

The Judith Turns 75

Montana's popular wildlife management area system celebrates its diamond anniversary with the acquisition that started it all.

By Bruce Auchly. WMA photos by Chris McGowan.

Sometimes a good idea is just that. And sometimes it's even better. This year marks the 75th anniversary of Montana's wildlife management area (WMA) program. Once known as game ranges, WMAs have expanded from their original mission as places for elk to spend winter without being bothered by humans—and without bothering nearby ranches.

But they are still all about habitat.

"A lot of species benefit from WMAs," says Rick Northrup, Wildlife Habitat Bureau chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "From a societal standpoint there is a benefit to having elk winter range, but WMAs also provide water for waterfowl and nesting cover for birds."

Wildlife habitat. Now, there's a great idea.

It's difficult for anyone born since World War II to imagine the absence of wildlife 75 years ago.

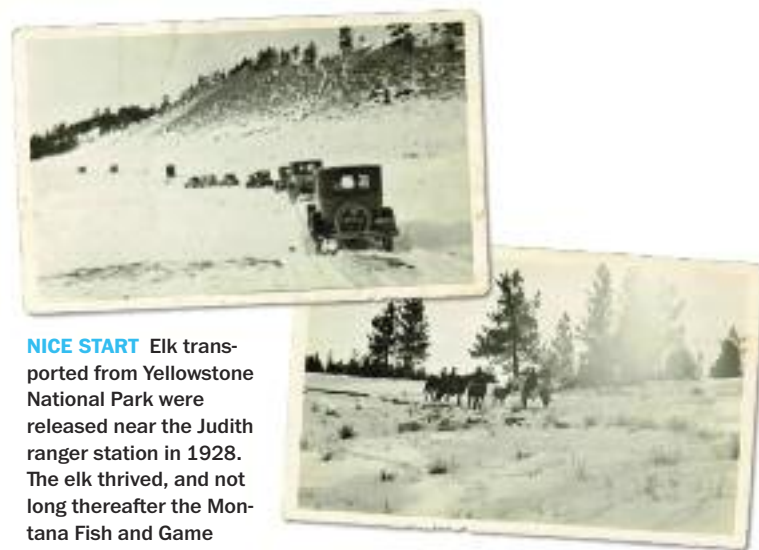
Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials. It doesn't matter. We all have been brought up in the golden age of wildlife management. Our grandparents and great-grandparents could tell us what it was like when wildlife was scarce, and what they did about it.

"There weren't too many elk in the 1940s," says Robert Noel, 84, whose uncle sold 768 acres to the Montana Fish and Game Department (FWP's precursor) in 1950. The land is now in the center of the Judith River WMA, Montana's first game range. "There were mule deer, but we had very few, if any, elk," Noel says.

About 100 years ago, Montana's big game populations reached rock



WHERE IT BEGAN The Judith River Game Range (now the Judith River Wildlife Management Area) was established in 1940. Over the next 75 years, FWP purchased properties from willing landowners to create a system of 69 wildlife management areas statewide. The public lands are open for hunting, hiking, and wildlife watching.



NICE START Elk transported from Yellowstone National Park were released near the Judith ranger station in 1928. The elk thrived, and not long thereafter the Montana Fish and Game Department bought 1,004 acres from a local ranching family to conserve winter range.

bottom for a variety of reasons, including overhunting and habitat destruction. One of the first steps in restoring those populations was to transplant elk from other areas and then protect the animals from overharvest. Starting in 1910, elk were captured from Yellowstone National Park and other areas and moved throughout the state. Many of today's elk in the Judith River drainage descended from 86 animals planted there in the winter of 1927-28.

Protection came from regulated hunting seasons. The state hired game wardens to enforce the new laws.

By the late 1930s, elk and deer populations had improved so much that landowners complained about wintering wildlife competing with their livestock for forage. In 1937, a Montana rancher was acquitted of

illegally shooting four elk feeding on his wheat crop. State laws resulting from that court case required the Fish and Game Department to assist landowners in reducing wildlife depredation losses.

A few years later, however, another rancher, C. R. Rathbone, was arrested for killing an elk damaging his property. The case went to the Montana Supreme Court, which ruled that landowners had to accept "some injury to property or inconvenience from wild game for which there is no recourse." Caught between these two mandates, the Fish and Game Department decided on a two-pronged approach. First, increase the elk harvest; second, buy from willing sellers high-quality habitat that would help keep elk off private lands.

In 1940, the department bought 1,004

acres from the Setter family. That central Montana parcel south of Utica was the first of eight acquisitions over the next half-century that resulted in what is today the 9,658-acre Judith River Wildlife Management Area.

"It showed great foresight by the leaders of the department over 75 years ago," says Mark Schleppe, FWP central region wildlife management area manager based in Fairfield. "They knew that elk recovery required state properties that the wildlife could use seasonally—in the Judith's case, in winter—reducing impacts to private landowners. Unlike other western states that instead artificially fed huge numbers of wintering elk and created disease problems from all that crowding, Montana went the route of acquiring grass on the ground to feed big game naturally."

The approach worked.

