

# BORN OF NECESSITY

For 125 years, FWP has dedicated itself to addressing wide-ranging public concerns about Montana's fish, wildlife, and state parks—and the outdoor recreation those resources provide.

by Tom Dickson

**IN 1901**, members of the Seventh Montana Legislative Assembly had their hands full. In addition to debating whether to establish a state board of health, fund a new bridge across the Yellowstone River, and bolster anti-gambling laws, lawmakers struggled to decide whether to finally get serious about enforcing the state's game and fish laws.

Though Montana was just 12 years into statehood, it was common knowledge among legislative leaders and residents that wildlife and fish numbers were quickly diminishing. Vast herds of bison, which just 50 years before had blanketed the state east of the Rocky Mountain Front, had been indiscriminately shot nearly to extinction. A worldwide craze for men's top hats had wiped out populations of beavers across the West. Elk, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep had disappeared in many parts of the state where they'd once been abundant. Other species seemed destined to follow.

"Game birds and deer are fast being exterminated in this country, as no one makes any secret of killing game birds at all times of the year and deer are hunted with dogs," wrote L.H. Mills of Saco in a questionnaire from the Board of Game and Fish Commissioners sent to all state newspapers in 1900.

In 1901, legislators knew they had to do something.

There had been some progress to that end. At the First Montana Territorial Legislature

in 1865, lawmakers had restricted fishing to hook and line only and forbade the use of poisons, nets, or dynamite. Eight years later they closed hunting for birds and big game during seasonal breeding periods. And in 1895, they enacted Montana's first harvest restrictions, limiting hunters to "2 bull moose, 3 bull elks, 1 hundred grouse...8 deer, 8 mountain sheep, 8 Rocky Mountain goats or 8 antelopes."



During the 19th century, Montana's wildlife underwent rapid decline—bison were nearly wiped out, beavers were trapped to scarcity, and elk, pronghorn, deer, and bighorn sheep vanished from much of their former range.

But legislative leaders also knew the game and fish laws they enacted were meaningless without officials to enforce them. And they had well-trodden paths to follow.

In 1852, Maine was the first state to hire game wardens, called moose wardens. In 1887, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan hired wardens of their own. Other states too had begun to address what

*Forest and Stream* editor George B. Grinnell labeled the "most pertinent question" concerning wildlife protection: enforcement.

## STATE TAKES THE REINS

At first, Montana's legislators tried giving responsibility to the 24 counties, granting them authority in 1895 to hire their own fish and game wardens. But by 1900, only five counties had a warden, all poorly paid, and enforcement remained practically nonexistent. "The past four years have proven conclusively that county commissioners have no interest in the protection of game, and this protection should no longer be left in their hands," wrote Morton J. Elrod, professor of biology at the University of Montana and chairman of the Montana Board of Game and Fish Commissioners—created in 1895—in the commission's 1900 report.

So, in spring of 1901, legislators effectively created a Department of Fish and Game—funded with fines from convictions and a sliver of property tax revenue from counties. They authorized the governor to appoint a department director, called the state game and fish warden, charged with hiring and supervising up to eight deputy wardens. The warden and his deputies were instructed to publicize game and fish laws, conduct investigations, make arrests, and lead search and seizure operations when called for.



*Lawmakers had to decide whether to finally get serious about enforcing the state's game and fish laws.*

Finally, Montana had some teeth in its regulations.

The day after the legislative session concluded, Governor Joseph K. Toole appointed W. F. Scott as the state fish and game warden. The new employee dove in headfirst. "Between April 1 and June 1 of 1901, by his account in the Biennial Report of the Montana Game and Fish Warden 1901-02, Scott single-handedly organized the department from the floor to the filing cabinets," wrote historian Diann Ericson. "Within two months Scott had purchased furniture, hired a secretary and devised a system to carry on the affairs of the department." During those two months he had also hired eight game wardens to enforce the roughly one dozen game regulations in the Montana Codes.

The Legislature had also asked Scott to "report on the condition of game and fish in the State of Montana, together with any information that may aid in protecting the fish and game of said state in the future."

In other words: Let Montanans know what's going on with their fish and wildlife and what should be done to address threats to those resources.

