

“Ho girls, easy.” Geof Foote stops his team of Belgian horses at a pile of toppled ponderosa pines. The Blackfoot Valley rancher has selectively cut these trees from a woodlot to improve its long-term health. Beyond the dirt track, sunlight shimmers off shallow wetlands on Meadow Springs Ranch, owned by Foote and his wife, Kathie. By using horses rather than tractors to cut hay,

restored, as have otters, Cooper’s hawks, and four owl species. Trout swim in restored meanders of a Blackfoot River tributary running through their land. The Footes’ spring-fed prairie teems with diverse native vegetation. And a perpetual conservation easement prohibits future owners from subdividing or otherwise developing this spectacular setting.

River valleys throughout Montana are

secure conservation easements on 85,000 acres of land, manage noxious weeds on 100,000 acres, and rehabilitate 2,100 acres of wetlands. It has also restored portions of 40 Blackfoot River tributaries and improved bull trout passage on 300 miles of streams and river—all while helping ranching families keep their operations going strong.

Most of these achievements were coordinated by the Blackfoot Challenge, a

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

How a nationally recognized, landowner-led conservation group is protecting both the natural resources and rural lifestyle of the Blackfoot Valley

BY SAM CURTIS

plow fields, and move logs, Foote lessens noise, air pollution, and, most importantly, damage to wet meadows on the 960-acre ranch. It’s just one way this trained biologist, formerly director of an environmental education foundation, operates his ranch with one eye on the bottom line and the other on wildlife habitat.

Some of Foote’s ranching methods are more akin to those used in the 1890s, when Meadow Springs was homesteaded, than in the 21st century. A few neighbors puzzle over Foote’s ways, but the local wildlife don’t seem to mind. Sandhill cranes, Canada geese, and black terns, all mostly absent 25 years ago, have returned to the roughly 100 acres of lush wetlands the Footes have

filling up with trophy homes and housing developments. In recent years, many parts of the state have seen double-digit annual growth, much of it centered on riverside lots. Not only has growing development harmed riparian fish and wildlife habitat, it has also altered the scenic ranching landscape for which Montana is famous.



LIGHT FOOTPRINT By using horses rather than tractors, Blackfoot Valley rancher Geof Foote protects fragile wetlands on his property.

That’s not true in the Blackfoot Valley, however. The Footes and several dozen other ranch families along the renowned river have found a way to work with private and public agencies to accommodate fish, wildlife, and open space—while still retaining productive farm operations and long-held ranching traditions. Over the past two decades, this remarkable private-public partnership has helped

landowner-led group formed in 1993 (the name came from the title of a *Montana Outdoors* article published two years earlier on restoring the river’s trout fishery). The Challenge, as it’s locally called, is a loose partnership of private landowners, federal and state agency representatives, local government officials, and corporate landowners working to enhance, conserve, and protect the natural resources and rural lifestyle of the Blackfoot Valley. So successful has the group been at preserving both ranch life and wildlife, it has developed a national reputation. When U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service director Steve Williams presented the group with the agency’s Watershed Stewardship Award in 2003, he said, “The Blackfoot Challenge is doing the kind of landowner-led conservation we need to be promoting nationwide.”

As the pressures of development continue to grow in Montana and across the United States, the Blackfoot Challenge’s string of success stories is offering hope to other



HEAD ON

"THE" RIVER Made famous by Norman Maclean's 1976 bestseller, the Blackfoot River Valley is home to both fly-fishing legend and long-held ranching traditions.

DAVID R BENNETT

ranchers and conservationists working to save their natural and cultural heritage.

HISTORIC INDIAN HIGHWAY

If ever a river corridor was worth protecting, it's the 132-mile Blackfoot Valley. Stretching from the Continental Divide west to the Clark Fork River, bordered on the north by the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat wilderness areas, the valley is home to grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolverines, lynx, and elk. The valley's streams and wetlands attract bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and 21 species of waterfowl. And native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout swim in the Blackfoot River and its tributaries.

Roughly 16,000 years ago, the lower half

to remain in the fertile valley. By 1885, the Blackfoot Valley was home to Montana's first large-scale logging operation. Five years later, the Mike Horse Mine opened on a Blackfoot River tributary. In the decades that followed, miners staked claims to more than 150 gold, silver, and copper mines, while ranchers fed their cattle on the valley's lush native grass.

By 1976, when Norman Maclean's Blackfoot River-based bestseller *A River Runs Through It* was published, the river was already attracting recreationists, retirees, and developers. After the movie of the same name premiered 14 years later, the valley became a holy site for fly anglers from throughout the world.

