

# STANDING FOR MONTANA

Strange stories of how the bitterroot, grizzly bear, mourning cloak butterfly, and Montana's other state symbols came into existence. **BY SARA GROVES**

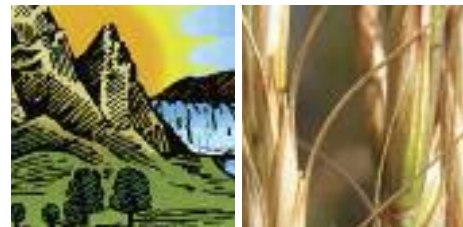
**H**ow do you represent to the rest of the world a state like Montana, with its diverse landscape, plants, animals, and people?

Montanans have been trying for nearly 150 years—from the creation of our state seal in 1865 to recent but unsuccessful efforts to designate an official Montana state pancake.

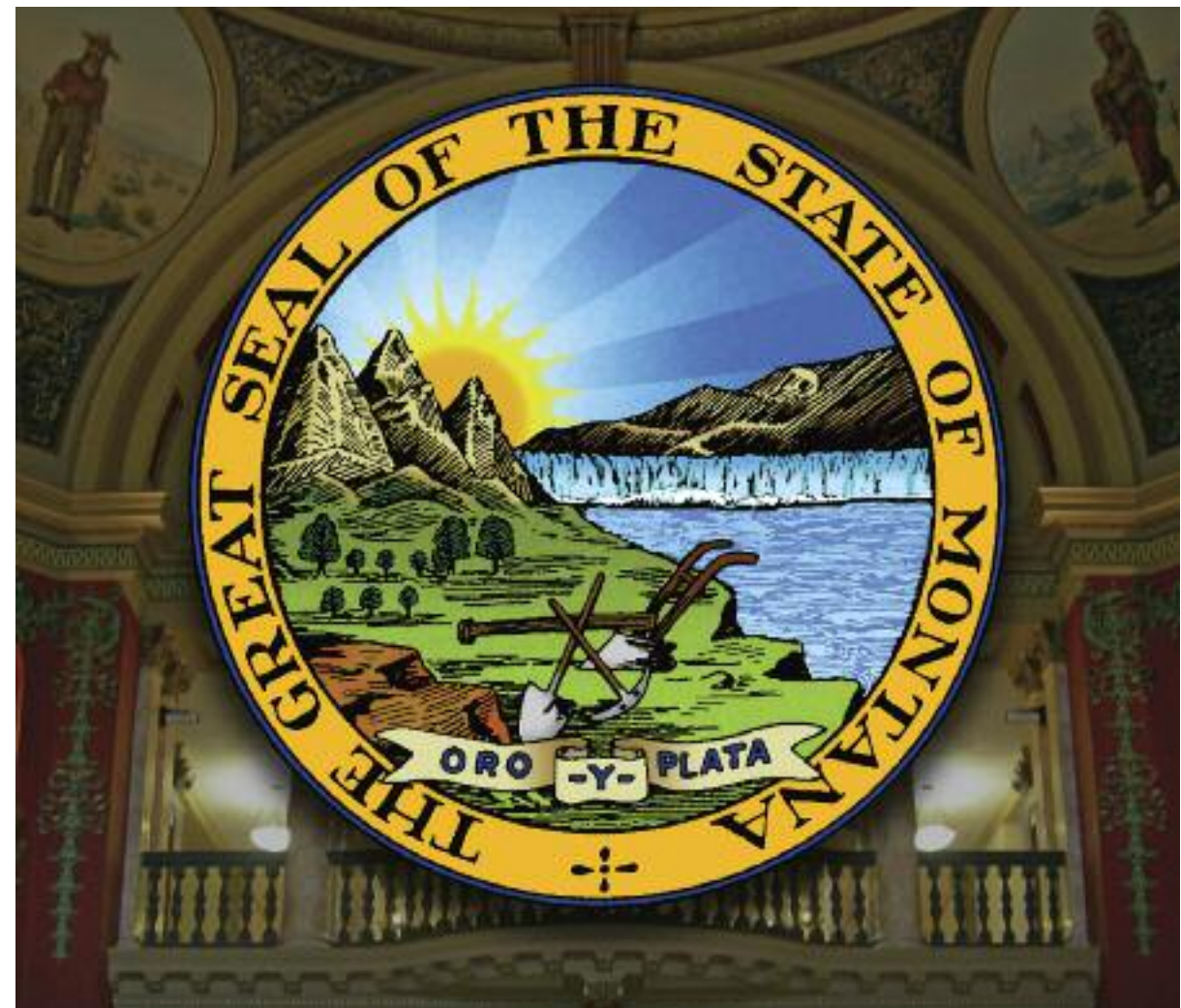
Symbols have been promoted by schoolchildren, garden clubs, legislators, and others. Some were decided via statewide vote, others were picked by the legislature, and a few just sort of snuck in. All represent an important part of Montana's natural history or culture.

