A GIGANTIC WIN FOR PUBLIC LANDS
Montana Wilderness Association works with communities to protect Montana’s wilderness heritage, quiet beauty, and outdoor traditions, now and for future generations.

From the Executive Director

Navigating the Times We’re Living In

Back in March, when the first Covid-19 cases in Montana were reported and life changed dramatically almost overnight, MWA was compelled to reconsider how we connect with our members and partners, how our staff connects with each other, and how we operate as an organization that prides itself on our community and grassroots activism.

To keep our staff, volunteers, and members safe and healthy, we had to make some tough decisions, such as closing our offices, calling off or postponing a number of gatherings, and canceling almost all of this summer’s Wilderness Walks.

We’ve also been urging our members and supporters to stay local and explore less-used trails. To help, we’re directing Montanans to the more than 350 trails featured on our recently updated online hiking guide, hikewildmontana.org, and encouraging all hikers to avoid crowded trailheads and trails.

As we turn to the outdoors for solace, it has become clear that our public lands are more essential now than ever for our physical health, our mental wellbeing, and the cohesiveness of our communities.

That’s one reason we celebrated the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act on July 22, which includes full and permanent funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a program that channels royalties from offshore oil and gas production into state parks, fishing access sites, trail systems, and much more. We’re so pleased that Congress listened to public land supporters like you and voted for a bill that will bring enormous benefits to Montana.

Passage of this momentous bill occurred during tumultuous times, when we are all faced with issues more solemn than conservation and public lands.

The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other victims of racial violence and police brutality were stark reminders that racial injustice remains a plague on American society. Public lands and other open spaces in Montana are not immune to it.

We stand in solidarity with the Black community, and we ask you to join us in our commitment to ensuring that all Black, Indigenous, and people of color feel welcome on public lands and can visit these places without experiencing violence, harassment, or any other manifestations of racism. After all, public lands belong to all of us, as does the much-needed solace those lands offer.

Recognizing that MWA has a role to play in ending systemic racism, we are developing a diversity, equity, inclusion and justice action plan, which we plan on completing in the coming months.

Something else happened in July, coincidentally on the same day that the Great American Outdoors Act passed the House: Sen. Tester introduced a bill that will permanently protect the Badger-Two Medicine and give the Blackfeet Tribe a significant role in managing the area. It was another bright bit of news to counter the times we’re living in and give us hope for better days ahead. Because of members like you, who no doubt helped compel Tester to introduce this bill, I have much hope those days will come soon.

– Ben Gabriel, executive director
FULL, PERMANENT FUNDING FOR THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND IS FINALLY A REALITY.

AND YOU HELPED MAKE IT HAPPEN BY HOLDING OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE.

On June 17, the Senate passed the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) by a strongly bipartisan 73-25 vote. Just over a month later, the House followed suit and passed the bill 310-107. This critical piece of public lands legislation will become law, and it’s hard to overstate its significance.

GAOA will, among much else, provide full and dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the program that directs royalties from offshore oil and gas development to public land, outdoor recreation, and public access projects across the country. To date, LWCF has provided over $600 million to Montana’s state and city parks, trail systems, fishing access sites, and other public lands and outdoor resources.

Both Sens. Jon Tester and Steve Daines were co-sponsors of the Senate bill, which is a testament to the work MWA members and supporters did holding Daines accountable for not supporting LWCF in the early years of his Senate term. We thank Tester for his longtime commitment to the program, and thank Daines for listening to Montanans, changing his position, and garnering the support that was needed on his side of the aisle.

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Thanks to your tireless activism, Rep. Greg Gianforte also bowed to public pressure and changed his position from not supporting LWCF to voting in favor of the bill.

Though Daines and Gianforte have shown little leadership when it comes to public lands, their change of position on LWCF is evidence that our efforts holding them accountable are working. We will continue to lead the way in holding our congressmen’s feet to the fire and demanding they serve as strong advocates for our public lands, which are central to our health and happiness, our economy, and our outdoor way of life.

One of the more tangible manifestations of MWA’s leadership took place in early March at the Rally to #FundLWCF. A group of around 100 citizens, journalists, business leaders, and politicians gathered on the banks of Bozeman’s East Gallatin River to call on Gianforte to offer his unqualified support for LWCF. Our message was simple: Montana residents, communities, and businesses have benefited immensely from LWCF, and we expect our elected officials to represent our interests and support the public lands that we love and depend on.

The Rally to #FundLWCF was a benchmark in the journey to secure the future of LWCF, but it would be a forgotten footnote if it hadn’t been for the continuing effort of members and supporters like you. Since that unseasonably warm winter day, you’ve made countless phone calls, signed petitions, and written numerous letters-to-the-editor making it clear that Montanans are united in their support of full and permanent LWCF funding.