Not all who visit or put down roots in

In the mid-1970s, valley residents helped convince the Montana legislature to pass legislation allowing for the sale of conservation easements. The state's first conservation easement was negotiated in the Blackfoot Valley in 1976.

"The Blackfoot Challenge grew out of these and other issues that were rather narrowly focused in the 1970s," says Land Lindbergh, a local rancher and one of the group's original founders. "Residents with a real stake in these matters would meet in the fields or at Trixie's Saloon in Ovando and try to find some common solutions."

By the 1980s, a larger group of landowners and agencies had begun dealing with a growing number of concerns, such as controlling noxious weeds, reducing griz-

"What could we do to keep the Blackfoot Valley from becoming another Bitterroot Valley or Gallatin Valley?" —HANK GOETZ, *Lands Coordinator, Blackfoot Challenge*

of the Blackfoot Valley lay at the bottom of glacial Lake Missoula. This 520 cubic miles of ice-dammed water periodically blew out, causing cataclysmic floods that scoured the landscape of the Northwest from what is now Clearwater Junction (where the Clearwater River meets the Blackfoot) to the Pacific Ocean. Shoreline rings visible on mountainsides above Missoula mark the ancient lake's various reincarnations, and glacial wetlands in the Blackfoot Valley are tangible remnants of the most recent ice age.

Prehistoric human inhabitants may have witnessed the last of the great floods, but it's the oral traditions of the Salish and Blackfoot Indians that give us the first human tales of the region. The Salish called the Blackfoot River *Cokahlarishkit*, or "the river of the road to buffalo." They and other tribes living west of the Continental Divide traveled along this route each year from the mountains to the bison-rich plains over what is now Lewis and Clark Pass.

The valley had seen a great deal of human use before Meriwether Lewis, returning from the Pacific, followed the Blackfoot River in July 1806 to reach the Missouri. Pioneers and settlers who followed the Corps of Discovery saw reasons

the Blackfoot River have treated the landscape with reverence. Sloppy mining practices, overaggressive grazing, and clear-cut logging combined to fill the river with heavy metals and sediment. Native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, their food sources poisoned and spawning gravel smothered, began to disappear.

Meanwhile, many landowners drained wetlands, channelized tributary streams, and erased brush from streambanks, further damaging fish spawning grounds as well as waterfowl nesting areas. As the valley's human population grew, new development fragmented contiguous habitat needed by elk, grizzlies, and other species.

MEETINGS AT TRIXIE'S SALOON

Valley residents slowly and gradually responded to these and other land use problems. In the early 1970s, several private ranchers began working informally with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Bureau of Land Management staff to reduce trespass. They created the 13-mile Blackfoot Recreation Corridor, in which landowners agreed to open their land to public hunting, fishing, and hiking in exchange for FWP creating safety zones around buildings, constructing parking lots, and regulating hunter numbers.

zily bear depredation, and saving bull trout.

"It was clear there were changes coming to the Blackfoot Valley," says Lindbergh, "but valley residents wanted to control that change and not be pushed around by outside influences."

The Blackfoot Challenge was formed to help locals maintain control over their home and their destiny. After a contentious start, in which participants often shouted out their disagreements, the group established guidelines for civil discourse.

"We established a culture of cooperation and communication, a forum where ranchers, biologists, landowners, and agency representatives could communicate openly," says Ron Pierce, FWP fisheries biologist in Missoula and a partner in the Challenge since its beginning. "That cooperation then shifted to on-the-ground stream and wetland restorations, which also helped bring down barriers. Sure, it was a bit rocky at first, but I know of no other place where people have been able to resolve differences across the table so constructively."

One reason for the Challenge's success has been the willingness of participants to consider other ways of looking at the world. David, Randy, and Brent Mannix, owners of the Mannix Brothers Ranch, are fourth-generation Helmville ranchers who



COWS AND GRIZZLIES The challenge is to preserve the valley's rural lifestyle while protecting and restoring critical fish and wildlife habitat.

TERI GARRISON

have seen a steady change in the way people view land use in the Blackfoot Valley.

“Not long ago, agriculture was king, and no one else in the valley cared much about the land and water that ranchers were using,” says David Mannix. “Well, now there are people living here in the valley and across the country who do care about things like fish and wildlife and water quality. And they all will have a say in what happens here. So, what the Challenge does best is soften the collision that happens when different views meet. That hasn’t happened overnight, but the Challenge has helped build trust between the many different interest groups in the valley, and we’ve seen that we have an awful lot in common.”

