

Why we acquired more habitat and public access

One of FWP's proudest achievements over the past several years has been to acquire critical wildlife habitat and recreational land. With the help of private landowners, the Montana legislature, hunters and anglers, and state and federal programs, this department has purchased or bought conservation easements on a total of 170,000 acres since 2004.

Many new acquisitions are notable for their important fish and wildlife habitat. The new Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and State Park, 40 miles west of Missoula, encompasses 40,000 acres of prime terrestrial wildlife habitat and 66 miles of riparian (streamside) habitat. Fish Creek and its tributaries support healthy bull trout and west-slope cutthroat trout populations. The creation of 24,000-acre Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA), north of Seeley Lake, secures outstanding fish and wildlife habitat, especially for lynx and

spawning bull trout. Conservation easements on the Moline and Riverdale Ranches, in Cascade and Chouteau Counties, respectively, protect wetlands. Portions of Marshall Creek WMA and the West Swan conservation easement may serve as wolf and grizzly bear connectivity corridors essential for maintaining genetic diversity, required by the federal government before delisting those species.

FWP acquisitions also provide new access for hunting, fishing, and other recreation. Some examples: 37-acre Stipeck Fishing Access Site (FAS) on the Yellowstone River near Glendive; 12-acre Pine Grove Pond FAS along the Whitefish River north of Kalispell; and the Moline Ranch easement, near the White Cliffs Area of the Missouri River, which opens up the only public hunting access to 14,200 acres of state school trust and Bureau of Land Management lands. The 6,200-acre Fish Creek State Park will provide camping, hiking, hunting, angling, and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Our new acquisitions have strong public support. For instance, the Marshall Creek WMA acquisition was backed by Missoula county commissioners, the Seeley-Swan ATV Club, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, and local sportsmen and sportswomen.

FWP acquired these and many other sites because they are special parts of Montana that deserve protection. This agency is committed to providing more public recreational access—something Montanans tell us again and again is a major concern. These acquisitions are also a reinvestment into the natural resources that sustain a lucrative portion of the state's tourism industry. More than \$1 billion in direct expenditures is spent on hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching in Montana each year.

Money to acquire these lands and conservation easements came from a combination of federal sources (such as the Forest Legacy Program and Pittman-Robertson Act), Habitat Montana (mainly revenue from nonresident big game license fees), general hunting and fishing license fees, and general funds approved by the 2007 Montana legislature for land acquisition.

Not everyone in Montana is happy about new FWP acquisitions. Some people think we should spend less on gaining new lands and more on managing those we already have. Others don't like the idea of the state owning any more property for public use.

We agree that controlling weeds and other maintenance on WMAs is important. That's why we keep our WMA maintenance budget in good shape. In answer to criticism about adding to the state land base, I think previous acquisitions speak for themselves. Consider the popular fishing access sites along the Yellowstone and Big Hole Rivers; Bannack State Park and the scenic parks ringing Flathead Lake; the Blackfoot-Clearwater, Robb-Ledford, and Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Areas; and more. Today all of us enjoy and value these and other special places that Montanans years ago had the conviction and foresight to secure. We're confident future generations will feel the same way about Montana's most recent wildlife and recreational acquisitions.

—Joe Maurier
Montana FWP Director



Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and State Park, now secured for wildlife and public use.