Little Belt Foothills (839,541 acres)

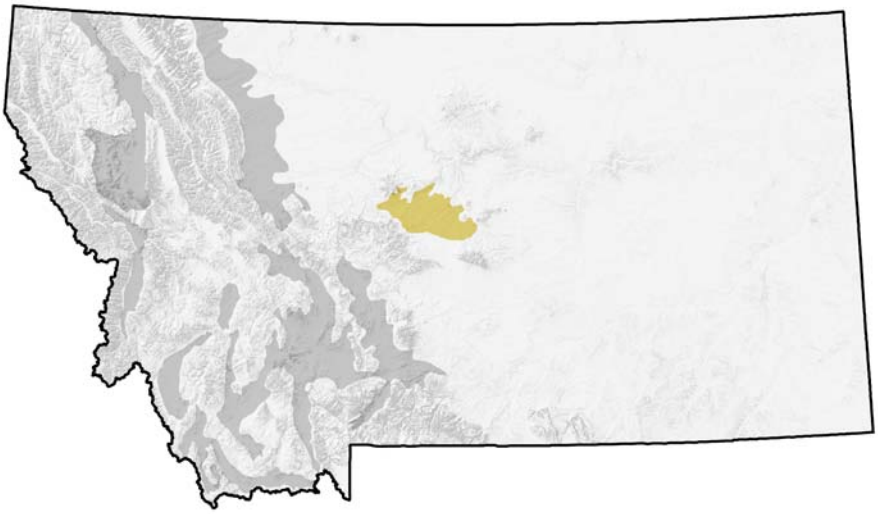

Figure 7. Little Belt Foothills Focus Area

The Little Belt Foothills area covers the Judith Basin, a large mountain foothill grassland community rimmed by the Little Belt, Highwood, Moccasin, and Big Snowy mountains. The Judith River, a tributary to the Missouri River, is the basin's primary drainage. Large, flat grassland benches define the high foothills. The lower elevations consist of rangeland interspersed with cropland, and sprawling terraces dominate the lower elevations. While about 30 percent of the landscape in the Judith Basin is farmed, the remaining areas support bunchgrass and sagebrush grasslands.

Landscape Characteristics

This subsection consists of foothills, terraces, and fans that formed in shale, siltstone, and terrace deposits. Elevations range from 3,500 to 5,000 feet. Drainage density is moderate. Mean annual precipitation ranges from 15 to 19 inches, with about 40 to 50 percent falling as snow. The soil temperature and moisture regimes are frigid and ustic. The primary natural disturbance is drought and fire. Other important natural biotic disturbances include beaver activity in riparian areas and prairie dog complexes in grassland areas. Land use is predominantly livestock grazing at higher elevations, with a combination of cropping and livestock grazing at lower elevations. The breakdown for land stewardship in the Little Belt Foothills area is as follows:

U.S. Federal Agencies:	16,309 acres, or 1.9% of total area, which include:
BLM:	15,197 acres, or 1.8% of total area
USFS:	1,112 acres, or 0.1% of total area
State Agencies:	77,159 acres, or 9.2% of total area
Private:	746,073 acres, or 88.9% of total area

Associated Habitats

Habitat	Habitat Tier	Percentage of Area
Mixed Mesic Shrubs	II	2.04
Very Low Cover Grasslands	I	2.36
Wetland and Riparian	I	7.34
Moderate/High Cover Grasslands	I	11.69
Agricultural Lands - Irrigated	III	18.99
Agricultural Lands - Dry	III	22.88
Low/Moderate Cover Grasslands	I	29.12

Note: A total of 94.42% of the Little Belt Foothills area is represented; 5.58% is made up of a combination of other habitat types.

Associated Species of Greatest Conservation Need (Tier I Species)

There are a total of 288 terrestrial vertebrate species that are found within the Little Belt Foothills Focus Area. Tier I species are listed below. All associations can be found in Table 13.

Amphibians: Northern Leopard Frog

Reptiles: Western Hog-nosed Snake and Milksnake

Birds: Bald Eagle, Greater Sage-Grouse, Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Black Tern, and Burrowing Owl

Mammals: Townsend's Big-eared Bat, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, and Black-footed Ferret

Conservation Concerns & Strategies

Conservation Concerns	Conservation Strategies
Range or forest management practices	Support government and private conservation activities that encourage and support sustainable land management practices (example; rest and rotation schedules)
Streamside residential development	Develop statewide riparian best management principles
Fragmentation and loss of native habitat as a result of conversion to cropland and human population growth/development	Government and private conservation programs/activities that encourage and support private land stewardship

	Encourage the conservation of natural rangeland communities through increased efforts to maintain ecological features (e.g., black-tailed prairie dog colonies) or processes (e.g., fire) on public lands
	Support state/federal tax incentives that discourage habitat fragmentation
	Identify and prioritize key wildlife linkage areas, and work with other state and federal agencies, conservation groups, and landowners to restore wildlife connectivity
Altered natural fire regime	Work with public and private efforts to restore natural fire regime to area
Invasive or exotic plant species	Cooperative efforts to reduce the abundance of invasive or exotic species

References

The Nature Conservancy. 1999. Ecoregional Conservation in the Northern Great Plains Steppe. Northern Great Plains Steppe Ecoregional Planning Team. 76 pp.