Another reason for the group’s success was the willingness of several local landowners to risk being the first to sell perpetual conservation easements to public agencies and private conservation groups.

“Some people stuck their necks out,” says Lindbergh. “They did things that said to the rest of the residents of the Blackfoot Valley, ‘You know, there are some possibilities here. Maybe we can work together to get control of all these changes that are coming down the road at us.’”

SHARED SACRIFICE

Citizens can lead, but they often need the money, manpower, and technical expertise of public and private agencies to accomplish their goals. When local Blackfoot Valley landowners teamed up with FWP, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, and The Nature Conservancy, they accomplished things that would have been difficult on their own.

According to Jim Stone, a good example of that collective success is in how the Blackfoot Challenge has allocated water during the recent drought.

“We’ve been able to bring together those with senior and junior water rights, including FWP and even a golf course, and come up with what we call the ‘shared sacrifice’ approach,” says Stone, a rancher who chairs the Challenge’s board of directors. Some ranchers, he explains, volunteer to use less water than is their legal right. “What that does,” Stone says, “is allow everyone to keep pumping some water, while still keeping enough water in the Blackfoot for fish to survive.”

Like a well-run business, the Blackfoot

Challenge has established various committees to study and recommend solutions on categories such as habitat and water quality restoration, drought and water conservation, forestry, wildlife, recreation, weeds, and education. These days, 400 landowners and 70 partner groups, agencies, and businesses participate in planning and carrying out on-the-ground projects recommended by the committees.

In 2004, the Challenge celebrated its greatest accomplishment to date: acquiring more than 40,000 acres of land from Plum Creek Timber Company. In the late 1990s, after Plum Creek began putting its Blackfoot Valley parcels on the market, members of the Challenge feared the valley’s famous open space would soon fill with trophy homes, fragmenting wildlife habitat and degrading the historically rural setting.

“We started asking ourselves what we could do to keep the Blackfoot Valley from becoming another Bitterroot Valley or Gallatin Valley,” says Hank Goetz, a local resident who coordinates land projects for the Challenge.

The answer was to form a partnership with The Nature Conservancy. TNC, which assumed the financial risk of obtain-

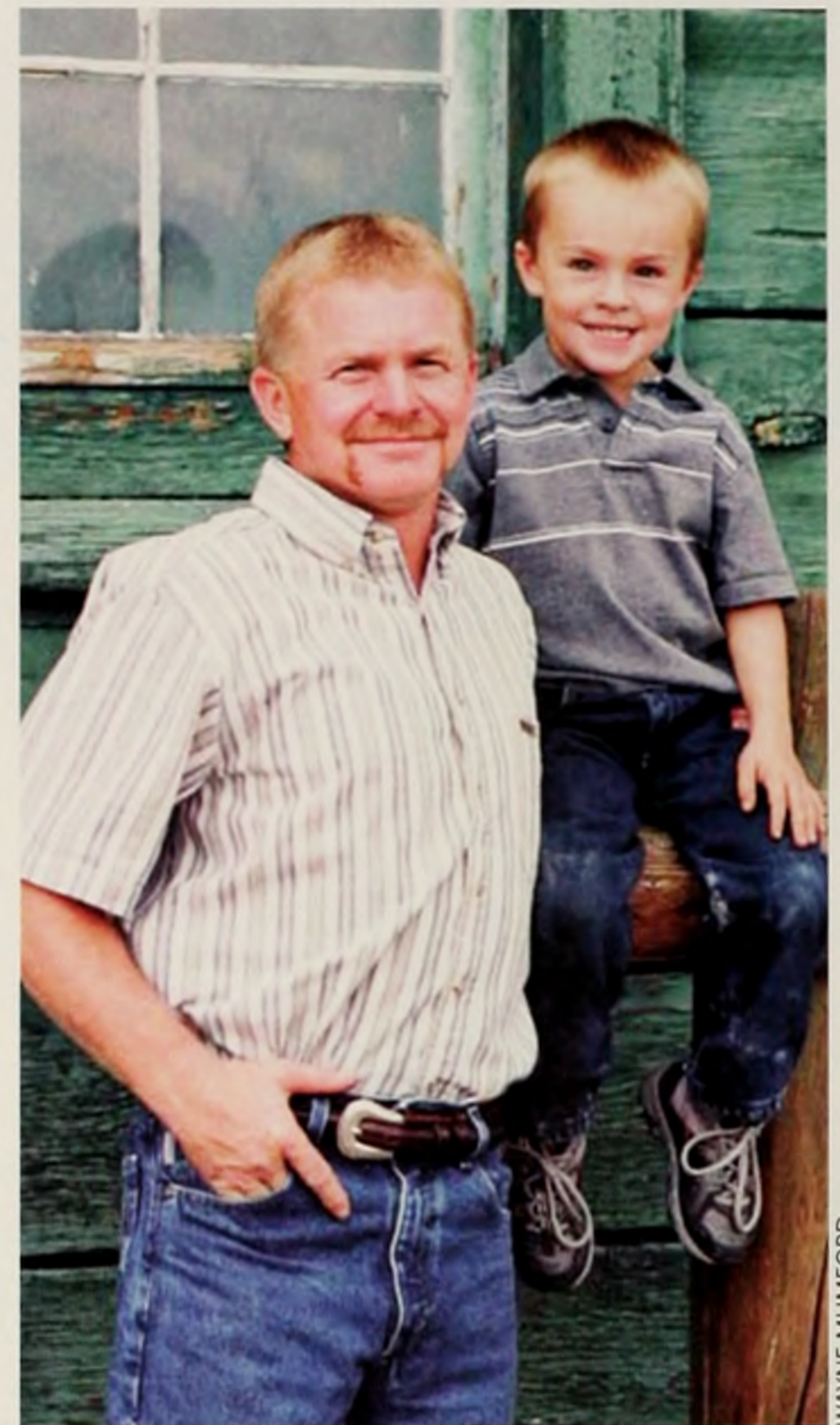
ing loans and buying the land, purchased 43,000 acres of Plum Creek property in 2004 and has an option to buy an additional 45,000 acres. Scattered along the valley from Lincoln to Ovando, the parcels contain elk and lynx habitat, bull trout streams, and large tracts of forest. The conservation organization plans to resell the property—with attached environmental safeguards and development restrictions—to private and public buyers working in cooperation with the Blackfoot Challenge.

