

FALL 2022

VIEW *Points*



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

"Owen Sowerine provides our students with an opportunity to observe nature through a different lens. They get to stop and be an active part of listening to and being fully immersed in all that nature has to offer".

- Pam Doty, Evergreen Junior High Teacher



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690 N. Meridian, Suite 207
P.O. Box 1913
Kalispell, MT 59903
406.752.8293
info@flatheadlandtrust.org
www.flatheadlandtrust.org

OUR MISSION

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



Message From THE PRESIDENT

My final term as board President will end in December. During my six years as Board President, the Flathead Land Trust has broadened its impact and added thousands of acres in conservation easements, protecting the Flathead Valley's agricultural heritage, and critical wildlife habitat. The strength of any organization is the time it takes to look inward, embrace change and set a strategy to catapult it to the next level. The board began this process by identifying areas for improvement and the long term plans and means it will take. A 5-year strategic plan was developed and implemented.

Like many organizations in 2020, Zoom became our boardroom. Many of us missed the social gatherings, our annual Land Affair was unfortunately canceled for two years. Though the pandemic may have changed our methods, it did not dampen our resolve. The last couple of years have been the most exciting and transformative time for our organization. This summer, we were able to hold The Land Affair, which was a big success, as well as participate in the Great Fish Community Challenge, which was our best yet. We're also planning a year-end donor and partner appreciation social gathering in December that we hope you'll join us for.



It's truly been a privilege to represent the Flathead Land Trust. I offer my gratitude to the staff who make conservation happen, our donors who trust in the value of our organization's work, and my fellow board members who volunteer their time, talent, and enthusiasm to our mission.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to serve in this role. Together, we pursued opportunities to position the Flathead Land Trust for even greater success in the future. It's been a sincere pleasure to have been a part of it all.

Bill Corwin
FLT Board President

WORKING TO CONSERVE FAMILY FARMLAND IN THE MISSION VALLEY

For over 50 years, a Mission Valley family has been farming south of Polson. Their 315-acre family farm has rich lakebed sediments at the base of the Valley View Hills with a backdrop of the rugged Mission Mountains. It is just south of Pablo Reservoir which provides water for irrigation that is critical for agriculture on the property. The entire farm has rich soils that have been designated as prime farmland and farmland of local importance by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). For two generations the family has been farming the productive land - first raising cattle and now growing wheat and hay.



315-ACRE FAMILY FARM IN MISSION VALLEY

Even though the third generation has decided not to take over the family farm and instead elected to go into non-agriculture related careers, the family wanted to see their productive land stay in agriculture. They decided the best way to do this was with a purchased conservation easement through the NRCS Agricultural Land Easement program. Not only will the conservation easement ensure their rich soils can stay in farming in perpetuity, the family also receives cash they can use for retirement or their farming operation without having to sell any of their land.

The conservation easement on the family farm will not only keep rich farmland available for agriculture, it will also benefit birds and wildlife. Cultivated fields and wet areas associated with the irrigation system and ephemeral waterways on the property provide bird habitat. The family regularly observes trumpeter swan, Canada geese, great blue heron, a variety of ducks, as

well as birds of prey, including bald eagle, prairie falcon, hawks, barred owl, and short-eared owl. While many of these species use the nearby Pablo Reservoir for feeding and nesting, the waterways, wet areas and cultivated fields on the property provide habitat for a diverse array of birds. Over one hundred bird species have been observed in the vicinity of the property. A group of 50 to 75 sandhill cranes regularly use the property as well as species of concern such as bobolink. The property is also adjacent to a 1,849-acre ranch protected with a conservation easement held by Montana Land Reliance that contains some of the grass-covered Valley View Hills. The grassy uplands on this neighboring conservation easement, combined with the moist lowlands of the family farm, provide nesting and feeding habitat for another species of concern, the long-billed curlew, which are also often seen on the property. We hope to close on this important agricultural land easement by the end of the year.

