FALL/WINTER 2026

VIEW Points



Bear swimming in the Stillwater River, photo by Brigit Rooney

FLATHEAD LAND TRUST
Conserving Our Legacy of Land and Water

"You realize that, at any moment, there could be an animal watching you - and there probably is"
– Brigit Rooney

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Conserving Our Legacy of Land and Water

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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

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Reflections on the Journey:
Words from Our Outgoing Board President



Whoosh! The two years of my term as board president have seemingly passed in a flash. As I pause for reflection, what an amazing trajectory the Flathead Land Trust is on, as we today build on the strong principles, relationships, stewardship and community support that have been hallmarks of the organization from its foundations just over forty years ago.

In celebrating the 40th Anniversary with the summer fete in 2025, we heard remarks and recollections from many of our earlier and long-term supporters, from friends and donors, to other non-profit partners, to conservation easement holders. In the late summer of 2026, for those who followed Flathead Land Trust's Great Fish Community Challenge social media campaign, you'll be familiar with the "Five Weeks/Five Decades of Conservation" approach, with a weekly recap of the major accomplishments across all five decades of Flathead Land Trust's history. For those who missed it, I highly recommend a scroll through these posts, not only for the inspiring accounts of projects past, but also for the exquisite photography!

These two opportunities to get the "bigger picture" of Flathead Land Trust's remarkable journey, one in each year of my presidential term, have given me a renewed appreciation for each individual action that contributes to our collective accomplishments. It truly is a case of "connect the dots." A Flathead Land Trust staff or board member, or supporter, might have a conversation with a friend, neighbor, or landowner, which then plants the seeds for anything from becoming a supporting member, to putting a beloved property under a protective conservation easement.

In its fifth decade now, the tapestry created by all of these connections – of people, of landscape, of conservation values and wildlife corridors, of shared concerns and interests – is now even more beautifully vibrant and strong. I hope you will all join me in taking a moment to appreciate, and to be proud of, what we have collectively created.

And then: Onwards! There is so very much to anticipate in the Flathead Land Trust's upcoming programming and easement work, as you'll see in this newsletter. Thank you all, for all you do for Flathead Land Trust.

Gratefully,

Margaret Notley,
FLT Board President



Protecting the Stillwater: Rooney Family Conserves a 57-Acre Wildlife Haven

On a recent morning at the newly protected Rooney property, a herd of 27 elk grazed on fresh vegetation along the edge of a restored pond. Calves wandered right up to the window as Melodye Rooney and a friend cooked breakfast. While wildlife sightings are common along this meandering stretch of the Stillwater River, seeing a herd this size stick around for breakfast was special. It's precisely this kind of magic that makes conservation so rewarding, knowing that future generations will sit in this same kitchen and enjoy the exact same view.



Neighbor Pat Nissen, who protected his land to the north with a Flathead Land Trust conservation easement, spotted a herd of 30 elk the previous day. He tracked them across the adjacent Cornell property (another Flathead Land Trust easement) before they settled onto the Rooneys' land. Together, this trio of contiguous conservation easements creates a safe haven for wildlife moving between the surrounding U.S. Forest Service and Stillwater State Forest lands.

From the beginning, the land's value as a sanctuary was obvious. On his very first site visit, Land Protection Specialist Ryan Hunter spotted a bear swimming in the Stillwater River just below the house.

Deep Roots and Wildlife Stewardship

Through the vision and generosity of Sean and Melodye Rooney, their vital 57 acres were permanently conserved in mid-September. The easement secures a continuous stretch of open space, safeguarding critical movement pathways and thriving habitat.

The Rooney family's connection to the Flathead Valley spans generations. It began with Sean's grandfather, who homesteaded near Cut Bank before moving to Whitefish to work for the Great Northern Railway. Sean's father traveled the globe throughout his career but eventually returned to his beloved Flathead Valley to teach English and geology at Flathead Valley Community College. Following in those adventurous footsteps, Sean and Melodye worked internationally, living and raising their family in the Netherlands, Venezuela, Dubai and Argentina, before returning to purchase the property west of Whitefish with Sean's parents in 2003 and eventually making it their year-round home.

Protecting Habitat and Water Quality

Over the years, the family has actively enhanced the land's ecological health, including a 2025 project to restore a pond and wetland habitat. They consistently document the species moving through the corridor using camera traps. The property serves as an official study site for *Snapshot USA*, Smithsonian's nationwide mammal survey coordinated locally by Sean and Melodye's daughter, Brigit (learn more about Brigit and Snapshot USA on pages 4 - 5) .

The property features nearly a mile of Stillwater River frontage, offering prime wildlife habitat of rich riparian forests and shrublands, emergent wetlands and 20 acres of productive hayfields. These permanently protected features support species ranging from grizzly bears, wolves, and moose to bald eagles and river otters. The wetlands and river frontage help preserve water quality.