Each symbol tells an interesting story about Montana to the rest of the world. We're the place to see grizzly bears, and the state where one of the world's most significant dinosaur fossil discoveries was made. Even more interesting are the stories of how Montanans selected these particular symbols over other popular candidates. ▶▶

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CREDITS ON FOLLOWING PAGES



## STATE SEAL

In 1865 territorial delegates appointed a committee to select an official seal to represent Montana to the world. Committee chairman Frank M. Thompson wrote that "the territorial seal shall . . . represent a plow, a miner's pick, and shovel; upon the right, a representative of the great falls of the Missouri; upon the left, mountain scenery. Underneath, as a motto, the words *Oro el Plata*. The Seal shall be two inches in diameter and surrounded by these words: 'The Seal of the Territory of Montana.'" (Fortunately, someone caught the Spanish language goof and changed the motto from "Gold the Silver" to "Gold and Silver," or *Oro y Plata*.) That same year Governor Sidney Edgerton signed a bill approving the territorial seal.

Thompson sent a crude sketch to an engraver, who produced the seal with a bison on the banks of the Missouri River, as per the wishes of the territorial delegates. The seal was to be shared by the governor and the territorial secretary. However, in 1876 enterprising Secretary James Callaway decided to augment his salary by charging to commission a new one, which ended up without a bison, to use on newly issued territorial bonds and other documents.

Over the next year, both men used their respective seals on territorial papers. In 1877 the legislature decided that Callaway's seal was the official version. Six years later, delegates decided to have that seal destroyed and commission a new one, which was entrusted to the territorial secretary.

In 1887 an engraver replacing the worn-out 1883 seal changed the mountains, removed the clouds, added trees, and put the sun in the sunset position. Two years later, when Montana entered statehood, the seal was again changed, to replace the word "Territory" with "State." The new engraver, a Helena jeweler, took his own liberties with the state seal. He moved the trees, altered the Great Falls and the Missouri River, and redesigned the mountains. Montana's official state seal remains much the same today.



Montana has also designated a state song, state lullaby, and state quarter. Learn more about state symbols in *Symbols of Montana*, by Rex C. Myers and Norma B. Ashby, and by visiting [montanakids.com](http://montanakids.com). (Click on "Facts and Figures.")

## STATE FISH: BLACKSPOTTED CUTTHROAT TROUT

(*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*)

The idea for a state fish may have first been proposed in this magazine. George Holton, a senior fisheries manager, suggested in a 1974 *Montana Outdoors* article that the state designate an official fish species because “fishing is a major recreational pursuit for state residents and an important attraction for the state’s tourism industry.” Holton then wrote, “At the risk of biasing the outcome, I propose as candidates the paddlefish, the Dolly Varden [bull trout], and the Arctic Grayling.”