BIGFORK-HARRELL FOREST PROJECT UPDATE

Behind the scenes this summer and fall, FLT has been working with partners, The Trust for Public Land and Montana Land Reliance, as well local community advisors on what will be a new 4.5-mile non-motorized trail system, trailhead, parking lot and amenities just $\frac{1}{2}$ mile north of downtown Bigfork. Access to the trailhead and new trail system will be on the west side of the 236-acre property off of Bigfork Stage Road. Trail and trailhead construction will begin in the spring with an anticipated grand opening to the public in late summer, 2023. For more details about this exciting project, please contact Paul Travis at ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org.





Help Us Protect OWEN SOWERWINE

“Owen Sowerwine is an absolute treasure to have literally adjacent to the Kalispell city limits. Because of its convenient location, it provides unparalleled educational opportunities for local students.”

- Denny Olson, Flathead Audubon

We have the opportunity to permanently protect 442 acres in the heart of one of the most complex sections of the Flathead River, a braided area including islands, sloughs, wetlands, and riparian forest just east of Kalispell. This incredible, undeveloped, ecologically diverse parcel known as Owen Sowerwine contains important bird, fish and wildlife habitat. This haven is used by federally listed grizzly bear and bull trout as well as black bear, fox, coyote, mountain lion, white-tailed deer, westslope cutthroat trout, and 156 species of birds. It has also been designated an Important Bird Area critical to the conservation of birds by Montana Audubon. Together with adjacent protected lands, it helps provide an interconnected network of open space and quality habitat at a landscape scale, adding to over 12,000 acres of conserved land along 50 miles of the Flathead River and north shore of Flathead Lake.

Owen Sowerwine borders a river ecosystem that is dynamic with intertwined channels of the Stillwater and Flathead rivers. It borders a mile of the Stillwater River, over a mile of the Flathead River, and at least 1.3 miles of channels connecting the two rivers. The riparian forest and wetlands of Owen Sowerwine help sustain the integrity, healthy function, and water quality in both rivers as well as Flathead Lake.

Owen Sowerwine also provides public access for outdoor activities. People can enjoy two miles of trails, fishing, hunting, and birdwatching only a half mile from the city limits of Kalispell. The property also provides opportunities for conservation education for local schools.

However, the future of Owen Sowerwine as an ecological gem and community asset is not secure. Owen Sowerwine is State School Trust land

administered by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). As State School Trust land, its purpose is to generate revenue for Montana K-12 public schools. Years ago local citizens recognized Owen Sowerwine's natural and community values and attempted to get Owen Sowerwine designated as a Natural Area under the Natural Areas Act of 1974. This effort was led by an avid outdoorsman, dedicated conservationist, and community leader for which the area is named. Although it was never officially designated as a Natural Area, Owen Sowerwine has been managed as a natural area through lease and license agreements with Flathead County, Montana Audubon and Flathead Audubon Society since the late 1970s. Fees from these leases and licenses have provided some funding for Montana schools. However, a long-term solution to ensure the riparian forest and

wetlands remain intact as well as provide significant funding for K-12 schools has been sought for years. Flathead Land Trust has proposed to purchase a conservation easement on Owen Sowerwine as that long-term solution.

In the absence of a conservation easement, DNRC is obligated to consider other land uses for Owen Sowerwine to generate revenue for Montana schools. These uses could include cabin sites, residential uses, agriculture, grazing, timber sales, and/or commercial uses.

Because a proposal for the conservation easement to DNRC received a lot of positive support from the public through a recent scoping process, Flathead Land Trust and its partners including the Flathead Audubon Society and the Flathead Lakers will begin fundraising in earnest to raise an estimated \$775,000 needed to complete this important conservation easement. Two large funders have committed to providing a third of the needed funding and we have until September of 2023 to raise the remainder. We are looking for support from the community to permanently protect Owen Sowerwine's natural integrity and current public uses. **You can help by donating to Flathead Land Trust and designating your donation to Owen Sowerwine at www.flatheadlandtrust.org.**



"Owen Sowerine provides our students with an opportunity to observe nature through a different lens. They get to stop and be an active part of listening to and being fully immersed in all that nature has to offer. The forested area and the river offer a unique experience of identifying habitats and the birds that live in those habitats. What I love best is that this area is some place they can take their families to. Local experiences at its best!"

