

FALL/WINTER 2023

# VIEW *Points*



Photo: Ken Ringer



**FLATHEAD  
LAND TRUST**  
Conserving Our Legacy of Land and Water

*"Do unto ecosystems as you would have them do unto you." – Doug Chadwick, from Four-Fifths a Grizzly.*



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**OUR MISSION**

Flathead Land Trust is dedicated to the conservation of northwest Montana's land and water legacy through voluntary agreements with private landowners



# A Message FROM OUR NEW PRESIDENT



Greetings friends and supporters of Flathead Land Trust,

As I write this note, sunlight is gleaming through the last of the fluttering aspen leaves still hanging on to their increasingly barren branches. Inviting as the sunlight is, when I step outside the bitter chill of the air reminds me more of late November than late October. Although we all saw it coming in the surprisingly accurate weather forecast, most folks I talk to have still been somewhat

shocked by and unprepared for this cold portent of winter. Maybe we should all have considered Santa and elf costumes for Halloween and pretended it was Christmas?

For the many of you whom I have not met, I would like to introduce myself as the current board president, following in the highly capable footsteps of Bill Corwin. It has been an honor to serve on the board of Flathead Land Trust for the last several years and I am now doing my best to support the staff, board and other committee members of Flathead Land Trust in this current role. This is my first newsletter article and it is a pleasure to greet you all with this fall salutation!

Regarding the great work of Flathead Land Trust in 2023, all I can say is WOW!! Following on the heels of the Badrock Canyon conservation project and the new Somers Beach State Park, Flathead Land Trust wasted no time jumping into conservation and trail development at the new Harrell Forest. I hope that many of you have had a chance to hike or bike the family-friendly trails and enjoy this incredible property just outside of Bigfork.

Being the incredible multi-taskers that they are, Paul and staff are also closing in on the requisite fundraising to conserve the long-time public asset of the Owen Sowerwine property. Although the community has had the benefit of enjoying Owen Sowerwine for decades, it has not been permanently protected. This is due to the fact that it is owned by the state of Montana for the purpose of raising money for schools. By raising enough funds to place a conservation easement on the property, Flathead Land Trust, along with partners the Flathead Lakers and Flathead Audubon, will ensure that this property can be a haven for wildlife and nature lovers forever.

The incredible generosity of our conservation community has once again been demonstrated through the Whitefish Community Foundations' Great Fish Community Challenge. Flathead Land Trust raised over \$100,000 to continue supporting incredible conservation in the Flathead Valley!

Thank you for the opportunity to serve this outstanding organization! If anyone would ever like to visit or write to me directly, please shoot an email to greg@forestation.com. I am looking forward to meeting many more of Flathead Land Trust's members and supporters during my term.

Stay warm! With gratitude,



Greg Gunderson, Board President

Diamond B Conservation Easement

# In Memory of Dean Marsh

By Paul Travis, Executive Director

Recently, we lost a great friend and champion of conservation, Dean Marsh. I first met Dean years ago when we both worked at Montana Academy, a therapeutic boarding school for adolescents near Marion. Dean dedicated many years to educating young people and helping them find their way in life before he left the school several years ago. Whether at work or not, Dean shared his sincerity, patience, positivity and gentle humor with many friends and young people, mostly while enjoying the outdoors. He loved being asked about his most recent, past or upcoming outdoor adventure and knew he was fortunate to have made a life in this corner of Montana where nature is so accessible and abundant. He also understood the value of conserving natural areas for future generations to enjoy and protect.

Several years ago, when Flathead Land Trust was beginning to raise money for the Bad Rock Canyon Conservation project, Dean asked me about touring the property. On our first hike in what is now the conserved Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area, he told me he wanted to do something that would make a lasting conservation difference. It was fall and the larch and cottonwoods were at their peak colors; it was a perfect day to enjoy this beautiful wild place a stone's throw from Columbia Falls. At the end of our hike, Dean committed his support with a generous donation to help purchase and conserve the property. This was the gift that planted the seed and helped build support from many other donors and foundations. The following spring, he made another donation to leverage more support through a matching challenge. Dean's contributions helped build fundraising



Dean Marsh at Bad Rock Canyon in fall of 2021

momentum; over 260 donors eventually committed to help make the Bad Rock Canyon Conservation project a reality. Anyone who knows the value of saving ecologically significant natural areas like the Bad Rock Canyon WMA would agree that Dean did make a large and lasting impact. We are grateful to him for leaving this legacy of conservation and inspiring us with his love of the natural world.