The grayling was the top choice of C. J. D. Brown, a distinguished professor, fisheries researcher, and author of *Fishes of Montana*. In a letter to Senator Margaret Warden, who would later introduce legislation for designating a state fish, Brown warned, “I think it would be a serious mistake to designate other trouts not native to Montana. Utah is the laughing stock of ichthyologists and fish biologists and sportsmen for designating the rainbow trout the state fish, which is native only to the Pacific coast states and is a true exotic to Utah.”

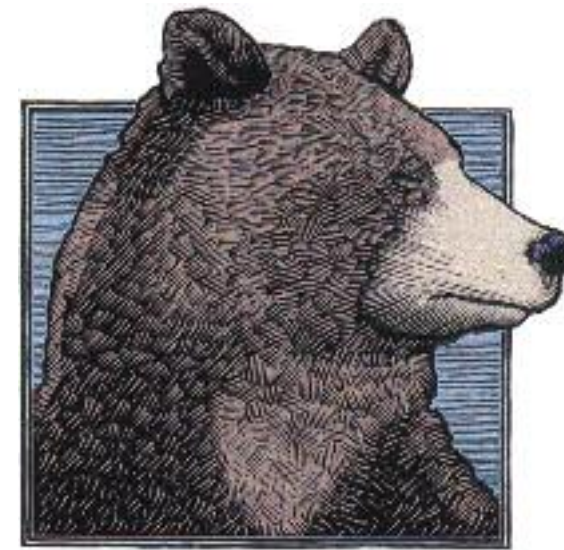
A prominent supporter of the blackspotted (west-slope) cutthroat trout was television personality Norma Ashby and her husband, Shirley, of Great Falls, both

avid fly anglers. In 1976, Ashby launched on her TV show, “Today in Montana,” a campaign for Montanans to vote for a state fish.

Described by Captain William Clark in 1805, the blackspotted cutthroat trout was also the choice of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation.

The cutthroat campaign got its most eloquent endorsement by Art Whitney, chief of the state’s Fisheries Division, who wrote, in testimony later delivered before the 1977 legislature: “Probably more than any other species, the cutthroat trout symbolizes the quality we are striving for . . . in Montana. Just as this fish requires a quality habitat if he is to survive, Montanans as a people are striving for a quality of life already lost in many parts of this nation. Naming the blackspotted cutthroat trout as Montana’s state fish will be just another indication that the people in this state will settle for nothing but the very best in protecting the Montana way of life we are all dedicated to preserving.”

The legislature agreed, after which Governor Thomas Judge signed into law the bill that made the blackspotted cutthroat trout Montana’s official state fish.



## STATE ANIMAL: GRIZZLY BEAR

(*Ursus arctos horribilis*)

Secretary of State Jim Waltermire launched the State Animal Project in 1982 as a way to “impress upon Montana students the importance of an individual’s vote and to familiarize them with the legislative process.”

Students statewide were encouraged to learn about Montana’s wildlife, nominate candidate species, and even form “political” committees to support and campaign for a particular animal. Students voted in a primary election and narrowed their choices to the grizzly bear and the elk. The general election was scheduled for a month later.

Students across Montana heard an earful from the two campaigns on why they should vote one way or the other. Adults also weighed in. Some believed that if the elk became the state animal it would lose its big game status, thus eliminating Montana’s multi-million-dollar elk hunting industry. Others opposed the grizzly because it was a predator and had only a few years earlier been given federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, which ended grizzly hunting and closed some trails and roads.

The grizzly won, capturing 34,346 votes to the elk’s 18,354 in the students’ election. Senator Larry Tveit sponsored a grizzly designation bill in the Senate, and Representative Clyde Smith was the House sponsor. More than 1,000 children attended the grizzly bear designation hearings, and the bill passed by wide margins in both houses. Governor Ted Schwinden, decked out in a grizzly cap, signed the bill into law in 1983.

## STATE GRASS: BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS

(*Agropyron spicatum*)

At a PTA seminar on the environment in 1972, Havre resident Toni Hagener heard Joseph C. Zacek, a range conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service, mention that Montana had no state grass, even though 75 percent of the landmass was composed of rangeland.