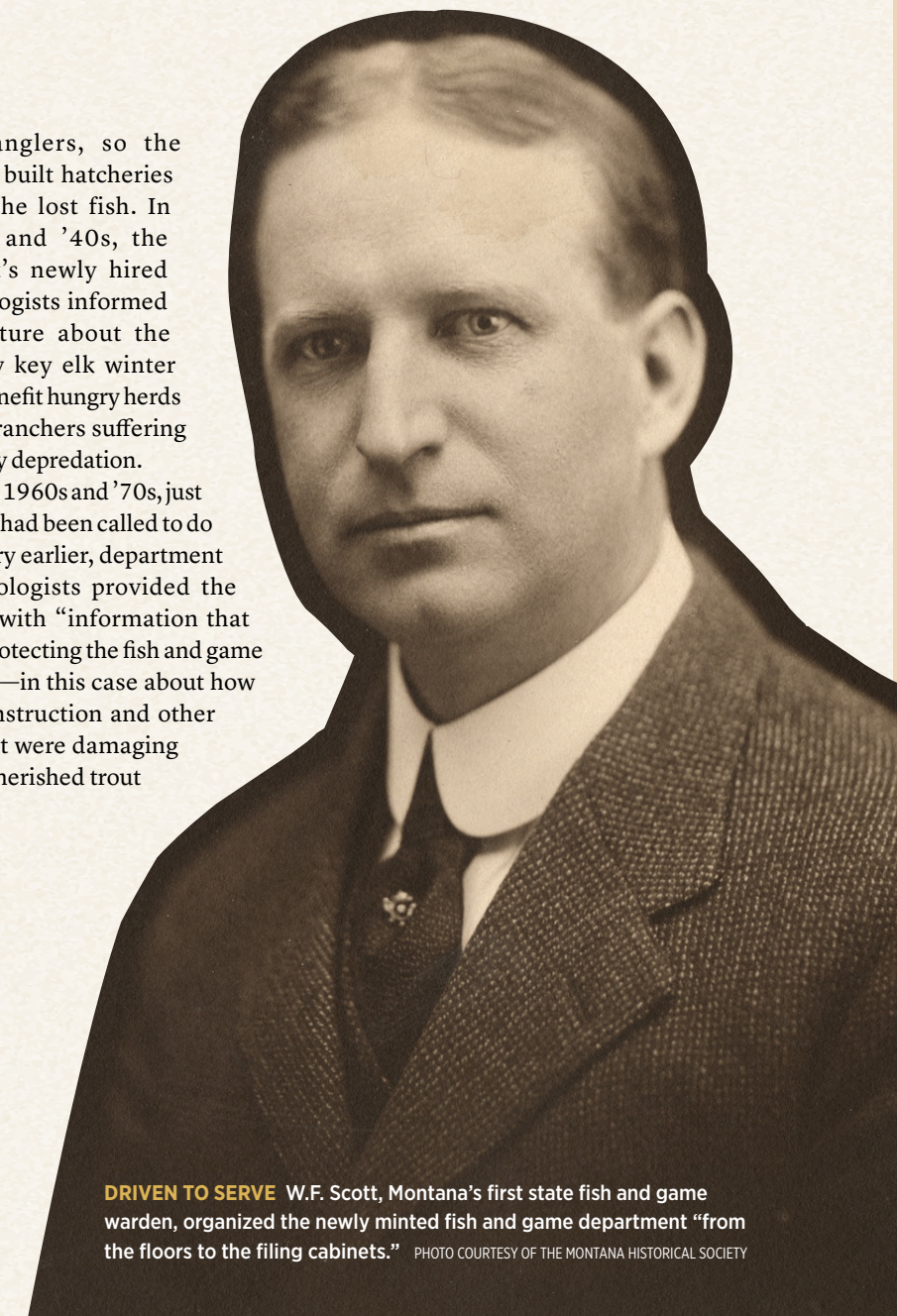
## CONTINUING TO RESPOND

That work has continued unabated. For the past 125 years, the department has reported on the status of Montana's fish and wildlife, taken stock of populations and threats, and provided recommendations.

In the 1920s, sawmill and mine waste effluent were killing off trout populations,

alarming anglers, so the department built hatcheries to replace the lost fish. In the 1930s and '40s, the department's newly hired wildlife biologists informed the Legislature about the need to buy key elk winter range—to benefit hungry herds and relieve ranchers suffering excessive hay depredation.

During the 1960s and '70s, just as W.F. Scott had been called to do a half-century earlier, department fisheries biologists provided the Legislature with "information that may aid in protecting the fish and game of the state"—in this case about how highway construction and other development were damaging Montana's cherished trout streams.



**DRIVEN TO SERVE** W.F. Scott, Montana's first state fish and game warden, organized the newly minted fish and game department "from the floors to the filing cabinets." PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**THE MONTANA WAY** With more than 700 staff statewide, FWP is dedicated to protecting the integrity of the outstanding wildlife, fisheries, parks, and recreational, cultural, and historical resources that define Montana and its people.

Thus it has continued since. Constant communication among department staff, elected officials, conservation group members, landowners, and other Montanans has continually increased the size and responsibilities of what since 1979 has been called Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Game wardens have been asked to expand their roles to enforce water recreation laws, prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species, and break up commercial poaching operations. In addition to big game, large carnivores, furbearers, upland birds, and waterfowl, wildlife biologists now also consider the plight of songbird, raptor, small mammal, and other previously overlooked species. Their focus has also expanded to a landscape scale to identify migration routes and movement corridors, and what forces might interrupt them. Fisheries management still emphasizes stocking or improving the habitat of trout, walleye, and other game species but also includes monitoring imperiled native species—from the Kootenai River’s massive white sturgeon to the tiny finescale dace in

small prairie creeks. Since 1965, FWP has also expanded to include management of Montana’s state parks, which has steadily grown to include dozens of historical, geological, and recreational sites across the state. Also at public request, the department has modernized its hunter education programs, increased bear awareness, publicized threats from invasive species and wildlife disease, added education programs like Becoming an Outdoors-Woman, and provided new ways to learn about outdoors issues and events through its website, videos, and social media.

