



Beckman's Big Surprise

How a reclusive millionaire's commitment to mule deer and public hunting access created central Montana's newest wildlife management area.

By Dave Carty. Photographs by Jason Savage

GOLDEN GIFT Evening sunlight sends a warm glow over the Beckman Wildlife Management Area northwest of Lewistown. The 6,600-acre parcel was made possible by a bachelor farmer who left \$3 million in his will to benefit deer and deer hunting access.

In honor of Leroy “R.B.” Beckman, I was hoping we’d see some muleys. But on a blustery day this past spring, the wind was blowing so hard I figured every deer in the vicinity would be hunkered down, trying not to get knocked into the next county. As Mark Schlepp, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks central region wildlife area manager, drove us in his department pickup down a gravel road toward the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA), the vehicle rocked as gusts hammered first one side then the other. If I were a mule deer, I thought, I wouldn’t be out on a day like this.

Schlepp was giving me a tour of the Beckman so I could see for myself this remarkable wildlife area that I’d heard about and long wanted to visit.

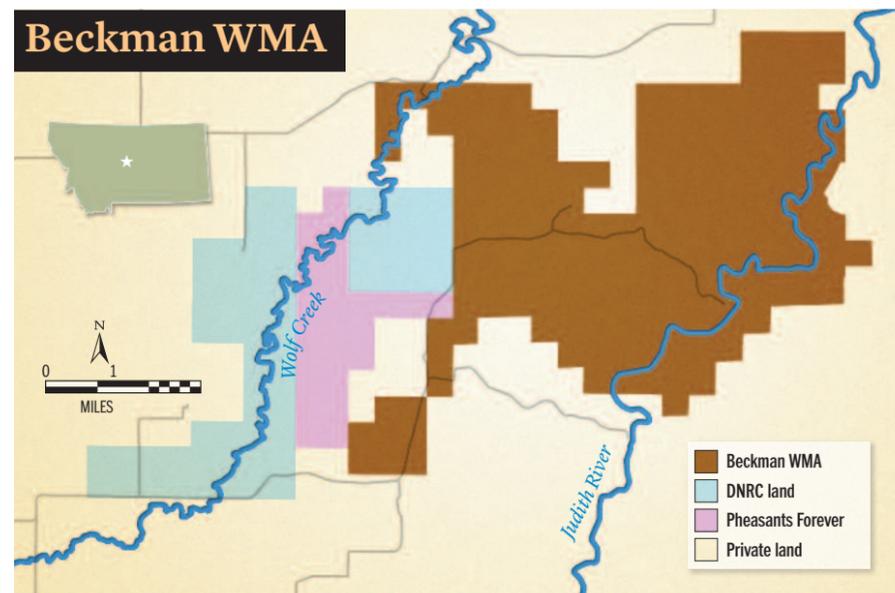
Seen from the rimrock far above the Judith River, the Beckman at first looks like much of the other country in this part of central Montana—rolling to flat farmland and miles and miles of wheat and CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) grasses. But once you drop down into the WMA itself, which follows the serpentine course of

the wild and free-flowing Judith for several miles, a new world opens. Rolling hills covered with ponderosa pine are home to Merriam’s wild turkeys, while the river bottoms hold a healthy population of white-tailed deer. Pheasants live in the thick willows and lush grasslands along the river, while sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, a small elk herd, and 20 or so pronghorn are found on the drier uplands. Songbirds thrive all over.

And then there are the mule deer—the reason this lush, wildlife-packed place came into state ownership in the first place.

What a will

Money to buy the WMA came from R.B. Beckman, a reclusive bachelor who lived on the outskirts of Great Falls. Thought by neighbors to be penniless, Beckman wore patched bib overalls, drove an old panel truck filled with trash, heated just one room of his small house, and lived off a meager Social Security check. “He grew up poor, near Denton, where his mother was a schoolteacher,” says Jim Luoma of Sand Coulee, Beckman’s closest friend. Luoma says Beckman didn’t smoke or drink and had only a few interests: buying and selling old guns, and hunting mule deer.



LANDSCAPE MOSAIC The Beckman WMA, roughly 20 miles northwest of Lewistown, is the centerpiece of a patchwork of public and private lands supporting wildlife habitat and hunter access totaling more than 10,000 acres.



It was mule deer that Beckman wanted to benefit from the nearly \$3 million he left in his will when he died in 1997, at age 88.

It turns out Beckman earned a bit of money farming as a young man and put his modest savings into gold mine stocks. “He was a smart man, but he also got lucky with those investments, because they made him a lot of money,” Luoma says.