By keeping the land intact and preventing future subdivision, the Rooney family ensures that this vibrant landscape remains undeveloped, allowing local wildlife and agriculture to thrive in perpetuity.

> *"Our family and friends have been fortunate to enjoy and learn from the wildlife and nature on our property. We are pleased to know that this piece of the Stillwater River corridor will be protected from development through Flathead Land Trust."*
>
> -Melodye Rooney

A Sense of Place: HOW CAMERA TRAPS AND FAMILY ROOTS INSPIRED CONSERVATION ON THE STILLWATER RIVER







Ever since Brigit Rooney was nine years old, she spent her summers on her family's property along the Stillwater River west of Whitefish. Because Brigit and her brother attended school abroad and grew up internationally, her parents, Sean and Melodye, wanted to anchor them with a true sense of place in the States. Part of building that connection meant becoming intimate with the abundant wildlife that frequented this riverfront haven. Inspired by the landscape and magnificent fauna, Brigit headed off to pursue her passion, earning a master's degree in wildlife biology with a thesis focused on African elephant behavior.

Much like the species they study, a wildlife biologist's career is often defined by constant movement. It wasn't until the pandemic hit—when Brigit was unable to return to Argentina, where she and her family were then living—that her travels paused. For the first time, she settled in long-term at the family's "River Trail" property in Montana, living there on her own.

Already an avid photographer, Brigit was captivated when she read an article about the Smithsonian Institution's *Snapshot USA* program. Before long, she reached out to project organizers and began setting up camera traps across her family's land.

The images were nothing short of striking. Beyond revealing the extraordinary variety of species utilizing the property, especially along the riverbank, the photos captured intimate behaviors: animals hunting, swimming, and even appearing to play. Her trail cameras documented black bears, elk, white-tailed deer, mountain lions, mink, beavers, raccoons, skunks, river otters, coyotes, wolves, badgers, and even flying squirrels and hawks.

Perhaps most impactful was discovering just how ubiquitous, and close, wildlife could be at any given moment. In mid-July 2020, a camera caught Brigit walking along a trail. Just nine minutes later, a mountain lion appeared in the exact same spot, completely unbeknownst to her.

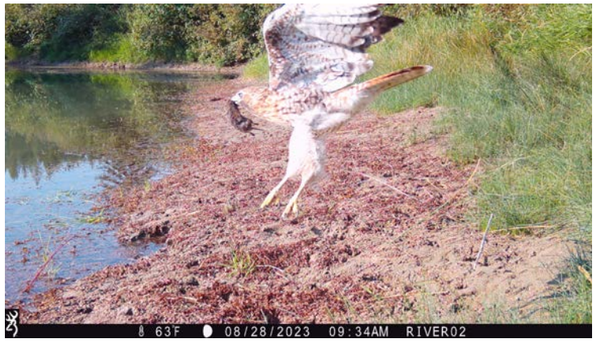
> "You realize that, at any moment, there could be an animal watching you... and there probably is."
>
> – Brigit Rooney

Seeing the diverse creatures that call this special landscape home helped inspire Sean and Melodye to permanently protect the property, a conservation dream that officially came true this fall.

Brigit's camera trapping work on the Stillwater also launched her next career chapter. In the fall of 2022, she joined *Snapshot USA* as Survey Coordinator, describing her core role as "wrangling people and data." Today, she serves as Program Manager for the nationwide program, overseeing an annual collaborative effort between wildlife professionals and community scientists across the United States to survey mammal populations using standardized camera-trap protocols.

With Brigit now based on the East Coast, Sean has enthusiastically carried on the tradition, keeping a keen eye on the property's camera traps. It is a daily reminder of why this quiet stretch of the Stillwater River was so deeply worth protecting for generations to come.





The Smithsonian Institute's Snapshot USA

★ **The Mission:** A nationwide survey tracking how mammal populations respond to land use, habitat, and climate changes over time.

★ **Scope & Impact:** Launched in 2019, partnering with 250+ collaborators across all 50 states and Puerto Rico to survey 401 unique camera arrays.

★ **By the Numbers:** Over 155 mammal species and 302 bird species recorded to date.

★ **2025 Milestones**: 200+ collaborators surveyed 226 camera arrays across 49 states and Puerto Rico.

★ **Core Requirement:** Deploy 8+ un-baited motion cameras (≥200 m apart) each September to October and upload/identify images via the online platform ***Wildlife Insights***.

★ **Collaborative Reward:** All participating organizations are listed as co-authors on annual published data papers.

★ **Learn More:** Access the Smithsonian Institute's *Snapshot USA* details at **snapshot-usa.org.**

Investing in the Future of the Mission Valley:
Flathead Land Trust Secures $8.2 Million Federal RCPP Grant

We are thrilled to announce that our Mission Valley Conservation Partnership proposal has been selected to receive funding through a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

This highly competitive grant will provide funding to keep vital farmland intact in the northern Mission Valley. Over the next five years, these funds will support purchased conservation easements for about ten local producers.