**FOUR MAIN ATTRIBUTES**

To improve its responsiveness to public concerns, the department held a dozen public meetings across the state in 2015 and asked communities about their opinions of the agency. Respondents pointed to four things that FWP does well and must focus on for continued success:

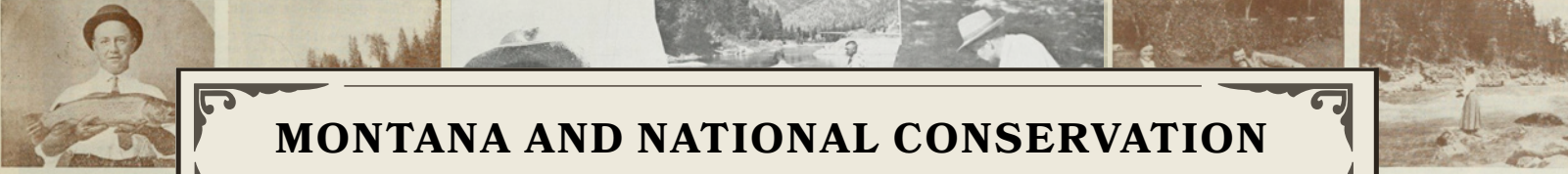
- **perpetuate** fishing, hiking, camping, hunting, and other **outdoor opportunities**;
- **work toward balance**, weighing

opportunities available today against future needs, by limiting hunting harvests or permits to float the Smith River, among other things;

- **focus on integrity**, with, for example, biologists using the best science, game wardens acting with professionalism, and administrators maintaining budget and decision-making transparency; and
- **bring people together**, to discuss, debate, pay for, and learn about the state’s fish, wildlife, and other outdoor resources.

During this year of FWP’s 125th anniversary, it’s worth noting how the relationship between Montana residents, their elected officials at the capitol, and this department has remained true to its origins. In 1901, as he was setting up his new office and dictating directives to eight new deputies, there’s no way W.F. Scott could have envisioned what the department he started would become. But observing how FWP remains staffed with employees dedicated to the mission of stewarding the state’s fish, wildlife, and state parks, it is highly likely he would approve and take pride in the department’s long and successful legacy. 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ERIK PETERSON; MORGAN JACOBSEN/FWP; JOHN WARNER; JEREMIE HOLLMAN



# MONTANA AND NATIONAL CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS 1900-2025\*

\*Select events only. For a more comprehensive examination of FWP history, read the Montana Outdoors special issue, "A Century of Conservation" at [Qr1.be/KSNH08/](http://Qr1.be/KSNH08/).

MONTANA MILESTONE PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONTANA FWP UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

## 1901

Montana appoints its **first state game warden, W.F. Scott**, who is authorized to hire up to eight deputies. These employees mark the origins of what today is Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.



## 1908

Montana builds its **first state fish hatchery** in Anaconda. The hatchery specializes in raising cutthroat trout, shipping them by rail to numerous points across western Montana. The fish are meant to replace wild fish killed by mining and sawmill pollution.



## 1902

W.F. Scott helps form the **National Association of Game and Fish Wardens and Commissioners**, now called the **International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**, at a meeting in Yellowstone National Park.

## 1910

The **first elk are transplanted into Montana from Yellowstone National Park**, marking the beginning of an aggressive elk relocation and restoration program. At the time it was estimated that fewer than 3,000 elk remained in all of Montana north of the park.



## 1900s MILESTONES

### 1905

Montana requires its **first resident hunting and fishing licenses**.

### 1907

Montana requires its **first nonresident fishing licenses**.

### 1910

**Wildfires** devastate many parts of western Montana and Idaho, claiming 87 lives and destroying the Montana towns of De Borgia, Haugan, Henderson, Taft, and Tuscor.



### 1911

Montana establishes early **wildlife preserves**, including Snow Creek, Pryor Mountain, and Gallatin, to aid the recovery of declining game populations.



### 1918

Canada and the United States establish the **Migratory Bird Treaty**, recognizing the need to protect and conserve birds that rely on both countries in their life cycle.



### 1914

The **passenger pigeon**, previously the most abundant bird in North America, is declared extinct.



### 1916

The **National Park Service** is created.



### 1901

Conservationist **Teddy Roosevelt** becomes president of the United States.



### 1905

Formation of the **American Bison Society** and the **National Bison Range** in Montana—and creation of the **U.S. Forest Service**.

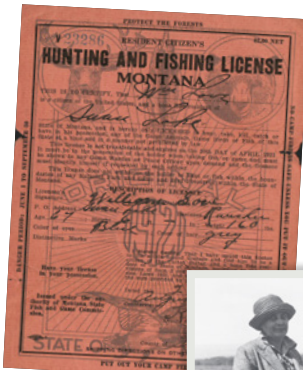


### 1910

**Glacier National Park** is established.

NATIONAL CONSERVATION MILESTONE IMAGES COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND SHUTTERSTOCK

## NATIONAL CONSERVATION MILESTONES



# FISH AND GAME COMMISSION

**1921**  
The Montana Legislature gives the Board of Game and Fish Commissioners authority to open and close seasons on game species and establish game preserves. The commission is renamed the **Montana State Fish and Game Commission**.