## Owen Sowerwine Update

We continue to make progress on the Owen Sowerwine project. Although our fundraising goal for the purchased conservation easement for the project increased after receiving the final appraisal from \$775,000 to \$1,055,000, we have less than \$125,000 left to raise. Thanks so much to those who helped us meet the \$100,000 Community Challenge Match this summer and gave through the Great Fish Community Challenge this fall, which contributed \$40,000 for the Owen Sowerwine project. We have applied for a large grant that, if received, would fulfill our funding needs - we learn the results regarding this grant in late November. In December, the proposed conservation easement will go before the State Land Board, from whom approval is needed. If all goes well, we hope to close on the project by March 2024.



Photo: Eric Witts, Flathead Lakers





Photo Courtesy of GravityShots.com



Photo: Greg Johnson



Photo: NPS

# Keeping it Connected

## Protecting a Vital River Corridor

Imagine a free flowing, crystal-clear river system fed by pristine mountain snowfields and a labyrinth of streams and tributaries. Not only water flows through this corridor; wildlife also courses through this riparian passageway searching for food, water, mates and places to call home. Now imagine a female grizzly bear with three cubs meandering in and out of the Owen Sowerwine area along the river, as they did this past summer. They have miles of uninterrupted riverine habitat to explore, providing plentiful resources. Imagine a bull trout or westslope cutthroat trout swimming through miles of river to reach their natal streams to spawn. Populations of native trout are still able to complete their migratory life cycles here. Farmers are farming along the river, anglers are fishing, boaters are floating. These idyllic scenes are not just pipe dreams, these describe the Flathead River corridor.

The Flathead River, originating in the Canadian Rockies and emptying into Flathead Lake after a nearly 160-mile journey, flows through the heart of the Flathead Valley. It is essential to our health and wellbeing. This watershed is not only important for wildlife, but also for clean water,

recreation, tourism, agriculture and our connection to the landscape. It supports our Montana way of life.

As part of a vast interconnected landscape, protecting this area is vital. Enveloped within a 2,000-mile stretch of the Continental Divide ecosystem, spanning from the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the Yukon Territory, it is part of one of the last large-scale, relatively intact, habitat continuums in North America still containing most of its native species.

While riparian areas and wetlands constitute only three to four percent of the landscape in Montana, over 75% of our wildlife depend on these habitats. Realizing the importance of conserving this riverine landscape, the Flathead River to Lake Initiative; a consortium of conservation organizations, landowners and governmental and tribal agencies; coalesced at the turn of the millennium to protect and restore this stunning area. Flathead Land Trust has been a major partner in this effort to conserve and enhance critical fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, prime farmlands and our traditional rural and scenic character. Since then, partners have protected over 6,700 acres of critical lands, adding to a conservation network of nearly

13,000 acres of private and publicly protected land along 50 miles of the Flathead River and north shore of Flathead Lake.

It takes resources to save resources. Projects of this scale require support, often at the scale that is more difficult for small local land trusts to secure. Along with many supporters, the Heart of the Rockies Initiative has been crucial in facilitating recent key conservation projects along the Flathead River. Through their "Keep It Connected" program, a plan for strategically protecting land crucial to retaining remaining wildlife connectivity, they contributed over \$375,000 to help conserve Bad Rock Canyon and Owen Sowerwine, two of the largest intact parcels of river bottom in the Flathead River corridor. They also helped fund a River to Lake Initiative coordinator position and research on critical conservation areas. The Heart of the Rockies' Keep It Connected program has been vital in preserving landscape-wide connectivity in the Rocky Mountain west, raising over \$11 million and protecting 200,000 acres since its inception in 2021.