To secure the RCPP funding needed to protect roughly 3,000 acres of privately owned farmland, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes helped leverage the grant by agreeing to place a conservation easement on 3,000 acres of tribal land along 15 miles of the Flathead River. Building on prior conservation achievements, this initiative will expand the permanently protected landscape to over 10,000 acres of land in a focused area west of Pablo and Ronan.

This grant will benefit local farmers, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, birds and wildlife, and the Flathead River corridor. By keeping productive farms intact and pairing land protection with NRCS conservation practices, the project helps safeguard water, habitat, and the region's agricultural economy.

Through the RCPP Program, USDA is investing more than $325 million in 42 projects nation-wide to help farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners boost their operations and conserve natural resources across the nation. Through RCPP, USDA works with partners to fund solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land.



More than a Forest: The Next Chapter of Foys to Blacktail

There's something special about looking out over the Flathead Valley from the forested hills above Herron Park. Below, the valley stretches toward Flathead Lake, while behind you, miles of forest provide a home for wildlife and a place for people to escape the bustle of everyday life. It's landscapes like these that remind us why protecting the places we love matters.

Earlier this year, Flathead Land Trust acquired approximately 1,131 acres adjacent to Herron Park, marking a major milestone not only in the creation of the Foys to Blacktail Community Forest, but also for Flathead Land Trust itself. While the acquisition was an exciting accomplishment, the story of protecting this landscape is far from finished.

Over the past several months, Flathead Land Trust has been working alongside Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Foys to Blacktail Trails, and other partners to develop a conservation easement and accompanying multi-resource management plan. Together, these will help ensure the forest remains a place where wildlife can thrive, people can explore, and thoughtful forest management can improve the health and resilience of the landscape.

With funding from the USDA Forest Legacy Program, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is anticipated to purchase and hold the conservation easement, permanently protecting the property's conservation values and public access.

What makes this project especially meaningful is that we're not simply protecting a piece of land and walking away. We're helping create a community forest, a place that will continue to grow and evolve alongside the people who care for it. From winding trails and quiet stands of timber to the wildlife that moves through these hills, the forest has something to offer everyone.

But the work doesn't end when the conservation easement is signed. Trails will need care, forests will need management, and the landscape will need thoughtful stewardship for generations to come. That's why Flathead Land Trust, along with our project partners Foys to Blacktail Trails, are working to establish a dedicated stewardship fund to support the long-term care of the community forest.

You, the reader, can help write the next chapter of this story. Consider supporting the Foys to Blacktail Community Forest Stewardship Fund by visiting flatheadlandtrust.org/support-the-foys-to-blacktail-community-forest-project.

After all, signing the conservation easement is just the foundation. It's the care we put into this land, the memories made along its trails, and the friendships formed along the way that make it all worthwhile. And through that care, we ensure this special place remains protected for generations to come.

Summer & Fall Events

Celebrating Foys to Blacktail

Community conservation at its best!

On May 1st, community members gathered alongside our project partners Foys to Blacktail Trails, Whitefish Community Foundation, Trust for Public Land and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at Herron Park to celebrate the acquisition of the 1,100-acre Foys to Blacktail property. Marking the completion of Phase 1, the event kicked off fundraising for the ongoing stewardship fund as work continues on a permanent conservation easement.



Giddying up for Conservation

The Land Affair

On July 30th, over 150 supporters gathered at Wrangler Springs Ranch for a western-themed Land Affair. Complete with local fare from Forage and music from Radio Ranch, the record-breaking evening raised over $39,000 for local land conservation projects throughout northwest Montana. Thank you to our donors, sponsors and friends for making it our most successful annual fundraising event to date!



Giving Where You Live

Great Fish Community Challenge

We are overwhelmed by your generosity during this year's Great Fish Community Challenge! Together, we raised a record-breaking $173,054 – including a $19,000 match from the Whitefish Community Foundation Circle of Giving. Thank you to all our donors for investing in clean water, wildlife habitat, and Northwest Montana's open spaces!



Volunteering at Harrell Forest

National Public Lands Day

Thank you to the incredible volunteers who spent National Public Lands Day caring for Harrell Forest! From sanding and staining the memorial benches remembering Delores Schrage and honoring Don Schrage to clearing trail drains to prevent erosion, your hands-on work keeps our community trails beautiful, safe, and thriving.



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You're Invited!

MEMBER & PARTNER APPRECIATION YEAR-END CELEBRATION

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8 at 6:00 PM

As a vital supporter, we want to celebrate with you! It's been another remarkably successful year protecting the places we all love across Northwest Montana, and you made it happen. Join us for drinks and appetizers in our office lobby (690 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell) as we reflect on 2026, look ahead to 2027, and present our annual FLT Conservation Leadership Award. We can't wait to see you there!

To RSVP and for more details, please contact Paul at:
ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org or 406-752-8293