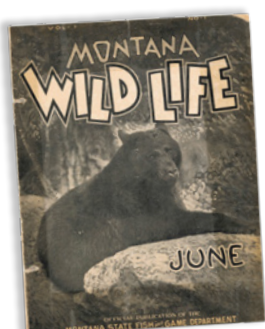


LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. PHOTO BY OTTO M. JONES



NATIONAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**1936**  
Lewis and Clark Caverns is transferred from the federal government to Montana, becoming Montana's first state park. **Today, FWP manages 56 state parks** totaling more than 38,000 acres, as well as seven National Historic Landmarks and numerous sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



**1928**  
The Montana State Fish and Game Commission launches **Montana Wild Life**, forerunner of *Montana Outdoors*.

**1928**  
Montana holds its **first hunting season (2 days only) for ring-necked pheasants**. The birds, native to China, had been released in many areas during previous years.



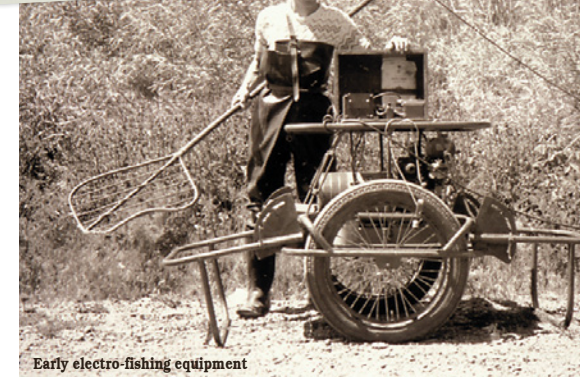
**1940**  
In **Rathbone v. Montana**, the Montana Supreme Court rules on the case of C.R. Rathbone, a rancher on the Rocky Mountain Front, who had been arrested for illegally killing elk on his property. Rathbone contended he was justified in killing elk out of season if they were eating his hay and damaging his property. The justices rule in favor of the state. "One who acquires property in Montana does so with notice and knowledge of the presence of wild game and presumably is cognizant of its natural habits..." their ruling states. "Accordingly, a property owner...must recognize...that there may be some injury to property or inconvenience from wild game for which there is no recourse."

This establishes a legal precedent for wildlife damages and later serves as a catalyst for the state acquiring big game winter range to keep elk away from hay meant for cattle.



MONTANA PBS

**1947**  
The department establishes a **Fisheries Biology Section** to "conduct experiments and gather information...and on the basis of these findings, to develop and test new fish management measures." Fisheries biologists begin studies on growth, food habits, and distribution of various species, and develop a creel census program.  
A few years later, the department's biennial report notes: "Problems of pollution, big dams, and other factors disturbing Montana streams must be faced squarely."



Early electro-fishing equipment

**1947**  
Land for the Sun River Game Range, later **Sun River WMA**, is purchased on the Rocky Mountain Front west of Augusta abutting the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The WMA becomes nationally known for providing winter habitat for more than 2,000 elk—80 to 95 percent of the Sun River elk herd.



## 1920s MILESTONES

**1922**  
The U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey estimates Montana's **antelope** population at 3,027—dangerously close to extinction.



**1929**  
The Montana Legislature authorizes the **State Board of Land Commissioners to establish state parks** but provides no funding.

**1939**  
The Montana Legislature establishes a separate **State Parks Commission** empowered to preserve the historic, scientific, archaeological, scenic, and recreational resources of the state, but doesn't provide funding until 1947.



**1934**  
The **Duck Stamp Act** is passed by Congress, requiring each waterfowl hunter to purchase a stamp, thereby generating revenue for wetland acquisition. The Act has resulted in 4.5 million acres of waterfowl habitat protection.

**1937**  
Passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, also known as the **Pittman-Robertson Act**, funds wildlife habitat conservation via excise taxes on firearms and ammunition, ensuring that hunters contribute directly to the preservation of wildlife habitats.



**1939**  
The **Carolina parakeet** becomes extinct.

**1940**  
The Montana Legislature creates the new position of state big game manager, and the Fish and Game Commission hires a young biologist named **Robert F. Cooney** to fill it (see page 38). That same year, Montana acquires land to establish the **Judith River Game Range** (Wildlife Management Area), created to conserve crucial winter range for thriving elk populations following their local reintroduction in 1928.

**1945**  
Thanks to reintroductions and harvest management, Montana's **elk population** grows to an estimated **15,000** animals.



**1941**  
The Wildlife Restoration Division begins its **first wildlife population surveys**. Several young biologists under the direction of Bob Cooney conduct a wildlife survey of eastern Montana. "[Four of us] started with our backs to the North Dakota border and worked our way westward, surveying game birds and other wildlife in every county along the way," biologist Merle Rognrud later recalled.



MONTANA PBS

**1950**  
**Bighorn sheep numbers** recover enough for the department to allow a limited hunting season, the first since 1915.



MONTANA PBS

**1950**  
Congress passes the **Federal Aid in Fish Restoration (Dingell-Johnson) Act**. Like Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson (D-J) revenues are derived from a federal excise tax, in this case on fishing tackle. Once proceeds become available to Montana starting in 1951, it is the major funding source for fisheries management in Montana besides license revenue.



**1954**  
The department begins stocking **wild turkeys**, starting by introducing 13 Merriam's turkeys from Colorado in the Judith Mountains near Lewistown.

**1957**  
Following several highly publicized hunting accidents the previous fall, the Legislature requires for the first time that new **hunters age 12 and older** take a **spring hunter safety class**.



