to feed on adjacent ranchlands, sometimes causing severe depredation problems. Years ago, wildlife managers came up with an innovative—and at first controversial—solution: Allow, on some WMAs, carefully managed cattle grazing. One of the first sites for this experiment was Fleecer Mountain WMA near Divide. Wildlife managers worked with local ranchers to rotate cattle grazing between a pasture on private land and WMA pastures to periodically rest vegetation so it could regenerate. According to Mike Frisina, manager of the WMA at the time and now the FWP range/habitat coordinator, this rest-rotation grazing system on and next to





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**BROADER RANGE AND SCOPE** WMA acquisitions have branched out beyond Rocky Mountain foothills to include key habitat parcels in a wide range of ecosystems. Above: Elk Island WMA, in eastern Montana on the Yellowstone River. Wetland-rich WMAs such as Ninepipe and Freezout (below) have greatly benefited waterfowl and other winged wildlife.

“These areas tend to be cornerstones of larger complexes of wildlife habitat. **The WMA itself may comprise only 5 or 10 percent of that complex, but it provides a key component for wildlife survival.**”



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mule deer, white-tailed deer, and pronghorn on the sprawling 58,188 acres of Mount Haggin WMA, the largest in the system. Like other wildlife management areas, the numerous units of the Milk River WMA in Phillips County offer excellent hunting as well as wildlife watching, which continues to gain participants each year. “Hunters know where the WMAs are, and they use them all,” Knapp says. “But we’re also seeing more birders, photographers, and others keying in on these areas.” Beartooth WMA, north of Helena, is popular with horseback riders and hikers. Freezout WMA, west of Great Falls, is a nationally renowned waterfowl viewing area. “Freezout is a particularly accessible WMA,” says Knapp. “I go up there each spring with my mother, who turned 90 this year,” “She can see huge flocks of waterfowl from the vehicle.”

WMAs being bought for subdivisions. The fast-growing development fragments the habitat that many species on WMAs use at various times during the year. “With land prices climbing the way they have, it gets harder and harder to buy new WMAs or expand the borders of existing ones,” says Jeff Herbert, assistant chief of FWP’s Wildlife Division. “That’s why the department has begun trying to broaden the ‘footprint’ of WMAs in order to secure high-quality habitat over a broader landscape.”

To expand the effects of WMAs, FWP purchases conservation easements from willing sellers on private lands containing prime habitat abutting the state lands. FWP pays a lump sum in exchange for the landowner agreeing to limit development and carry out land improvements, such as rest-rotational grazing, that help wildlife. In many cases, landowners have sought out the easements, recognizing benefits to both the WMA and their own property. “One landowner sold us a conservation easement on property where a future owner could have built homes right up against the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA

boundary,” says Thompson. “We didn’t want that to happen, and neither did he. The conservation easement was a perfect solution.”

Such creative approaches to protecting habitat are becoming increasingly important. Each year more houses, shopping malls, and fences are built on lands across Montana that for thousands of years have provided wildlife habitat. “Wildlife is a public resource, but in much of Montana, most wildlife lives on private land,” says Herbert. “We probably will never be able to replicate the acquisitions we made in the mid-20th century and vastly expand our WMA system. But by working with landowners adjacent to these critical habitats, we’re trying to leverage the tremendous wildlife value of WMAs and expand their effectiveness.” 🐾

*Because WMAs are managed principally for the benefit of wildlife, they are closed from December through May. For specific opening and closing dates as well as other WMA regulations, maps, and management information, visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov).*

**W**MA account for just one-third of 1 percent of Montana’s total land base. That’s not much wildlife habitat, especially when considering the increasing acreage of land surrounding

## The Human Side of WMAs

In addition to their history as a place for wildlife, all WMAs carry a unique story of the people who have used, valued, and managed them.

Many WMAs were once hunting grounds for American Indians. Later these rich lands attracted trappers and then pioneers. Homesteaders, who obtained the lands from the federal government, worked to carve out a living in often brutal conditions. The property entered state ownership when it went up for sale, and local conservationists saw an opportunity to preserve the habitat for the long-term benefit of wildlife.

Kootenai WMA near Libby and Mount Silcox WMA near Thompson Falls were acquired from conservation-minded families to protect habitat for local bighorn sheep herds. Local hunters and other conservationists led the effort to acquire Sun River WMA, which provides winter range for Montana’s largest elk herd outside Yellowstone National Park. Blackleaf WMA, along the Rocky Mountain Front near Bynum, was historically used by the Blackfeet and other Indian tribes; tepee rings and travois trails are still visible. Elk Island WMA and Seven Sisters WMA, on the Yellowstone River between Sidney and Glendive, were likely named during an excursion by the steamboat *Key West* up the river in 1873. FWP secured the Milk River WMA near Nelson Reservoir after local hunters, other conservationists, and landowners recognized the great wildlife potential of the bottomlands, at the time owned by the Bureau of Reclamation.



“THE TRAPPER’S HOME,” BY RICHARD THROSSEL, CIRCA 1905. WESTERN HISTORY/GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT, DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Many Montana WMAs have been valued as prime hunting grounds for centuries.

Other WMAs have similar stories. The histories recount how concerned Montana citizens and FWP staff worked closely with existing landowners to ensure these habitat gems continue producing wildlife and providing recreation far into the future.

—Tom Dickson





JIM THEROCK

**BIGGER FOOTPRINT** Because WMAs cover very little of Montana, wildlife managers try to broaden each area’s “footprint.” They acquire conservation easements on adjacent private land and work with ranchers on progressive grazing systems, such as those employed on Madison-Wall Creek WMA (above). Expanding the scope of WMAs creates healthier habitat for game animals as well as nongame species of concern such as the white-faced ibis.

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BOB MARTINKA