**“The Rocky Mountain West is a geography of hope and opportunity”**  
*—Heart of the Rockies Initiative*

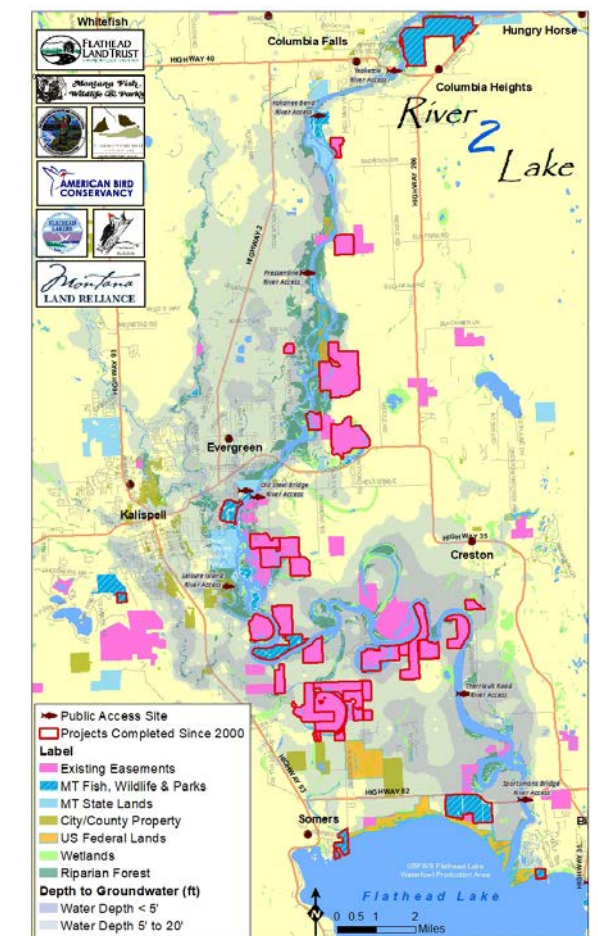
This, however, is only the beginning. There are gaps in the conservation network along the Flathead River. Imagine if high-density housing or industries sprouted up in those open areas, potentially leaking pollutants into the shallow aquifer that feeds the entire system. There is literally a river flowing beneath the Flathead River. The water table in this underlying river frequently flows less than five feet below the surface, often extending for miles beyond the riverbed. Our conservation network has protected 49% of the lands overlying shallow groundwater in the Flathead River corridor, but its stellar water quality is still threatened.

The floodplain of the Flathead River ought to remain intact, yet there continues to be development pressure in many of these areas. The beauty and tranquility of the Flathead River corridor that attracts many of us to enjoy it also is at high risk of conversion to residential or commercial areas. This development pressure is one of the many reasons why this area remains

a key focus for the Flathead River to Lake Initiative for future conservation efforts. As the Flathead Valley grows, development is necessary, but we must balance it with protecting the values we cherish about this amazing place we call home.

The course of this river could shape the course of our future. It is our hope that, generations from now, the braided river and tributaries continue to flow uninterrupted through a thriving ecosystem. We hope that our children's children will be able to see the cubs of the cubs of that grizzly bear at Owen Sowerwine meandering for miles as native trout swim through the glorious Flathead River.

To learn more and help conserve critical land along the Flathead River, visit [keepitconnected.org](http://keepitconnected.org), [flatheadrivertolake.org](http://flatheadrivertolake.org), or donate to Flathead Land Trust at [flatheadlandtrust.org](http://flatheadlandtrust.org).





# SUMMER AND FALL *Outreach & Fundraising*

This year, we were fortunate to participate in the **Great Fish Community Challenge** - through the Whitefish Community Foundation - in another record breaking year. A whopping \$6,262,929 was raised for 77 Flathead Valley nonprofits in the fundraising campaign from August 10 - September 15, including matching and incentive grants. Flathead Land Trust was honored to be a part of this impressive campaign that helps so many local organizations work for the betterment of Northwest Montana.

Nearly \$90,000 was raised for Flathead Land Trust through the support of over 200 donors. At the Great Fish Awards Ceremony on October 24th, we also received a \$12,650 matching grant from the Whitefish Community Foundation's Circle of Giving donors, for a **total raised of \$102,324**. The first \$40,000 of these funds will help fund the **Owen Sowerwine Conservation Project**. The additional funds will help implement effective land conservation strategies throughout the Flathead Valley. It will help save our most important fish and wildlife habitat and high quality farmland, while also providing new opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Every year, the impact the Great Fish has on our ability to do more of this vital work to conserve places that matter in this amazing landscape grows exponentially. We are so grateful to all the donors, as well as to Whitefish Community Foundation and The Circle of Giving, who have made this possible!