While the need for a fully funded LWCF has been evident for years, the events of the last several months have thrown the program’s importance into particularly sharp relief. As the Covid-19 pandemic has put the squeeze on Montana businesses and communities, the need to bolster our economy and the public lands it depends on has become increasingly evident. Before the pandemic, Montana’s outdoor recreation economy supported 71,000 jobs and generated over $7 billion annually. A 2020 poll found that 98% of Montanans believe that outdoor recreation businesses and jobs are an important part of Montana’s economy.

Supporting these jobs and businesses will be critical in helping Montana rebound from the economic difficulties brought on by the pandemic. Now, as we take steps to reopen our state, people are flocking to our public lands to find solace and enjoy time with friends and family, underlining the necessity of funding our parks, campgrounds, trails, fishing access sites, and more.

As the importance of our public lands becomes increasingly clear, so too does the mandate of our elected officials to support them. We’re proud of the hard work that our conservation community did to ensure that our full delegation supported the Great American Outdoors Act, and we’re excited about capitalizing on this momentum to keep making historic public lands progress.

– Jacob Foster, policy and advocacy coordinator
Accessing and enjoying public lands have become more essential than ever before for the wellbeing of our communities, families, and ourselves.

As we continue to navigate our way through the pandemic and tourists flock to Montana, physical distancing continues to be of the utmost importance to keeping our communities healthy.

Hike Wild Montana, our online hiking guide, features more than 350 trails across the state, providing options that will help Montanans stay safe, avoid crowded trails and trailheads, and discover trails less traveled.

Hikewildmontana.org is now easier to use than ever before, with new features that make finding the perfect trail a breeze. The guide includes a virtual map that highlights Wilderness and wilderness study area boundaries, provides quick trail details (such as hike length and elevation gain), and links to agency sites on each trail listing with details on Covid-19 facility closures and restrictions.

Launched in 2016, Hike Wild Montana is the state’s first statewide online hiking guide with trail information crowdsourced from hikers from around the state. Search trails, read recent trail reports, discover local businesses nearby – or volunteer as a trail scout. MWA encourages hikers to submit their favorite trails and share trip reports with the community.

Hike to Walling Reef in the Sawtooth Range along the Rocky Mountain Front

Stop to smell the wildflowers along North Fork Trail #16 on the way to Bear Basin

continued
Our online hiking guide is powered by volunteers like you.

In return for your work scouting new trails and submitting trail reports for our hiking guide this summer, we’ll reward you with MWA apparel!

**Scout ten new trails this summer,** and you’ll receive a Hike Wild Montana hoodie (while supplies last, or an alternative apparel item), plus be entered for a chance to win an “In and Out” daypack from Mystery Ranch Backpacks.

**Scout five new trails this summer,** and you’ll receive a Montana Wilderness Association t-shirt of your choice.

or…

**Submit ten trail reports,** and you’ll receive a Montana Wilderness Association t-shirt of your choice.

For details and guidelines for submitting trails, please visit wildmontana.org/scout
TESTER INTRODUCES THE BADGER-TWO MEDICINE PROTECTION ACT

On July 22, Sen. Jon Tester officially introduced legislation to permanently protect the Badger-Two Medicine. If it becomes law, the Badger-Two Medicine Protection Act will successfully conclude a decades-long fight to secure the future of this remarkable area. Critically, the legislation will formally ensure that the Blackfeet Tribe has a voice in the management of the Badger-Two Medicine. It will continue to allow existing uses like hiking, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, and other traditional practices, and it guarantees that existing Blackfeet treaty rights will be honored.

Sen. Tester introduced the legislation a month after a federal appeals court ruling provisionally upheld the cancellation of the final oil and gas lease in the Badger. While the legislation does not affect the future of the lease, which remains in legal limbo, it brings the permanent protection of the Badger-Two Medicine within touching distance for the first time.

Our decades-long work to secure the wild future of the Badger could not have been done without the hundreds of members and supporters who have accompanied us on this journey over many years and invested their time and money into this monumental effort. We can’t thank you enough.

Of course, the work to protect the Badger isn’t done. We need to make it clear that Montanans strongly support the Badger-Two Medicine Protection Act, and encourage Sen. Daines and Rep. Gianforte to join Tester in working to secure permanent protection for this special area.

To sign an open letter endorsing the bill and urging Montana’s entire congressional delegation to commit to protecting the Badger-Two Medicine, please visit protectthebadger.org.

— Zach Angstead, central Montana field director

FOREST SERVICE RELEASES FINAL DRAFT OF TWO FOREST PLANS

It’s been a long process, involving countless meetings, hundreds of written comments, and hours poring over maps. But we’re finally nearing the end of two national Forest plan revisions. In May, the Forest Service released the final draft of Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest plan, covering nearly 3 million acres of public lands stretching from the Continental Divide eastward to the Big Snowy Mountains. In July, the agency released the final draft of the Custer Gallatin National Forest, covering nearly 2 million acres of public lands across southern Montana and into South Dakota.

