Highlights and Successes

2021 Annual Report

Thanks to your investment in our work, we made enormous strides in 2021 protecting the wild, confronting climate change, enhancing public land access, and helping communities thrive.

2021 was also the year we embarked on a new era as Wild Montana. With that change, we reaffirmed and renewed our commitment to uniting and mobilizing communities to keep Montana wild.

We can’t thank you enough for being part of our community keeping Montana wild.

PROTECTING THE WILD

In 2021, the U.S. Forest Service finalized the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (HLCNF) plan. From 2015 to 2021 we invested hundreds of hours of staff and volunteer time, generated hundreds (if not thousands) of comments, and mobilized hundreds of members and supporters to get involved in the making of this plan that will guide the management of this 3 million-acre Forest over the next 20 to 30 years.

The results call for celebration, as the Forest Service recommended a total of 153,000 acres for Wilderness in the HLCNF – an increase of nearly 119,000 acres compared to what existed before the new plan. (Recommended Wilderness is the highest level of protection the Forest Service can give a landscape in a Forest plan.)

Receiving this level of protection for the first time ever were the Big Snowy Mountains, an island range that emerges from the prairie in the very middle of the state. Home to some of Montana’s biggest elk herds and rife with ice caves and limestone outcroppings, the Big Snowies are also the source of some of the purest water in the U.S.

Also recommended for Wilderness is Nevada Mountain, located along the Continental Divide northwest of Helena. Grizzly bears, wolverines, lynx, elk, and so many other species depend on this area as a migration corridor. Same goes for Alice Creek and Red Mountain, both adjacent to the Scapegoat Wilderness, which the Forest Service also recommended.

These Forest Service recommendations align nicely with those offered in the Lincoln Prosperity Proposal, a plan we helped develop for protecting wildlands around the town of Lincoln and southward along the Continental Divide. The outcomes of the HLCNF plan makes it more likely that we can turn this proposal into legislation and designate Nevada Mountain as Montana’s first standalone wilderness area in nearly 40 years and add Alice Creek and Red Mountain to the Scapegoat Wilderness. We’ll continue to advance this proposal that would protect nearly 120,000 acres from any kind of development.

The Lincoln proposal complements the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act (BCSA), which would add nearly 80,000 acres to the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas and thereby permanently protect the four most crucial tributaries of the world-renowned Blackfoot River and its native trout fishery. Reintroduced by Sen. Jon Tester in 2021, the bill received a hearing in a Senate committee in October, putting it on track for passage in 2022.

Unfortunately, Sen. Steve Daines announced during the hearing that he wanted something in exchange for his support of the BCSA: up to 300,000 acres of wild public lands across the state, managed as wilderness study areas, stripped of their protection. He threatened to introduce a bill within weeks that would do just that. We responded immediately, calling out Daines – in digital ads, newspapers’ opinion pieces, on billboards, and social media – for holding the BCSA hostage. We also generated more than 400 calls to his office in support of the BCSA and in opposition to the dangerous bill he threatened to introduce.

CONFRONTING CLIMATE CHANGE

Our work to confront climate change aligns with our efforts to protect the wild. It involves safeguarding wildlands from development, securing existing and potential wildlife corridors, and keeping headwaters and streams running cold, clean, and connected. It involves conserving large, intact, and interconnected landscapes across Montana that will enable plant and animal species to adapt and move as they must to endure and thrive.

It also involves reforming our nation’s oil and gas leasing system and advocating for policy solutions that will protect clean air and water and support a more stable climate. That means reducing methane emissions from leaky wells, ending speculative oil and gas leasing of public lands, and increasing transparency and public engagement in public land management decisions.

The largest victory in 2021 came with passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. This bill included provisions from the Revive Economic Growth and Reclaim Orphaned Wells (REGROW) Act of 2021, aimed at plugging and reclaiming orphan wells across the country, including an estimated 280 in Montana. The bill allocates $250 million to the BLM to identify and remediate wells on federal land that are polluting our land, water, and air, and another $25 million in grants for states like Montana to fund their own clean up programs.

As of press time, he had not introduced that bill.

Protecting the wild means standing up to bills that would undermine it. With nearly a thousand Wild Montana supporters speaking out, we also stopped a bill at the state legislature that would have paved the way for roads in national parks and other public wildlands. We also stopped a bill that would have allowed motorized e-bikes on non-motorized trails in state parks.

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Morning light brings some warmth to the cold Blackfoot River canyon (photo by Christian Sawicki)

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funding that will have massive implications for public lands.

of our supporters fought back and ultimately secured this repeatedly tried to siphon off this money, but thousands to use marijuana dollars to fund public lands. Legislators in November, 2020, when they passed a ballot initiative to public lands programs and initiatives revenue from recreational marijuana sales will be allocated We secured an additional $20 million annually by

•  $4 million for State Parks improvements and maintenance.
•  $1.25 million for the Montana Trail Stewardship Fishing Access Site on Flathead Lake.
•  $11.5 million for Habitat Montana, the state’s premier •  $7.9 million for Fish, Wildlife & Parks to acquire

$70 million in state and federal funds faced. We nonetheless led the effort to secure over $70 million in state and federal funds, including:

•  $4 million for the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition’s proposal to improve access and recreation along the Lower Yellowstone River.
•  $7.9 million for Fish, Wildlife & Parks to acquire Somers Beach State Park and Montebello Fishing Access Site on Flathead Lake.
•  $11.5 million for Habitat Montana, the state’s premier wildlife habitat and public access program.
•  $1.25 million for the Montana Trail Stewardship Grant Program.
•  $4 million for State Parks improvements and maintenance.