## 1960

## BOB COONEY

*FWP's first wildlife biologist set an incredibly high standard.*

When the Pittman-Robertson Act passed in 1937, the then-Montana Fish and Game Department was focused on wildlife law enforcement and fish hatcheries. The P-R funding provided a way to launch a wildlife management and research program. The department found the right man to start it in Robert F. “Bob” Cooney, hired in 1940 as Montana’s first professional state wildlife biologist. He had no blueprint to follow.

“He had to not only be the first wildlife biologist, but he had to build the wildlife program in Montana, and oh, man, it took off. He hired the right people,” says Jim Williams, former FWP Region 1 regional supervisor.

In the early 2000s, Williams worked with the late Montana State University professor Harold Picton and FWP wildlife research chief Terry Lonner to capture the early history of wildlife recovery in Montana in a PBS documentary, *Back from the Brink: Montana's Wildlife Legacy*. They interviewed Cooney, then in his 90s, extensively for the project.

Cooney’s background prepared him for the job as a wildlife biologist. Born in 1909 to Fred and Fanny Cooney, Bob grew up working on the family ranch near Townsend and went to high school in Helena. He attended the University of Montana, and worked on a Sun River elk study while he was a student. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in forestry and began working for the U.S. Forest Service in 1937, before being hired by FWP.

Cooney hit the ground running. In 1941, he and his technician Ray Gibler conducted some of the first formal biological surveys in what is now the Bob Marshall Wilderness. They rode and walked 2,000 miles in less than three months from July to October, observing mountain goats, elk, and other wildlife, including ptarmigan and grizzly bears.

“One thing that a lot of people don’t realize is that he is one of the pioneers in grizzly bear ecology research, looking at their diets and knowing they were at a little lower density on

the landscape and knowing that they needed a little extra-special care,” says Williams. Cooney kept meticulous journals of his surveys. One entry reads, “Griz Br... dropping Badger Pass-2 ¼” 50% white bark pine...” He went on to describe how the droppings show the “important use of white bark pine seeds.” He documented the bruins eating mostly plants, the occasional Columbian ground squirrel, lots of ants, and opportunistically, elk calves. The surveys also documented the now-federally threatened bull trout. Cooney took a photo of Gibler with a 9¾-pound bull trout he caught on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River.

The U.S. entered World War II just a few months after Cooney and Gibler finished up their initial surveys, but Cooney was held out of military service because his work was deemed an essential part of the war effort. “During the war, there was a concern to feed the country and make sure we had adequate wild game in case Montanans needed it for food,” says Williams.

Cooney hired people to help him survey what wildlife was left on the landscape across the state so they had a baseline to work with. “Bob Cooney was very interested in and valued not only the trapping and transplanting, but he valued the research part of fish and wildlife ecology,” says Williams. “Back then he was a real proponent of having the best science that was available applied to Montana’s landscape. He was ahead of his time.”



Bob Cooney

**He was not only the first wildlife biologist, but he built the wildlife program in Montana, and oh, man, it took off.”**

Cooney hired Butte-born Jim McLucas, who under Cooney’s direction led the state’s big game trapping and transplant program, moving over 16,000 animals in his career to reestablish populations in areas they had previously roamed. “He was an extremely good hand with animals,” Cooney says in a video interview in *Back from the Brink*.

Cooney was also an early wilderness proponent. He testified in 1958 at a U.S. Senate Committee meeting during hearings for the National Wilderness Preservation Act.

Bob Cooney died in 2007 at the age of 97. He and his wife Carol Wells were married for 71 years. For his groundbreaking work he received many awards, including the University of Montana Distinguished Alumni Award. In 1994, the Montana Wilderness Association gave Cooney an award for his work revealing how wilderness is important to wildlife.

Cooney wrote in a 1950s magazine article: “...it is upon the preservation of these wilderness areas that the future of the grizzly in the United States will depend.”

“He was just an incredible person, very visionary,” says Williams. ■

—Heather Fraley, freelance writer and editor in Missoula

## DICK VINCENT

*A young fisheries biologist led the way for Montana's wild trout management.*

In 1974, Montana did something no other state had ever tried: It stopped stocking trout in streams and rivers.

This initially outraged many anglers, fishing-related businesses, and even some Montana Department of Fish and Game employees. For decades, hatcheries had been credited with improving fishing. Without stocking, many worried this change would put a stranglehold on Montana’s famous trout waters and the businesses that relied on legions of out-of-state anglers each summer.

Instead, once stocking ended, wild trout numbers doubled or tripled on many rivers, improving fishing dramatically.

Yet it didn’t make immediate sense. Take a 1-mile river stretch containing 1,000 “wild” trout—not just native cutthroat trout but also naturally reproducing rainbow or brown trout—then add another 1,000 hatchery trout to the mix. How could the stretch then end up with fewer trout?

What Montana fisheries biologists learned shocked the trout angling world.

It all started in the mid-1960s, when Art Whitney, state fisheries chief, and Bud Gaffney, regional fisheries manager in Bozeman, wanted to document how changes in fish habitat, fishing regulations, and stream flows affected fish populations. In 1966, they hired E. Richard “Dick” Vincent, a young fisheries biologist, to develop techniques to sample trout populations and then estimate fish numbers in a given stretch. That way, managers could do “before and after” comparisons. “At the time the department had no way to quantify populations,” says Vincent. “We could say that a population had declined or increased, but that was just an opinion.”