Hagener wrote to Zacek that a local community development group she chaired might be interested in promoting an official state grass. She asked which native grass would best qualify: Western wheatgrass? Blue gamma? Another species?

Zacek replied that blue gamma was not highly regarded by ranchers. “We have a saying about this grass: ‘A cow has to have a mouth a yard wide and travel 20 miles an hour to get a belly-full,’” he wrote. His top choice was rough fescue, which he claimed was the “one species that is definitely Montanan because it occurs in only limited amounts in other states.” His second choice was bluebunch wheatgrass, found throughout the state.

That’s the species Hagener’s group decided to lobby for, and in 1973 the legislature made bluebunch wheatgrass Montana’s official state grass.



WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT: PAT CLAYTON; GRIZZLY ILLUSTRATION: PETER GROSSHAUSER; BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS: MATTHEW LAVIN

## STATE GEMSTONES: SAPPHIRE AND AGATE

In 1895 prospector Jake Hoover discovered gold in the Little Belt Mountains. He and two partners invested \$40,000 to begin an extensive mining operation. After a year of mining, Hoover managed to extract only \$700 worth of gold, but he also found some pale blue pebbles in Yogo Creek. He sent a cigar box full of the stones to Tiffany & Co. in New York to see if they were worth anything.

George F. Kunz, at the time considered America's foremost gem expert, called Hoover's rocks "the finest precious gemstones ever found in the United States." Tiffany & Co. sent the prospector a check for \$3,750, the first of many he would receive for his discovery.

Hoover's mines, which the U.S. Geological Survey later described as "America's most important gem locality," eventually produced an estimated \$40 million worth of sapphires. Montana's yogo sapphires are even found in the Royal Crown Jewel Collection in London.

The Montana Council of Rock and Mineral Clubs asked the legislature to declare both the sapphire and the Montana agate (the latter found in abundance along the Yellowstone River) as Montana's official state gemstones. The legislative body complied in 1969.



## STATE TREE: PONDEROSA PINE

*(Pinus ponderosa)*

The ponderosa pine is a common western conifer that grows on dry slopes and mountain foothills, often surrounded by juniper, sage, and prairie grasses. Its range extends from central British Columbia south to central Mexico and east to South Dakota's Black Hills. Ponderosa pine forests, found throughout Montana, are highly valued for their commercial timber.

The tree is likely named for its "ponderous" size, reaching 230 feet in some regions (though topping out at 194 feet in Montana), or its heavy wood.

Ponderosa pine forests are used by a wide range of wildlife, including birds such as western tanagers and great horned owls, and mammals such as grizzly bears and mule deer. This tree also helped build the West, supplying timber for mine braces, railroad ties, and residential homes.

In 1908 Montana schoolchildren selected the ponderosa pine over the Douglas fir, American larch, and cottonwood as Montana's state tree. But not until 1949, after a yearlong campaign by the Montana Federation of Garden Clubs on behalf of the ponderosa, did the legislature finally make the designation official.



GEMSTONES: ISTOCKPHOTO; PONDEROSA PINE: CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; MAIASAURA: DAVIDE BONADONNA

## STATE FOSSIL: MAIASAURA

*(Maiasaura peeblesorum)*

One of the most significant paleontological discoveries of the latter 20th century came in 1978, when fossils of a nesting colony of duck-billed dinosaurs were found west of Choteau. The following year, paleontologist Jack Horner and research partner Bob Makela determined that the species, which they named Maiasaura ("good mother lizard"), raised its young in colonies, as many birds do, rather than abandon the nest after laying eggs, like reptiles.

So scientifically important was the finding that in the mid-1980s the Montana Council of Rock and Mineral Clubs decided to lobby for the Maiasaura as the state's official fossil.

Representative Orval Ellison introduced the fossil designation legislation, telling Ben Veach, chairman of the council, "You get me the kids and I'll get your bill passed." Veach enlisted the help of Helen Peterson's sixth-grade class at Livingston Middle School. Peterson and 130 schoolchildren wrote letters to Governor Ted Schwinden, legislators, and other schools in Montana. They wrote songs and stories and made and distributed brochures and T-shirts. They also baked 2,000 Maiasaura-shaped cookies for the legislators, and toured the State Capitol and governor's office.

