

# Central Montana Welcome Mat

A new WMA acquisition opens access to 100,000 acres of prime state and federal wildlife land. BY JIM PASHBY

**MID-STATE MARVEL** The new WMA sits in the southern foothills of the Big Snowies between Lewistown and Ryegate.

Hunters, photographers, and other wildlife fans received an early Christmas present last year. In October 2022, the Montana Land Board approved the purchase by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks of a property in the southern foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains roughly 20 miles south of Lewistown. The \$8.22 million acquisition, supported by the Golden Valley County Commission and the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission, is FWP's newest wildlife management area.

In addition to the nearly 5,700 acres of prime elk and other wildlife range on the parcel itself, the new acquisition opens public access to tens of thousands of acres of neighboring federal land, including the 7,000-acre Twin Coulee Wilderness Study Area and the 87,000-acre Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area. Previously both areas were difficult to reach because they are surrounded by private ranches that granted no public access to the federal lands.

The newly acquired property contains habitat for pronghorn, mule deer, and black bears, as well as 22 animals listed by Montana as state "species of concern," including greater sage-grouse, long-billed curlews, mountain plovers, and Great Plains toads.

*Jim Pashby is a writer in Helena.*

FWP purchased the wildlife-rich property from Shodair Children's Hospital, which received it in 2019 as a donation from the Forrest Allen Estate.

FWP officials say that 75 percent of the purchase price will come from federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds, with the other 25 percent coming from Habitat Montana, a state program funded by hunting license sales, and from private donations.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was instrumental in the deal, assisting Shodair through the complex land sale process, donating \$150,000 to the purchase price and pledging \$250,000 as startup funding for the new WMA's infrastructure and management. That work includes upgrades to wildlife-friendly fences laid out for rest-rotation grazing, as well as installation of additional water supplies that will improve the parcel for livestock and wildlife.

The Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Conservation Fund and the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust also donated \$175,000 and \$75,000, respectively, to the purchase price.

Governor Greg Gianforte, one of five members of the land board, asked that language in the deed stipulate that grazing will continue. The current grazing lease lasts until 2031, and the new deed includes a require-

ment that FWP develop a grazing plan that is beneficial to wildlife, with leases offered to neighboring landowners. Studies show that well-managed cattle grazing can benefit grasslands for wildlife.

"Not only does this land offer exceptional hunting opportunities, excellent habitat, and access to the Big Snowies elk herd, it will remain available for cattle grazing," Gianforte says. "Our state has a vested interest in seeing land conserved for wildlife habitat while also protecting ranchers on the landscape."

The property sits in a hunting district with more than 9,000 elk, the state's second largest herd. That may sound like good news, but in fact the herd is 10 times larger than FWP's population objective—the size biologists believe is both biologically sustainable and won't put undue strain on working ranches concerned about elk eating hay bales and alfalfa.

Another benefit of the state acquisition? It will allow public hunters to help FWP trim that herd to an appropriate size. 🐾

*To protect habitat and allow wildlife undisturbed access to winter range, the Big Snowy Mountains WMA is closed each year to public recreation from December 1 through May 15. For the rest of the year, it is walk-in or horseback access only from two designated parking areas.*