Our work to enhance public land access took the form of on-the-ground stewardship around the state and advocacy at the 2021 state legislative session, which proved to be one of the most challenging we’ve ever faced. We nonetheless led the effort to secure over $70 million in state and federal funds, including:

2021 also proved to be a banner year for our stewardship program, composed of Volunteer Trail Crew projects as well as wildlands education and monitoring. Thanks to a dedicated volunteer workforce, this season we surpassed $1 million total of in-kind volunteer labor since 2012! (This amount is based on the dollar value that federal and state agencies assign to every hour our volunteers are on the ground restoring trails, which counts as an “in-kind” contribution.)

Some other achievements from the 2021 stewardship season include:

•  A new Lower Yellowstone River state park with three separate units near Hysham, Terry, and Sidney/Glendive.
•  Over 12 new state land acquisitions.
•  New land-based trails.
•  New water-based trails.
•  Protection and enhancement of cultural and historic sites within the river corridor.

We’ve been proud to be a part of this groundbreaking effort to this point, and we’ll continue to support FWP and the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition in making this vision a reality.

Helping communities thrive also means ensuring that all people feel welcome on our public lands. That’s why we launched an effort in 2021 to change the name of three locations on public lands currently named after Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America and defender of slavery, white supremacy, and racism to his dying days.

Along with the Montana Racial Equity Project, the Montana Human Rights Network, and other groups, we joined with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) in submitting a petition to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. The petition requests that the board remove the name of Davis from those three locations in Montana and replace it with names that honor the area’s Native Inhabitants and Chinese immigrants. So far nearly 500 people have emailed the Board on Geo- graphic Names in support of our request. If you’d also like to email the board, visit our action center at wildmontana.org.

A volunteer works on diverting an eroded trail on the Cliff Creek Trail in the Gallatin Range. (photo by Christian Sawicki)

Cottonwood trees in all their glory on the Lower Yellowstone River near Hysham. (photo by Christian Sawicki)

ENHANCING PUBLIC LAND ACCESS

None of our legislative victories would have been possible without the 750 Montanans who joined our Legislative Action Team, ready to contact lawmakers at a moment’s notice, nor without the 3,000 supporters of ours who called and emailed legislators, urging them to defeat bad bills and support good ones.

In 2019 we brought together the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition (LYRC) to protect wildlife habitat, improve public access, and strengthen communities along the Lower Yellowstone River. Since then, we’ve helped build a strong network of grassroots supporters across eastern Montana, united by a belief that a more accessible Lower Yellowstone will help communities along the Lower Yellowstone thrive.

The coalition’s vision has garnered endorsements from city councils, county commissions, mayors, businesses and economic development experts. Gov. Greg Gianforte and former Gov. Steve Bullock have also supported the vision. In 2021, the legislature allocated an initial $4 million dollars to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to pursue the first stages of the project.

To guide that investment, Gov. Gianforte appointed a group of 12 stakeholders, including our State Policy Director Noah Marion, to the Lower Yellowstone River Corridor Advisory Committee. In December, the committee issued a report laying out just how FWP could go about making the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition’s vision a reality. The reports calls for:

- A new Lower Yellowstone River state park with three separate units near Hysham, Terry, and Sidney/Glendive.
- 50 miles of trail across the state improved by our Volunteer Trail Crew and chapter stewardship efforts.
- 44 Wilderness Walks throughout Montana, engaging 240 people.
- 27 wilderness character surveys across nine wilderness study areas, surveying 168 trail miles.
- 414 volunteers who contributed over 6,000 hours of volunteer service, which translates to a value over $165,000!
JOIN OUR VOLUNTEER TRAIL CREW

Volunteer on a Wild Montana trail stewardship project this summer while experiencing some of our wildest public lands.

We work across the state addressing backlogged maintenance needs so the trails we love to hike and ride remain open. Every trip is free to join.

Choose from trail stewardship projects across Montana as a crew member or camp cook.

Food, instruction, and fun provided.

For a preview of weekend frontcountry and weeklong backcountry projects across the state, visit wildmontana.org/vtc.

Registration opens March 1.

Discover Wild Montana is more than a book. It’s a tradition.

Like mud season and blooming balsamroot, Discover Wild Montana means that spring is here.

As a Wild Montana member, you get your own copy of our flagship publication every April. Inside, you’ll find descriptions of dozens of free guided Wilderness Walks and trail stewardship projects, exclusive insights into our work, and gorgeous photos from across Montana. It’s an invitation to kick your summer planning into high gear. We can’t wait to join you on the trail.

Members also get early registration for Wilderness Walks, a benefit you don’t want to miss.

If you’re not a member already, you can join us and ensure you get your copy of Discover Wild Montana at wildmontana.org/join.

Wild Montana is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization under 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Service Code. This financial information is drawn from audited financial statements by the accounting firm JCCS.