Under the terms of his will, a board of trustees that included Luoma (who also acted as Beckman’s personal representative) was given specific instructions to purchase a piece of land in central Montana that would be put into public ownership for the enhancement and hunting of mule deer. The board asked FWP to find a suitable site it could buy and then donate to the department.

The first purchase, in 1999, was a 2,560-acre parcel bisected by the Judith River. FWP acquired the land when it learned the owners wanted

to sell the property so they could retire. At the time it was platted as a subdivision, but the couple decided to sell the land to FWP to preserve it as wildlife habitat. An adjacent 2,129-acre parcel was purchased two years later, and then a few smaller parcels were added to fill out the WMA, which today consists of 6,600 acres.

Sonja Smith, FWP area wildlife biologist in Lewistown, says the department takes seriously Beckman’s wish that the area support a strong mule deer population. “The breaks-like habitat on Beckman, with the rimrock and ponderosa pine, is classic mule deer habitat,” she says. “Our goal is to maintain strong mule deer numbers on and around the wildlife management area, though right now numbers are down throughout most of central Montana because of natural population fluctuations across the entire landscape.”

Smith says FWP is helping muleys by maintaining irrigated crop fields in the bottomlands, which produce barley, wheat, and alfalfa. The department also lets an adjacent rancher rotationally graze cattle on the WMA in exchange for allowing public hunting on his property. “We’re also working to increase



LUSH LANDSCAPE Top: filled with trout and smallmouth bass, the Judith River winds through verdant bottomlands of the Beckman WMA. Above: Nongame wildlife such as western meadowlarks abound on the wildlife management area. Left: R.B. Beckman, whose secret estate allowed the wildlife haven to become public property.



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ROOM FOR MORE Left: A mule deer doe pauses amid uplands framed by ponderosa pines. Pheasants, whitetails, wild turkeys, and other game animals abound, but mule deer are of particular importance on the Beckman. Though numbers are down throughout central Montana, FWP is improving habitat on the WMA to speed up recovery there. Below: A bluff on the Beckman overlooking the Judith River.



elk harvest to reduce depredation on neighboring ranches and lessen competition for habitat with deer,” she says.

Mosaic of wildlife lands

In addition to benefiting wildlife and recreation in its own right, the Beckman area anchors a mosaic of adjacent public and private conservation lands that in combination provide more than 10,000 acres of prime habitat and unfettered public access to hunting and wildlife watching. “From a wildlife management and public access standpoint, all this land blends together,” Schlepp tells me, gesturing toward the horizon. Next to the Beckman WMA is the 1,000-acre Pheasants Forever Wolf Creek property, behind which is 1,800 acres of Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) land. Also abutting the WMA is a DNRC school trust fund

section. Pheasants Forever holds the lease on those 640 acres, allowing the conservation group to manage the land for grazing, small grain production, and wildlife habitat. Yet another part of this enormous complex of wildlife habitat is a large multi-unit Block Management Area.

“The Beckman is the centerpiece of an entire landscape of wildlife lands accessible to public use,” says Schlepp. “Whatever we do on the WMA may have an effect that goes several miles north of here and several miles south.”

The Mule Deer Foundation, Montana Wildlife Federation, and other groups supported the Beckman WMA acquisition and management. Pheasants Forever (PF) has been especially active. Craig Roberts, president of PF’s Central Montana Chapter, says his members planted five shelterbelts on the Beckman, the PF property, and adjoining

DNRC land, and has another planned for the WMA in 2014. Plantings include buffalo berry, silver sage, chokecherry, golden currant, and Rocky Mountain juniper, totaling several miles of winter cover. All—including double rows of 36,000 silver sage shrubs that link the shelterbelts—were planted by hand, on soil cultivated and prepared a year in advance.

The group has also planted five wildlife food plots on the WMA.

Pheasants Forever generally doesn’t buy and own land, but Roberts says the organization purchased the Wolf Creek property in 2008 because it connected the Beckman WMA to the 1,800 acres of DNRC property a mile or so to the west. “We were concerned the land would be subdivided, so we bit the bullet, did some intense fund-raising, and acquired it before we lost the opportunity,” says Roberts, a retired DNRC area

manager who lives in Lewistown. Some of the PF parcel is planted in wheat and barley, while the rest is in native grasses or in crested wheatgrass that Roberts says volunteers will eventually plant to native cover.

Roberts adds that PF’s lease on the nearby section of school trust land allows the group to maintain 320 acres in wheat and barley cropland (half left fallow each year) and open the other half for intermittent grazing.

