



KEEPING PEOPLE AND BEARS SAFE Using donations, Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation supports a wide range of FWP projects. Among the highest priorities has been to fund bear management technicians like Justine Vallieres (left, shown with a culvert trap at a lake home west of Kalispell), who work with ranchers to remove dead cattle (top left) far away from traditional "boneyards" near livestock and human dwellings. They also help communities and homeowners install bear-resistant garbage bins (top right) so that grizzlies don't become addicted to human foods.

FILLING THE GAPS

Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation allows people to help fund FWP's grizzly, raptor, access, and nongame wildlife programs.

BY TOM DICKSON

As we drive to a lake home about 20 miles west of Kalispell, Justine Vallieres tells me she's not looking forward to whatever we find. Two days earlier, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks bear management technician had set up a culvert trap baited with deer meat to live-capture a grizzly that had repeatedly broken into a barn next to the house.

Following a two-track lane through the Flathead National Forest, Vallieres explains the dilemma: "If the bear's not in the trap, that means it could still be out there breaking into cabins. But if it is trapped, and DNA tests show it's the one that's breaking in, we'll have to euthanize it."

"Killing grizzlies," she adds, "that's the worst part of this job."

Vallieres figures that over the past four years she has had to kill 17 grizzlies and assist her boss, now-retired FWP bear management specialist Tim Manley, with another eight. "It's really hard to put down a grizzly

after people lured it into a residential area with their food and garbage, because it's just being a bear," she says. "At the same time, we can't allow them to break into cabins and put people's lives at risk."

The solution, for Vallieres and the eight other technicians who help FWP bear management specialists, is to prevent grizzlies from causing problems in the first place. She installs electric fencing around composting sites and orchards, informs people in bear country to keep pet food and livestock feed indoors, and explains to hobby farmers that their chickens are grizzly magnets. The 32-year-old technician, who grew up in New Hampshire and studied at the University of British Columbia, even set up a Facebook page connecting area homeowners who can't harvest their plums and apples—irresistible bear attractants—with those who can. "It's all about finding ways for humans and grizzlies to coexist so people stay safe and bears stay alive," she says.

As we emerge from the forest and enter a clearing, we see in the distance the house, the barn, and the bear trap.

THE GREAT BEAR

For years, Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation funded Vallieres's and the other technicians' work to protect human life, property, and bears. The foundation was formed in 1999 to help FWP fill vital funding gaps in essential programs. "It's the ideal mechanism for people to donate private funding so the department can do a better job of managing bears, acquiring access, rehabbing raptors, and all that other work that people really want to help support," says Jim Williams, FWP regional supervisor in Kalispell.

Mitch King, the foundation's director and previously a program manager with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, says the foundation works closely with FWP to make sure projects are scientifically sound and represent the agency's highest conservation priorities. "These are the cream of the crop, the activities that matter most to FWP," he says.

An eight-member board of directors meets quarterly to discuss fundraising strategies that support FWP priority projects. The foundation raises money through donations from individuals, corporate partnerships, grants from other organizations and foundations, and funding from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust (a federal trust fund that the foundation manages. See sidebar on page 43).

Tom Dickson is the Montana Outdoors editor.

Keeping grizzlies out of trouble is a major focus. "FWP took over funding the bear technicians in 2021, but the foundation was absolutely vital in getting that essential program off the ground and established," says Neil Anderson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Kalispell. Anderson adds that the foundation still pays for GPS tracking collars, electric fencing, and other technology essential for the techs to help reduce conflicts between bears and people.

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Bear-aware education is another priority. The foundation has funded videos and education programs on camping, fishing, hiking, hunting, and mountain biking in bear country (now considered all of Montana's western one-third); how farmers and ranchers can protect their families and property; living in bear country; and what to do if you encounter a grizzly or black bear. "Reducing conflicts between people and bears is probably the single most important work the foundation has funded over the years," says Jeff Hagener, foundation board chair and former FWP director.

Hagener says the foundation has pur-

chased bear education trailers for county fairs, sponsored bear spray demonstrations, and helped pay for a simulated charging bear that rushes a participant to show how fast the large carnivores move. It also funds homeowner education and bear-resistant garbage containers for neighborhoods and hydraulic-lid dumpsters at county landfills, as well as education programs for hunters in fall, when bears are prepping for hibernation, and hikers in spring, when bears emerge from their dens.

Most recently, the foundation purchased a \$7,000 trailer to help ranchers transport livestock carcasses away from the traditional "boneyards" that are not far enough from corrals and human living quarters.

"All this is a critical component of grizzly bear species recovery," Hagener says. "If grizzlies are ever to be delisted, Montana can't be killing dozens of bears every year because they are getting into trouble."

MORE AND MORE ACCESS

Another FWP priority the foundation supports is increasing public access by helping the department and groups purchase prime fish and wildlife property from willing landowners. Through the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the foundation recently helped the Flathead Land Trust and FWP buy the Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area, 772 acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat on the Flathead River. The scenic property adds to a 12,000-acre network of conserved land along 43 miles of

LEFT TO RIGHT: TOM DICKSON; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK



ACCESS FOR ALL A top priority for Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation funding is FWP projects that secure land for public access and fish and wildlife habitat. Left: The Montebello access site sits on the southwest shore of Flathead Lake and will provide paddling access to Cromwell Island and Wild Horse Island State Park. Below: The Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area along the Flathead River near Columbia Falls.



BIRDS AND OUTDOOR ED The foundation also has (clockwise from top left) funded raptor rehabilitation at the FWP Wildlife Center in Helena (a facility it is raising funds to enlarge), research on harlequin ducks and other little-known wildlife species; and FWP's Traveling Wild van, which delivers outdoor education programs to students and communities across Montana.

the Flathead between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake.