Vincent had grown up in southeastern Montana, fishing the Madison with his family from a young age. He took high school chemistry classes from Bud Lilly, the legendary fly shop owner and trout conservationist, and earned a master’s degree in fish and wildlife management at Montana State University

(MSU). The Montana Department of Fish and Game hired Vincent fresh out of grad school and assigned him to the Madison.

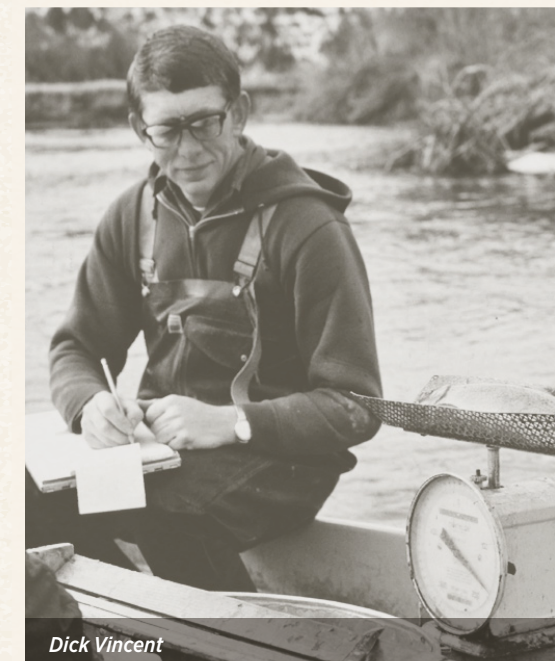
Over the next several years, Vincent developed an electro-fishing technique that temporarily stunned fish so they could then be netted, measured, marked, and released. Whitney and Gaffney, meanwhile, convinced Montana Power to delay drastic reductions in downstream flows on the Madison River from Hebgen Reservoir for a few months until after rainbow trout spawned in the spring. Using Vincent’s “mark and recapture” sampling techniques, they could then see if trout populations improved with the cessation of spring-time “dewatering.”

“What we found is that stopping dewatering only helped the Norris stretch of the Madison, which was not being stocked with catchable-sized trout,” says Vincent. “But in the heavily stocked Varney section of the river, there was no positive effect.”

The biologists wondered what the heck was going on.

Though hatcheries had long been revered for enhancing trout fishing, some anglers and fisheries biologists had grown skeptical by the late 1960s. Anglers on the Madison, for instance, recalled catching more and bigger fish before widespread stocking in the 1950s and ‘60s. Some biologists wondered if hatchery fish were harming naturally reproducing populations, a question the Hebgen Dam study results brought into sharper focus.

Vincent asked his supervisors if he could conduct a study on the effects of stocking trout on top of existing wild populations in the Madison. “The study’s proposal was so controversial that it had to be approved by the Fish and Game Commission,” says Vincent. “Without Art Whitney’s, Bud Gaffney’s, and (regional supervisor) Leroy Ellig’s support, it would never have happened.”



Dick Vincent

Eventually approved, the study ran from 1970 to 1972. The department stopped adding hatchery fish to a 4-mile stretch at Varney Bridge for three years and compared the trout population there to previous years. This pause in stocking wasn’t popular. “I couldn’t go into a public building without being yelled at,” Vincent told an MSU researcher in 2015.

But the study’s results soon silenced the critics. “By fall of 1971, wild trout numbers had increased 153 percent from the 1967-69 average,” Vincent told *Montana Outdoors* in 2004. “And by 1974—a few years after the study was done—the number of wild trout larger than 10 inches was 213 percent more than the stocking years.”

Vincent had also stocked a previously unstocked 1.4-mile stretch of O’Dell Creek, a Madison River tributary. “The wild trout population began declining,” said the biologist, dropping from 515 brown trout in 1967-69 to just 280 in 1972.

“We’d suspected that stocking was having a negative effect, but when we saw large trout numbers in the Varney Section triple and trout numbers in O’Dell cut in half, well that just blew us away,” Vincent says.

Biologists later learned that planting hatchery trout on top of wild trout results in “territorial chaos.” The stocked fish don’t play by the rules—don’t even know the rules—and disrupt the territorial hierarchy of wild populations. Disrupted by hatchery fish, wild trout were more vulnerable to ospreys, other predators, and anglers, which the dumb hatchery fish also had no clue how to avoid.



A previous study showed that because most stocked fish were eaten by ospreys and other predators, each hatchery-reared catchable trout landed by an angler cost the department \$2.50 (\$20 in today's dollars). Using those statistics and Vincent's study results, Whitney recommended the state stop stocking not only the Madison River but all Montana rivers and streams containing self-sustaining trout populations.

At first the proposal was widely denounced. "There was a huge fear that ending stocking would cause an economic disaster for the communities along the rivers," Vincent told *Montana Outdoors* in 2004. "We took a lot of heat on that."

But Whitney and other department leaders stayed steadfast to the science. In 1974 the Fish and Game Commission agreed and adopted a statewide policy that trout would only be stocked in lakes without wild populations.

On rivers, the department would continue to manage wild trout waters by advocating for adequate stream flows, underwater and streamside habitat, and public access.

"If you want to catch big wild fish," Vincent told *Montana Outdoors* in 2004, "then you need to fight for water and habitat, and that is what has happened. I don't know of a state where people have fought as hard for their rivers as they have here in Montana."

