



44

Number of boats, out of more than 70,000 checked, that FWP Aquatic Invasive Species Program check station crews found carrying invasive zebra and quagga mussels in 2022, the greatest number since inspections began in 2015. All mussels were removed, and the boats were thoroughly decontaminated before being allowed to continue traveling.



CONSERVATION

RAWA nears the finish line

As this issue of *Montana Outdoors* went to press in mid-October, the Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) was poised to reach the Senate floor for a vote with expected strong bipartisan support. The House version of RAWA passed 231-190 in June.

The landmark bipartisan legislation will provide a total of \$1.39 billion each year for states, territories, and tribes to protect and restore habitats for species of greatest conservation concern across the United States.

RAWA, which grew out of a 2014 citizen panel convened by Bass Pro Shops founder John Morris and former Wyoming governor Dave Freudenthal, would solve a problem that has been vexing wildlife agencies for decades: how to fund nongame wildlife conservation. Most wildlife agencies get their revenue from hunting and fishing license fees and federal excise taxes (the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson acts) on guns, ammo, fishing gear, and boat fuel. The agencies' work, in turn, benefits primarily game species.

The management of nongame fish and wildlife species—which in Montana outnumber game species five to one (440 to 88)—receives just a fraction of what goes into managing game animals. There is no equivalent federal excise tax on mountain bikes, camping gear, kayaks, hiking boots, binoculars, birdseed, and other general outdoor recreation items to generate nongame

conservation funding. Instead, nongame management is funded mainly by the federal State Wildlife Grant Program using intermittent revenue from offshore oil and gas leases.

RAWA includes \$750 million for a new Endangered Species Recovery and Habitat Conservation Legacy Fund, dedicated to getting species off the federal endangered species list. The money would go to developing recovery plans for threatened and endangered species, conserving critical habitat on private land, and securing voluntary conservation agreements.

RAWA spending would be guided by federally approved State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP). Montana's first SWAP was produced in 2006 and updated in 2015. The 400-plus-page document identifies the ecological communities most requiring conservation (including intermountain and prairie rivers and streams, prairie wetlands, sagebrush-steppe grasslands, and mountain grasslands) and the fish and wildlife species in greatest conservation need (such as the pallid sturgeon, hoary bat, Canada lynx, fisher, burrowing owl, and sage-grouse).

"If RAWA passes, and things look encouraging right now, it would result in unprecedented funding available to Montana for carrying out our State Wildlife Action Plan," says Hank Worsech, FWP director. "It would also conserve vital habitats used by those species and by the people who live in and recreate across Montana." ■



What duck is this? Hint: "baldpate."

Know your ducks

Waterfowl season in Montana is under way until January 5 or January 13, depending on where you hunt (consult the 2022 migratory bird regulations booklet). To avoid illegally shooting the wrong bird, hunters need to identify duck species and sex when the waterfowl are flying past or overhead. To help, *Montana Outdoors* has produced a duck ID guide. View it here:



MONTANA STATE PARKS

Miffy's state park adventure

Four-year-old Lulu and her parents were a day's drive from Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park when they realized one of their family members was missing.

Miffy—a blue stuffed bunny and Lulu's best friend—had been accidentally left behind. By this time the Washington family was in northern Wyoming, and Lulu was heartbroken. Her mom, Reagan, called the state park and left a voicemail, hoping for the best.

The next morning, a park employee replied with a text message: Miffy had been found! Reagan texted back that the family would return in a week to pick up the beloved bunny. To put young Lulu's mind at ease, park ranger Ramona Radonish, administrative assistant Lorie Steerman, assistant park manager Katherine Clement, and maintenance worker Brian Giordano took Miffy on adventures in the park and sent photos to the family each day.

Miffy completed the park's activity booklet to become a full-fledged junior ranger. She learned about rattlesnakes, went bird watching, helped with grounds-keeping (while riding on the mower), and took occasional naps to rest up for further exploits. After a week, Lulu and Miffy were reunited on the family's return journey to Washington.

Reagan later emailed FWP: "The effort and kindness of the park employees was ABOVE AND BEYOND. It was incredibly heartwarming and kind, and helped our daughter get through our trip. We ultimately looped back to the caverns and were able to meet these amazing rangers and thank them." ■



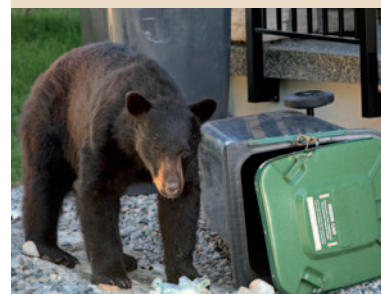
Counterclockwise from bottom left: Assistant park manager Katherine Clement swears Miffy in as a junior ranger; helping maintenance worker Brian Giordano clean a restroom; looking for raptors with park ranger Ramona Radonish; taking a well-deserved rest after a long day of activities.



PHOTOS: MONTANA STATE PARKS

WESTERN MONTANA'S BEAR CRISIS

No strangers to western Montana towns and cities, black and grizzly bears appeared in unprecedented numbers this past summer due to a weak wild berry crop that drove them from mountains into lowlands in search of food. Justine Vallieres, FWP bear management specialist in Kalispell, told reporters in late September she had already received more than 550



Deprived of huckleberries and other wild fruits because of drought conditions, bears moved into western Montana towns in search of food and garbage to build fat reserves for winter hibernation.

calls in 2022 from residents and communities in northwestern Montana concerned about bears raiding garbage bins, fruit trees, porches, and chicken coops. "And it's only going to get worse between now and hibernation," she said.

Jamie Jonkel, FWP bear management specialist in Missoula, called the current natural food conditions for bears a "crisis" that was creating dangerous situations where the large carnivores were increasingly entering residential areas. "Bears trying to put on fat for hibernation are getting desperate for calories," he said.

FWP bear specialists urged residents and communities to redouble efforts to keep food and garbage—including pet food and livestock feed—indoors where bears can't get at the attractants. "Otherwise it may mean we have to capture and kill bears for human safety concerns," Vallieres said. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MIKE MORAN ILLUSTRATION; LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; SHUTTERSTOCK