Both plans offered a mixed bag of strong protections, not enough protection, and no protection whatsoever for places we’ve been advocating for each of the Forest plans.

Here’s the good news: In the Helena-Lewis and Clark plan, the Forest Service for the first time recommends Wilderness protection in the Big Snowy Mountains of central Montana, specifically for two-thirds of the Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area. It also recommends, for the first time ever, Wilderness protection for Nevada Mountain, located northwest of Helena along the Continental Divide. The plan also recommends the Red Creek and Silver King areas, which are adjacent to the Scapegoat Wilderness, and keeps in place the Electric Peak recommended wilderness, also near Helena, from the 1986 plan.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest plan recommends, for the first time ever, Wilderness protection in the Gallatin Range, including most of the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area. It also offers Wilderness protection for the southern stretch of the Crazy Mountains and expands Wilderness protection in the Pryors, two ranges that play a vital role in Apsáalooke (Crow) culture. After all the work we’ve done to elevate how important this range is to the Apsáalooke, we are especially pleased with this outcome in the Crazy Mountains.

And the bad news: The Helena-Lewis and Clark plan offers no protection for the Elkhorn Mountains east of Helena, reduces the acres of protection for the Big Belts, and provides no protection at all for the Little Belts, most notably the Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Area and the Deep Creek/Tenderfoot tributaries of the Smith River.

In the Custer Gallatin, the plan fails to incorporate key elements of the Gallatin Forest Partnership (GFP) agreement, which MWA helped craft along with individuals and other organizations that have a wide range of interests in the Gallatins. It leaves out the full amount of recommended Wilderness that the GFP called for in the Gallatin Range and Taylor Hilgard area of the Madison, and does not recommend any Wilderness designation for Cowboy Heaven, also in the Madison Range. It also drops the nearly 21,000 acre existing recommended wilderness for the Lionhead.

MWA and many of our members and supporters are currently drafting and submitting formal objections to both Forest plans that we hope will alter these plans for the better before the Forest Service signs its record of decision on both plans sometime next year, at which point the plans go into effect.

— Amy Robinson, conservation director

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— Amy Robinson, conservation director
On July 16, Sen. Tester announced he was introducing a bill that will put an end to noncompetitive oil and leasing, an outdated and broken practice that is wasting taxpayer money that the Bureau of Land Management should be using to care for our public lands.

Dating back a 100 years, noncompetitive oil and leasing, an outdated and broken practice that is wasting taxpayer money that the Bureau of Land Management should be using to care for our public lands.

Noncompetitive leasing creates a situation whereby the BLM — already understaffed and understaffed — is bombarded with thousands of acres of oil and gas leases to process and monitor.

That’s time, resources, and knowledge taken away from all of the other things the BLM is obliged to do under its multiple-use mandate, such as habitat improvements, clean water monitoring, law enforcement, and maintenance of trails, trailheads, fishing access sites, boat ramps, and many other things that are critical for Montanans’ outdoor way of life.

Tester’s Leasing Market Efficiency Act will require all BLM oil and gas leases to be issued through a fair, competitive process, instead of noncompetitive, no-bid auctions. The new system will increase transparency, cut down on waste, and — most importantly — ensure that the BLM is using taxpayer dollars to care for our public lands.

To be sure to visit wildmontana.org for more information about the bill and how you can help get it passed.

— Aubrey Bertram, eastern Montana field director

Commitment is Everything

You’re out there every weekend, and maybe every day, exploring our wild places. They’re the places that give fresh air, comfort, and much-needed solitude, things we need now more than ever.

We need Montana’s public lands. And we need to protect them.

The Wild Bunch, MWA’s monthly giving program, helps us fight to protect places like the Badger-Two Medicine. They help us maintain our trails. They help us enjoy spectacular wild places on our Wilderness Walks.

To join the Wild Bunch, just commit to making a monthly gift. You can sign up online anytime or when you renew your membership. Any amount goes a long way to ensuring our wild public lands stay protected and accessible, so they’ll always be there when we need them.

Join today at wildmontana.org/wildbunch.
Join us for a virtual celebration of our wilderness community

Join us this year, from near and far, for a virtual WildFest event.

On the evening of October 24, we’ll celebrate the year’s accomplishments, honor our incredible volunteers, and take part in an online silent auction. We’re also honored to welcome guest speaker Kendall Edmo.

We appreciate your patience as we adapt WildFest to ensure the safety of all members and supporters. We’ll provide more details as soon as we can.

For the latest, please visit wildmontana.org/wildfest or call Laura Parr at (406) 443-7350 ext. 110.