The land purchase project got a boost recently when Senator Conrad Burns and Montana's other congressional delegates obtained \$18.3 million from the 2005 congressional appropriations bill for Blackfoot Valley acquisitions. The money will be used to purchase parcels of the timber land from TNC to become additions to national forests and Bureau of Land Management property and part of the state Blackfoot-

Clearwater Wildlife Management Area.

The combination of congressional leaders, local landowners, anglers, private groups, and public agencies, says Mike Thompson, is what makes the Blackfoot Challenge such a powerful force. As manager of the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA, Thompson has been in the thick of Blackfoot Valley issues since the 1980s. He's seen how local landowners rose above internal squabbles and personal gain to find solutions to land use problems benefitting the entire community. Most important, he says, the Challenge's citizen members refuse to let the forces of real estate development and agricultural economics control their destiny.

"They don't sit around saying, 'Oh well, times are changing, there's nothing we can do about it,'" Thompson says. "If things are changing in the Blackfoot Valley, it's because the Blackfoot Challenge is making those changes." 🐾



WAYNE MUMFORD

"This partnership approach is the only way smaller ranches like ours can survive. It's the only way this rural lifestyle can be maintained for our kids."

—JIM STONE, *Rancher and Blackfoot Challenge Board of Directors Chairman (shown here with son Brady)*

A Winter Resort for Blackfoot Elk

Located 40 miles east of Missoula at the confluence of its namesake rivers, the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area is like a Club Med for elk. The 72,000-acre WMA, Montana's largest, was established in 1948 to provide essential winter range for elk in the surrounding Bob Marshall and Mission Mountains wilderness areas.

Manager Mike Thompson says the WMA's extensive native rough fescue grasslands provide elk with nutritional winter food. The area also has abundant shrubs, which elk eat when grasses ice over, and it provides security from predators.

To celebrate the WMA's 50th anniversary, a citizen's advisory group decided that private lands within the WMA should be purchased. Members were concerned the inholdings, owned by a timber company, would be sold for housing development.

In addition to citizens, Thompson says credit for securing the inholdings goes to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Plum Creek Timber Company, Five Valleys Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the Blackfoot Challenge, Lolo National Forest, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

In November 2004, the last of several land transfers and

acquisitions were signed, protecting a total of 7,800 acres within the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA.

"It was really moving to see so many people come together on this effort," Thompson says. "In 1998, they said they wanted to make this happen, and they did."



MICHAEL JWOLF

FILLING THE GAPS In 2004, nearly 8,000 acres of inholdings were acquired for the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA, located near Ovando.