

THANK YOU, MR. LINCOLN

Recently, FWP acquired a remarkable piece of property known as the Lincoln Ranch. Located 70 miles northwest of Great Falls, the ranch contains 7,540 contiguous acres along 14 miles of the Marias River. Gary Olson, FWP wildlife biologist in Conrad, says the property is the largest undeveloped tract of riparian habitat on the Marias River and one of the largest in the region. You can float from one end to the other and not see a single power line, pivot sprinkler, or farmstead. It's the same landscape Meriwether Lewis saw two centuries ago. In fact, Captain Lewis actually traversed the northern part of the ranch. He and his crew fled across the property in July 1806 after a fight with a band of Blackfeet warriors.

In addition to its rich history, the Lincoln Ranch contains oxbow wetlands, sagebrush grasslands, and a river bottom cottonwood gallery. This multi-layered plant community provides a wide range of habitats for waterfowl, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pheasants, Hungarian partridge, sharp-tailed grouse, raptors, and songbirds. Because of its high-quality habitat, the land likely also contains many wildlife species in greatest need of conservation, such as olive-sided flycatchers, snapping turtles, and spotted bats. The river holds burbot, northern pike, yellow perch, channel catfish, and walleye year-round, and trout in cooler months. And as you can see from the photo at right, the scenery is magnificent.

FWP aims to maintain the property's wonderful natural state. We'll provide public access, but only with the least disruption to the landscape as possible. We plan to create a small state park campground, with a visitor contact station, interpretive signs, hiking trails, and a boat ramp. Any of these proposed developments would first require additional environmental assessments and public review.

How the ranch came into public ownership is quite a story. Charlie Lincoln, a local bachelor rancher and wildlife enthusiast, died in 2007. In his estate, he bequeathed his ranch to the Catholic Diocese of Helena with the stipulation that if the Diocese did not desire to hold the property in fee, FWP would be given "the right of

first refusal" to meet the highest offer. In other words, the department could match the highest bid and acquire the property.

Earlier this year, the Diocese chose not to hold the property in fee, and the estate put the ranch up for bid. The highest bid came in at \$7.6 million, slightly above the appraised value of \$7.38 million. That seems like a lot of money, but consider that riverside habitat is becoming increasingly rare because of the high value that developers place on these areas for new home sites. What's more, despite mortgage woes elsewhere in the United States, prices for scenic, wildlife-rich ranches, often called "amenity properties," continue to escalate in Montana.



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Both the FWP Commission and the state Land Board have approved the purchase price of \$7.6 million. Most of the money for the acquisition comes from the Habitat Montana Program, which uses hunting license fees to conserve critical wildlife habitat through acquisitions and conservation easements. The remainder was funded by the Governor's Access Montana Initiative.

I never knew Charlie Lincoln, but he must have been one smart fellow. He obviously cared deeply about both his church and the tremendous wildlife values of his ranch. The way he structured his will enabled him to leave the value of the land to the Diocese, while ensuring that the historically significant and wildlife-rich property itself reverted to public ownership—and will stay that way in perpetuity.

—M. JEFF HAGENER, Director, Montana FWP

NATURAL WONDERS
ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

Q. What's the difference between a federally endangered species, such as the pallid sturgeon, and a federally threatened species, such as the Canada lynx?

A. An endangered species is in danger of extinction throughout all or most of its range. A threatened species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or most of its range.

Q. How do you tell a crow from a raven?

A. If you see a big, black bird in town or around your house, it's probably a crow. Ravens don't generally tolerate humans and are more likely to be found in forests. Ravens

are also bigger, about 2 feet tall with a 4.5-foot wingspan (the size of a red-tailed hawk). Crows are only about 1.5 feet tall and have a 3-foot wingspan (closer to the size of a magpie). Also, when flying, the crow's tail is rounded, while the raven's is wedge-shaped (forming a V, as found in the bird's name). Another difference: Ravens soar, but crows don't.