The House unanimously passed the bill in February 1985. The Senate passed it after debating whether the Tyrannosaurus rex would be more appropriate.

A few weeks later, the governor visited Livingston to sign the state fossil bill. Rarely before had a law been signed outside of the State Capitol, but as Veach put it, "I'm sure the capitol is well-built; it withstood the Helena earthquake of 1959. But 130 sixth-graders twice in one year? Well, why risk it?"



**STATE FLOWER: BITTERROOT**

*(Lewisia rediviva)*

The bitterroot's scientific name comes from Meriwether Lewis, who first officially described the plant in 1805. (*Rediviva*, Latin for "revived," refers to the plant's bright flowers, which blossom each summer.) But long before that, the bitterroot was well known to American Indians of the region, who for centuries boiled and ate the plant's nutritious root.

Despite its heritage and lovely pink petals, the bitterroot was no shoo-in for Montana's state flower. Many people denounced the oddly shaped forb. The *Helena Independent* editorialized in 1894 that the bitterroot "has one quality which should be fatal to it as a state emblem. It has no stem . . . and the leaves and flower grow out of the top of a thick, fleshy, spindle-shaped root." That made the flower difficult to pick, the editors argued, and lacking a stem it couldn't be made into a bouquet or worn as a boutonniere.

But 3,621 Montanans disagreed, and that year they made the bitterroot the clear winner in a statewide contest. (The evening primrose and the wild rose took distant second and third places with 787 and 668 votes, respectively.) The 1895 legislature acknowledged the public's decision and made the bitterroot the official state flower of Montana.

BITTERROOT AND MEADOWLARK ILLUSTRATION: ARTHUR SINGER AND ALAN SINGER; MOURNING CLOAK BUTTERFLY: ALETA ANN RODRIGUEZ



**STATE BIRD: WESTERN MEADOWLARK**

*(Sturnella neglecta)*

Another state symbol inspired by its connection to Meriwether Lewis is the western meadowlark. The melodic prairie bird was first recorded for science by the explorer on June 22, 1805, when the Corps of Discovery portaged around the Great Falls of the Missouri River. In his journal that night, Lewis wrote, "there is a kind of larke here that much resembles the bird called the oldfield lark with a yellow brest and a black spot on the croop . . . the beak is somewhat longer and more curved and the note [song] differs considerably; however in size, action, and colours there is no perceptible difference; or at least none that strikes my eye." In 1930 Montana's schoolchildren voted for the western meadowlark as the bird that best represented their state. The following year, the state legislature made it official.

In 1998 several lawmakers proposed to replace the meadowlark with the magpie. They argued, unsuccessfully, that unlike the songbird, which flies south each fall for warmer climes, the magpie stays in Montana year-round and is more deserving of the state bird honor.



**STATE BUTTERFLY: MOURNING CLOAK**

*(Nymphalis antiopa)*

Who would have thought that naming a state butterfly would spark a Grizzlies versus Bobcats controversy? But it did—at least for one state representative. In 2001 all 100 members of the Montana House except Representative Brad Newman voted to make the mourning cloak the state butterfly.

The mourning cloak is a handsome insect. Its wings of dark brown (the color of mourning cloaks once worn to funerals) are edged in bright blue and yellow. Newman took issue with the blue and yellow, which he believed too closely resembled the

school colors of Montana State University.

The Butte Democrat claimed that his loyalty to The University of Montana, along with the Bobcats' losing streak at the time, kept him from voting for the mourning cloak. "I think that as a matter of legislative policy, we ought to stick with a winner," Newman said after his vote. "I'm holding out for a maroon butterfly."

He couldn't convince enough of his fellow lawmakers, however, and in 2001 the legislature made the mourning cloak Montana's state butterfly.