*Editor's Note: Dick Vincent retired in 2008 after 42 years with FWP, including serving his last decade as the department's whirling disease coordinator. He lives with his wife Twyla and two miniature dachshunds in Toston. ■*

—Tom Dickson, previous editor of *Montana Outdoors*



## WESLEY WOODGERD

*FWP launched an exceptional state parks system under his leadership.*

Not everyone would have the guts to reprimand a Montana governor for an accidental poaching incident, make him pay a \$300 fine, strip him of his big game hunting privileges for the rest of the hunting season, then talk to the press about it. But that's exactly what Wesley Woodgerd did in 1974 while serving as the director of the Montana Fish and Game Department after Governor Thomas Judge put his tag on a spike bull elk in an area only open for branch-antlered bulls.

Woodgerd later told the *Kalispell Daily Interlake* that the governor brought the elk to a check station and took full responsibility for the out-of-season harvest.

Woodgerd served as director from 1973 to 1977, but only after climbing through the ranks. He began with the department in 1948 as a trapper, eventually working his way across the state through various assignments to become regional supervisor in Glasgow. In 1965, he was appointed as the head of the newly created Parks Division in Helena.

Woodgerd assumed the parks position just as interest in protecting recreation resources was gaining momentum nationally. According to *A History of the Development of the State Park Idea*, written by Dave

Conklin, Woodgerd oversaw the creation of seven recreation zones that conformed with the Fish and Game districts (now known as FWP regions). Within these zones, park managers were hired and new public access sites developed, including fishing access sites and historic sites such as Bannack and the Madison Buffalo Jump.

From 1965 to 1975, Montana added 62 new sites and access areas to its park system, including several that caused Woodgerd to expand his definition of a park system.

These acquisitions included recreational waterways on the Missouri, Madison, and Yellowstone rivers. The department purchased a section of canyon on Belt Creek known as the Sluice Boxes, which came along with an old railroad grade that became the state's first designated recreation trail. Under Woodgerd's leadership, 36 miles of state recreation road were developed along the Missouri River near Craig and game ranges such as the Beartooth and Blacktail were established. By the time he became department director in 1973, the Montana state park system had grown from 10 parks in

**“Wes laid the modern groundwork for a successful state parks system that continues to pay dividends to this very day.”**

1953 to almost 200 parks, monuments, recreation areas, waterways, recreation roads and trails, and fishing access sites.

Woodgerd appointed Ron Holliday, who was just 31 years old at the time, to the state parks administrator position. Conklin described him as “a tall Texan...with enthusiasm and an affable manner.”

“I was privy to over a decade of up-close observation of Wes Woodgerd's management,” Holliday wrote in an email. “He clearly articulated the mission, tried his best to provide adequate resources to get the jobs done and delegated the authority for us to operate. Wes laid the modern groundwork for a successful state parks system that continues to pay dividends to this very day.” ■

—Peggy O'Neill, FWP outreach editor



Game wardens and agency members meet to discuss new training and techniques for wildlife management.

**1963** The Montana Legislature narrowly passes the **Stream Conservation Act**, the first such law in the nation.

In 1965, following reports by department fisheries biologists on streams damaged by channelization, dredging, and other human development, a permanent law, the renamed **Stream Preservation Act**, passes by an overwhelming margin.



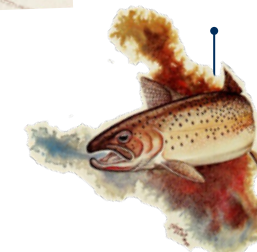
**1970** The department's **Recreation and Parks Division** begins hiring regional parks managers, caretakers, and seasonal help for the 156 parks, fishing access sites, and recreation areas around the state.



**1971** *Montana Outdoors* begins publication under the department's new Environment and Information Division. The division also creates a documentary film unit to promote state fish and wildlife conservation.



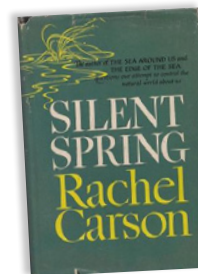
**1971** The mountain lion is given status as a game animal. Nine years earlier, the Fish and Game Commission had lifted the bounty on mountain lions that had been in effect since 1887.



**1974** After research on the Madison River and its tributaries found that stocking trout resulted in fewer trout than in unstocked stretches populated with wild trout, the department stops stocking trout in rivers and streams.

1979

## 1960s MILESTONES



**1962** Biologist Rachel Carson writes *Silent Spring*, documenting the harm of DDT and other chemicals to the environment and human health.



**1964** The federal **Wilderness Preservation Act** is signed into law to prohibit mining, oil and gas drilling, timber cutting, and other operations from designated pristine wilderness areas.



**1965** The Legislature transfers authority for state parks from the **Montana Highway Commission** to the **Fish and Game Department**. With this new responsibility comes a substantial funding source from the federal **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)**.



**1972** Montana mandates wearing “hunter orange” for big game hunters and adopts a new state constitution enshrining residents' right “to a clean and healthful environment.”

**1975** The department creates a **Nongame Wildlife Program**, to protect and conserve the state's nearly 700 nongame wildlife species.

**1979** The Montana Department of Fish and Game is renamed **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**.



**1970** First **Earth Day** is observed, marking the birth of the environmental movement, as well as establishment of the **Environmental Protection Agency**.