“We have a ton of elk there,” says Mark Rogers, who in 1992 sold FWP 1,893 acres that was added to the east and north sides of the WMA. Rogers still lives across the road from the Judith. “When I was in high school, there would be 400 to 500 elk there in the winter. Now there’s 1,000 or more,” he says.

NEARLY 70 WMAS

Including the Judith, FWP now owns 69 wildlife management areas that provide habitat not just for deer and elk but also a wide range of other game and nongame wildlife. Total acreage stands at roughly 300,000 acres. Though that may sound like a lot of land, WMAs account for just one-third of 1 percent of Montana’s total land base. In addition, the land remains on local tax rolls and FWP pays property taxes on it each year.

WMAs encompass intermountain grasslands, mountain forests, plains grasslands and forests, shrub grasslands, river bottoms, and wetlands. This diversity provides key habitats 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, like the swift fox and pygmy shrew.

FWP doesn’t buy land for a WMA unless it’s packed with wildlife and recreational opportunities. “Wildlife management areas get a lot of use, and not just from hunters,” Northrup says. “Bird watchers visit them in the summer. On Marshall Creek and Fish Creek WMAs in western Montana, snowmobiling is allowed in designated areas. And Mount Haggin in southwestern Montana offers miles of cross-country ski trails.”

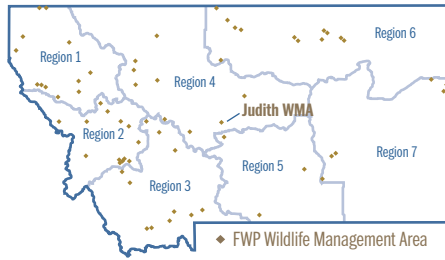
Funding to buy these areas came from hunters, primarily through license fees and a federal excise tax on firearms and ammunition divided among states to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat.

When Montana acquired the first parcels for the Judith River WMA, the idea of restoring wildlife by protecting habitat was just gaining popularity. Today, conserving habitat

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At 300,000 acres, FWP’s 69 wildlife management areas comprise just one-third of 1 percent of Montana’s total land base.



is the foundation of all wildlife management. The idea of what habitat is and how it works continues to evolve. Conservationists now recognize the interconnectedness of animal species and plant communities as well as the importance of WMAs. These areas aren’t just any old lands but rather cornerstones of larger complexes of wildlife habitat. For example, a WMA may comprise only 5 or 10 percent of an ecosystem, but it provides a key component for wildlife survival. “Sometimes people don’t realize why winter range is so important,” says FWP’s Northrup. “But it supports elk from a much larger summer range.”

Examples include three WMAs on the Rocky Mountain Front—Sun River, Ear Mountain, and Blackleaf. Elk come from throughout the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex east of the Continental Divide to spend harsh winter months on these wildlife areas along the Front, where winds blow snow off slopes to expose grass.

NEW APPROACHES

WMA management has changed over time in response to changing conditions. Take winter depredation. Though one goal of buying winter range for a WMA is to keep big game animals off adjacent ranches, things don’t always work out that way. Deer and elk don’t care about boundaries and sometimes continue grazing downslope onto private property.

So years ago, wildlife managers came up

with an innovative solution: Allow carefully managed cattle grazing on some WMAs.

Local ranchers rotate cattle grazing between their property and adjacent WMAs to periodically rest vegetation so it can regenerate. This “rest-rotation” grazing system improves forage on state and private properties for both the rancher’s cattle and the deer and elk that feed there in winter. The cattle eat lesser-quality grass such as smooth brome that gets too coarse for elk and deer. When new vegetation appears, game animals find it and use it.

Perhaps an equally important benefit is to the landowner’s bottom line. “When we set up a grazing lease with a neighbor, we provide additional acreage for his livestock,” says Northrup. “Maybe that benefits the neighbor enough to stay in ranching rather than sell the land for housing or other development.”

Elk need grass, but not the mowed bluegrass kind. Big game and housing don’t mix.

No one knows that better than Schlepp, the central region WMA manager, who has witnessed firsthand how important a WMA and surrounding working ranches can be to big game populations. He grew up on a farm just a few miles north of the Judith, started hunting on the game range as a young man, and hunts there still.

“I’ve watched both the Judith and its elk herd grow through the lean years of the 1960s into what they are today,” he says. “I’ve been fortunate to have hunted there for most of my life, and to see firsthand as a sportsman and an FWP employee what a smart decision it was 75 years ago for department leaders to acquire that first piece of winter range. And then for us as a department to continue building on that decision to create the WMA system we now have.”

Hunting, birding, and more

Location: The Judith River WMA sits 40 miles southwest of Lewistown at the base of the Little Belt Mountains. For directions, visit the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov) and click on the “Fish & Wildlife” tab then the “Wildlife Management Areas” link.

Big game species: Elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and pronghorn

Recreation: Hunting, wildlife watching and photography, hiking, and horseback riding



WILD AND SCENIC Acquired over the years from willing sellers, the Judith River Wildlife Management Area southwest of Lewistown provides wildlife habitat and recreation for bird watchers, hunters, hikers, and photographers.