For another recent acquisition, the foundation used a new Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust funding program called "Assets for Conservation." This purchase secured 1,400 acres of prime habitat for elk, mule deer, black bears, moose, mountain lions, ferruginous hawks, and grassland birds in the south Elkhorn Mountains between Butte and Helena. The property, which had been targeted by housing developers, was then sold to the U.S. Forest Service for safekeeping.

Hagener and King are especially excited about a new 15-acre property on Flathead Lake that the foundation purchased then sold to FWP. "Government agencies can take a long time to buy land. But the foundation can step in and do things like pay for appraisals or even buy the whole thing before a developer can get their hands on it," Hagener says. The lakeside tract, known as the Montebello property, will be made into a water recreation access area that looks out at nearby Cromwell Island and gives paddlers easier access to Wild Horse Island State Park.

"Montebello is an example of how people can help FWP and contribute to what we do," Williams says. "People love knowing that this agency is increasing public access, securing critical habitat, and managing fish and wildlife populations. They want to help, and that's where the foundation comes in. Because without it,

there's really no way for people to directly donate to all these incredible projects."

RAPTORS AND OTHER NONGAME

Another top FWP concern is nongame wildlife conservation. The foundation raises money to fund projects research projects on wolverine movement, bat biology, harlequin ducks, and high-elevation species like white-tailed ptarmigan and American pikas.

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Then there's outdoor education. Laurie Wolf, chief of the FWP Education Bureau, says the foundation raised \$180,000 to buy a van, known as Traveling WILD, and hire summer staff to deliver educational programs about fish and wildlife across Montana. "That never would have happened without them," she says.

Wolf says the foundation was also the driver behind a "distance learning" program, paying for equipment and coordination so that 200-plus students in 25 schools across Montana could learn about sage-grouse. The foundation also paid for a new sound and video studio in Helena, where

FWP education specialists provide additional distance learning programs and produce videos viewed by students and adults on YouTube and other platforms (watch an example at <https://youtu.be/hvGTgx9ZCsw>).

Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation also focuses on projects that rehabilitate wounded raptors for release back to the wild. Its most ambitious effort is a capital campaign to raise money for a new raptor facility at Montana WILD's Wildlife Center, next to its Education Center on Helena's west side. The Wildlife Center cares for and rehabilitates injured animals, mainly birds of prey, and is chronically short on space.

"We're super excited about the potential for this," says Wolf, explaining that the envisioned 4,500-square-foot building would be able to house and rehabilitate far more injured raptors than the current facility allows, plus dozens of "education" raptors too disabled to live in the wild that are used to teach visitors about the winged predators.

"The facility will include enclosures for our 18 different education species, and the other half will house raptors for rehabilitation," Wolf says. The new facility will also provide viewing areas where bird watchers and others visiting nearby Spring Meadow State Park can see raptors up close. "There will be no other place in Montana where someone could get so close to a golden eagle, a saw-whet owl, and a prairie falcon all in one day," Wolf says.

So far, the campaign has raised about \$400,000 of its \$800,000 goal, most of it from the Helena-based Foundation for

Animals. "All of us here are hoping the foundation can raise the rest," Wolf says.

WILDNESS

If there's one word to describe all the FWP programs funded by Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation, it's *wildness*. The new, expanded raptor center would rehabilitate more injured eagles, hawks, and owls for recovery back in the wild. The foundation's

work overseeing the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust helps Montanans and visitors experience wildness throughout the state's mountains, waters, and prairies. Through education programs, kids and adults learn how to help wildlife stay wild so the animals aren't lured dangerously close to where people live.

The importance of educating Montanans is on Vallieres's mind back at the Kalispell-

area lake home as we park and walk toward the culvert trap. Except for an old deer leg still hanging in the opening, it's empty. "You hope the bear just goes back into the mountains," she says. "But that's not usually what happens. Once they find food down here, they almost always come back for more." 🐻

To learn more about Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation, visit mtoutdoorlegacy.org/.

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust

In addition to helping FWP fill funding gaps for critical projects, Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation is the fiduciary manager of the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust and manages the trust's habitat, access, and recreation grants.

The trust was created in 1998 from the sale of recreation lots on Canyon Ferry Reservoir, which are owned by the Bureau of Reclamation, to cabin owners who had been leasing the properties. Ninety percent of the proceeds were deposited into the trust, and federal law mandates that earnings fund, through grants, land acquisitions that restore and conserve fish and wildlife habitat, enhance hunting and fishing and other outdoor recreation, and improve public access to public lands.

Under the foundation's oversight, the trust has more than doubled from an original value of \$15 million to \$33.5 million today. The foundation disburses funds under the direction of two independent oversight entities—an agency board (representing the five land management agencies in Montana) and a citizen advisory board—that are responsible for identifying projects that ensure the trust's goals are met. Over the past two decades, the trust has awarded nearly \$14 million in land acquisition grants, \$7 million of which are in the Missouri River watershed and the rest elsewhere across the state.

Examples include \$190,000 to help purchase a fishing access site on upper Prickly Pear Creek in the Helena Valley, \$50,000 to supplement acquisition of 22 acres of parkland along the Bitterroot River in Hamilton, and \$60,000 to help Walleyes Unlimited buy the 71-acre Black Bridge Recreation Area near Glendive.

To learn more about these and other projects or find out how your agency or organization can apply for Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust grants, visit mtconservationtrust.org or mtoutdoorlegacy.org/. ■



An angler fishes for trout at Prickly Pear Creek Fishing Access Site in the Helena Valley.

LEFT TO RIGHT: TOM DICKSON, FLATHEAD VALLEY LAND TRUST; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JESSE LEE, WARMAD; DICK WALKER, LUKE DURAN, LUKE DURAN