**1972** Congress passes the **Clean Water Act** to regulate water pollution in the nation's waters, and the **EPA bans the use of DDT**, proven to cause eggshell thinning in bald eagles, peregrine falcons, ospreys, and other birds.

**1973** Congress enacts the **U.S. Endangered Species Act**.



## NATIONAL CONSERVATION MILESTONES



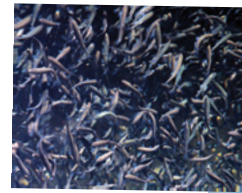
## ASK FIRST!! to Hunt & Fish on Private Land



**1987**  
FWP produces its first **warmwater fish management plan**. By the end of the decade, the agency stocks more than 36 million walleye, northern pike, largemouth bass, and other species in Montana's lakes and reservoirs each year.

This same year, Montana House Bill 526 sets aside a portion of hunting license revenue for habitat protection through conservation easements, leases, and land acquisition. Efforts to tie together wildlife habitat acquisition, the state waterfowl stamp program, the bighorn sheep and moose license auctions, and other Department land activities later become the **Habitat Montana** program.

**1985**  
FWP creates a **Landowner/Sportsman Program** and hires a coordinator to work with local committees made up of ranchers, farmers, hunters, and others. The agency also launches the **Block Management Program**, through which participating landowners provide public hunting access in exchange for help from FWP managing hunting areas such as installing parking areas and signs. The popular program is expanded in 1996.



**1991**  
A separate **bowhunter education course** becomes mandatory for all first-time bowhunters.

**1992**  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service bans grizzly hunting in Montana.



**1999**  
Chronic wasting disease is detected in a captive elk herd near Philipsburg, CWD's first appearance in Montana.



**2001**  
FWP introduces its **Electronic Licensing System** and begins tracking applicants through an Automated Licensing System (ALS).



**2005**  
FWP launches its first **official website**.



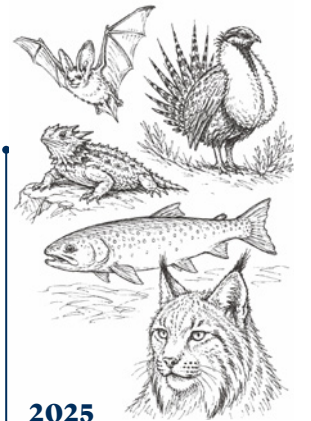
**2009**  
Montana Legislature passes the **Bridge Access Law**, stating that the public may access streams from county or public bridges. The law is challenged but upheld in the Montana Supreme Court in 2014.



**2022**  
Estimated size of the GYE grizzly population: **1,100**. Estimated size of the NCDE grizzly bear population: **1,200**.

**2023**  
FWP's State Parks Division is incorporated into a new **Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division**, which now also includes wildlife management areas and fishing access sites.

**2024**  
Montana's estimated elk population: **150,000**.



**2025**  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks releases its latest **State Wildlife Action Plan**, required for federal funding through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. It identifies **52** Habitats of Greatest Conservation Need, **375** Species of Greatest Conservation Need, and **98** Species of Greatest Information Need.

## 1980s MILESTONES



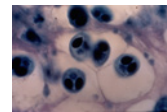
**1985**  
FWP establishes **TIP-MONT**, a toll-free hotline for reporting illegal activities, and the Legislature passes the **Stream Access Act**, which confirms the right to recreate within the ordinary high-water marks of all navigable streams and rivers in Montana. The act is later challenged several times but is always upheld by various courts.



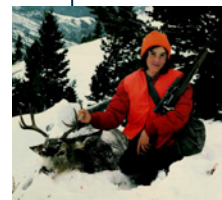
**1988**  
FWP forms a covert unit officially known as the **Criminal Investigation Section (CIS)** to deal with escalating serial poaching cases.

**1993**  
A new **Private Land/Public Wildlife Advisory Council** is formed comprising hunters, landowners, outfitters, and legislators.

**1994**  
Whirling disease is detected in the Madison River.



**1994**  
FWP sponsors the state's first **Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW)** workshop. Held annually in outdoor settings, the workshops teach women new skills (or hone existing ones) including archery, flyfishing, canoeing, shooting, and outdoor survival.



**1995-1996**  
**Gray wolves are reintroduced** into Yellowstone National Park and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness of central Idaho, 68 in total. By 2024, an estimated 500 wolves live in the Greater Yellowstone Area.



**1999**  
Having recovered since the DDT ban 27 years earlier, the **peregrine falcon is removed from the endangered species list**, marking a major success for the ESA and the ban on DDT.



**2007**  
The **bald eagle**, the national symbol, is removed from the **list of endangered and threatened species** after a dramatic population recovery. Two years later, brown pelicans are determined to have recovered as a species, and in 2016, Louisiana black bears are removed from the list of endangered and threatened species.



**2018**  
**Gray wolves** in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho are removed from the endangered species list.

**2017**  
FWP modernizes its **logo** while retaining the features of the grizzly bear head drawing, which dates from the department's original 1943 logo.

**2026**  
FWP publishes the **2026-2030 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)**, "From Peaks to Prairies: Montana's Outdoor Recreation Roadmap." The plan sets a five-year strategy for recreation priorities and funding, and maintains the state's eligibility for Land and Water Conservation Fund grants.