Constant maintenance

Those who think WMAs are simply purchased, fenced, and left alone would be surprised to see how much active management they require. On the day Schlepp was showing me around, he and another FWP employee inspected two portable water pumps as well as hundreds of feet of pipe that will deliver water to upland areas to

irrigate hay and grain plots for deer, wild turkeys, and upland birds. A major project has involved spraying thousands of acres of weed-infested uplands to control spotted knapweed. “In some parts of the Beckman, the knapweed looked like a purple sea,” Schlepp says. In addition, old fencing was coming down and new, wildlife-friendly fencing was going up so that parts of the WMA can be rest-rotation grazed. The managed grazing system invigorates native plant communities, benefiting the privately owned cattle as well as the public’s mule deer and whitetails.

“This whole complex is a team effort,” says Smith. “In addition to all that Pheasants Forever has done, a huge amount of credit goes to [former FWP Lewistown-area wildlife biologist] Tom Stivers. He wrote the original proposals, conducted public meetings, and figured out the graz-

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PLENTY TO SEE Lewistown area wildlife biologist Sonja Smith scans the Judith River valley for wildlife on the Beckman WMA. Facing page, clockwise from top left: mallard hen and ducklings; Wilson's snipe; mule deer buck in velvet; killdeer.



ing plan and how to get water to go to all the right places. And then there are the neighboring landowners. Much of the credit for all the wildlife around here goes to them for controlling weeds, maintaining good grazing practices, and other types of land stewardship.”

Spectacular scenery
During the extremely high water of spring 2011, much of the Judith blasted through existing curves in the river bed, creating entirely new channels. From a ridgeline hundreds of feet above, Schlepp pointed out the river’s previous route. Already, isolated gravel

bars were sprouting seedling cottonwoods, which, with cows now unable to graze them, have begun providing songbird habitat. In the distance sat an abandoned homestead, which had once been just a few yards off the water’s edge but was now a quarter-mile from the river. A few decades from now the building

will have tumbled down and eroded into the prairie soil.

The Beckman land is what’s known to biologists as a “transitional area”—topography that transitions from the water-sculpted breaks of the Judith River to the uplands hundreds of feet above. Seen from a high vantage point, the area is beautiful, with dry sandstone breaks, some rising 1,000 feet, contrasting with ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and fertile bottomlands. At one point, Schlepp and I drove along nearly a half mile of white sandstone cliffs, on a smaller scale but every bit as spectacular as the much more famous White Cliffs on the Missouri River about 25 miles northwest. It was a treat to view this scenic wonder, hidden within a box canyon and virtually unknown to any but the handful of hikers and hunters

who have discovered the place in recent years. The Judith—ordinarily low, clear, and filled with trout and increasing numbers of smallmouth bass—ragged with peak runoff. On that cool and sunny spring afternoon, the place burst with green, fresh growth. Whitetails bounded from thickets along the river, and tracks of pheasants, turkeys, and sharp-tailed grouse crisscrossed dried mud in the road ahead of us.

All day I was hoping we’d see a few mule deer, too. And finally we did—two does, likely pregnant and about to drop their fawns.

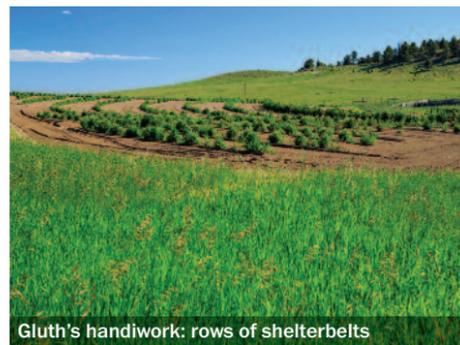
No doubt R.B. Beckman would have been pleased. 🐾

For a detailed map of the Beckman WMA, visit the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov) and search for “Wildlife Management Areas.”

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Sharing a farm worker

All work on the Pheasants Forever property and many habitat improvements on the Beckman WMA are done by Virgil Gluth, of Denton. The conservation group provides tractors, plows, seeders, and other equipment for Gluth’s uplands management work, while FWP funds his seasonal position through its Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. “Virgil has been invaluable to us out here,” says Craig Roberts, president of Pheasants Forever’s Central Montana Chapter. “He prepares soil for shelterbelt plantings, plants and weeds shelterbelts, builds and fixes fences, plants food plots, maintains the equipment—you name it. All the management activities here are coordinated through Virgil. He’s the center of operations.”



Gluth’s handiwork: rows of shelterbelts