On September 13th, we hosted over 95 attendees at the beautiful Diamond B for our annual event, **The Land Affair**. Not only was it a perfect early fall evening where we got to catch up and celebrate with our good friends and supporters, but we also raised **over \$17,000** for conservation of our open spaces and



The Land Affair at Diamond B in mid-September

wild places in northwest Montana. The location was quite fitting as the venue, enveloped by the Flathead River, lies on land conserved with a Flathead Land Trust conservation easement. Many thanks to all who attended, donated and enjoyed the evening with us. A special thanks to Whitefish Credit Union, Glacier Bank, First Montana Bank and all of our event sponsors; as well as Emily and Josiah Baer at Diamond B Weddings, Cartwright Catering, and Randy Marshall, who provided live music.

In May and July, Flathead Land Trust, with partners Flathead Audubon and the Flathead Lakers, hosted **16 public tours of the Owen Sowerwine property** in order to build support for purchasing a conservation easement of the 405-acre property. Over 150 people attended the tours, which included hikes of the mainland along the Stillwater



Kayak tour of Owen Sowerwine along the Stillwater River in late July



Bird Education Program 8th Grade Evergreen Jr. High at Owen Sowerwine

(Continued from page 6)

River and several kayak tours. The kayak tours presented a unique view of the property from the water, highlighting its bird, wildlife and ecological value of the property. In addition, 8th graders from Evergreen Jr. High visited Owen Sowerwine and 7th graders from West Valley and Bigfork middle schools visited West Valley Wetlands as part of a Bird Education Program in partnership with Flathead Audubon. These school visits are part of our commitment to inspiring future generations to be stewards of our natural wonders.

With our partners the Trust for Public Land, we helped host the **grand opening of the Harrell Forest Community**

**Trails** on September 22nd in conjunction with Trust for Public Land's 50th anniversary celebration. The event was attended by approximately 140 people who enjoyed live music and heard from the project partners on how this incredible conservation and recreation project came to fruition. In her remarks to attendees, Cindy Harrell Horn shared the personal significance of the project as a legacy to the Harrell name. Alan Horn and Cindy Harrell Horn made the dream of the Harrell Forest Community Trails possible through their generous land donation to The Trust for Public Land in 2020. Immense gratitude to the Horn's and our many project partners and funders for making it all possible!

## Harrell Forest Community Trails: *A Collaborative Vision Comes to Life*

Along with our partners, Trust for Public Land and Montana Land Reliance, we are delighted to announce the opening of the Harrell Forest Community Trails, just outside of Bigfork. This 238-acre oasis, formerly proposed as a development site, is now permanently protected and open for the enjoyment of residents and visitors alike. The new trail system offers stacked loops for up to 7-mile round trip treks, awe-inspiring vistas overlooking Flathead Lake, the Swan River and the Swan Mountain Range, and a trailhead with amenities.

The new trail system is open from sunrise to sunset. Please enjoy the trails responsibly and follow the rules and trail etiquette, including keeping your dogs on a leash, picking up after your pets, respecting adjacent private property and refraining from cutting switchbacks or creating new trails. Horseback riding is not allowed on the property, but we hope you will enjoy exploring the trails by foot or on bike.

### Would you like to be a Trail Ambassador?

Please contact us at [info@flatheadlandtrust.org](mailto:info@flatheadlandtrust.org) if you would like to help be the eyes and ears out on the trails.



Harrell Forest kiosk: design by Jim Atkinson of J Designs, additional engineering by Eclipse Engineering, built by JD Thinning, sign and map design by Highline Design, project management by Forestation.







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Conserving Our Legacy of Land and Water

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*Please Join Us!*

**MEMBER & PARTNER APPRECIATION  
YEAR-END CELEBRATION -  
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14 at 6:00 PM**

Our donors and supporters are the lifeblood of Flathead Land Trust. We would like to honor you all as we celebrate another phenomenal year of community-based conservation, which would not be possible without your support. We will have a delicious selection of food and drinks as we celebrate our successes of 2023 and plans for 2024. We're looking forward to seeing you there!

Please contact Paul at [ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org](mailto:ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org) or 406-752-8293 to RSVP and for more details.