- Pam Doty, 8th grade teacher
Evergreen Junior High





Flathead River IN PAINT

WENDY HALE, ARTIST

On July 22, fifteen artists took brush to canvas, painting plein air on conserved lands along the Flathead River from Bad Rock Canyon to Flathead Lake. These exceptionally talented artists captured a variety of ecosystems in multiple different forms of media. Their works, revealed at the "Flathead River in Paint" opening reception at Montana Modern Fine Art on November 9, portray the irreplaceable natural magnificence of these conserved lands.

Just as the artists translated landscapes to canvas, we are hoping to translate their paintings back to the land, furthering conservation along the Flathead River. An online auction, where the public can bid on these pieces, will run through December 7th, kicking off fundraising for

the Owen Sowerwine project. Fifty percent of the profits from this campaign will benefit the artists, while the other half will go towards the Owen Sowerwine conservation project.

Flathead Land Trust, along with our partners, hopes to raise \$775,000 to purchase a conservation easement on the Owen Sowerwine property, protecting it in perpetuity while providing sustainable income for K-12 schools. An exquisite art piece hanging on your wall could help remind you of the lasting legacy of this conservation project.

Visit our website (flatheadlandtrust.org) for a link to view the stunning artwork and to bid.

FUN WITH FEATHERS: FLT TEACHES LOCAL 7TH AND 8TH GRADERS THE BRILLIANCE OF BIRDS

Through a variety of presentations, activities and field trips, Flathead Land Trust is helping local 7th graders learn about the diversity and unique adaptations of birds and the places in the Flathead Valley that provide important habitat for them. "Learning about adaptations fits into the 7th grade science curriculum and there is no better way than to learn about adaptations than through birds," says Laura Katzman of Flathead Land Trust. Each year Laura provides a bird education program to local 7th graders, with the help of Flathead Audubon Society. Sometimes they follow-up with a program when the kids are in 8th grade. This year she is working with over 200 7th and 8th graders from Evergreen Jr. High and West Valley School. "It all begins with a presentation and activities to show the kids how incredible birds are," says Laura, "I get volunteers to see how many times they can flap their arms in 10 seconds. I then explain a hummingbird can flap its wings 700 times in 10 seconds or 70 times per second. That is followed up with the kids thinking about how long they could flap their arms until they were tired. They then learn that bar-tailed godwits can fly non-stop for 8 days across the Pacific Ocean from Alaska to New Zealand, a distance of more than 7,000 miles. It's a lot of fun. My favorite fact that really astonishes the kids is that some birds increase their body weight by 5% in a single day before migrating, and if a 7th grader wanted to gain as much weight they would have to eat 70 burgers in a day."



After the initial presentation, kids visit West Valley to view sandhill cranes staging on their migration. In winter, the kids learn about birds of prey and dissect owl pellets. This is followed up by a visit from Kari Gabriel and her live saw-whet owl, rough-legged hawk and prairie falcon. In spring, the kids learn about waterfowl, play a game of Jeop-birdy to test their knowledge learned throughout the year and go on a field trip to Church Slough to view the spring bird migration.

Seventh grade science teacher at Evergreen Jr. High, Vic Dalla Betta likes the bird education program because ***“students gain an appreciation for the diversity of bird species that visit our ecosystem throughout the year, the complexity of bird behavior, the need for conservation of sensitive habitats, and the passion people have to help sustain these habitats for future generations.”*** He said a bonus is that former students who have been through the program have told him their families visit some of the field trip sites now, including the West Valley Bird Viewing Area, which is on land protected by a conservation easement held by Flathead Land Trust, and have gained a larger interest in birds in the Flathead Valley

Collaborative Stewardship A VITAL COMPONENT OF OUR MISSION

In our work, completion of new conservation projects understandably gets all the attention. It is exciting and important to celebrate newly conserved land. But there is an equally important side to our work that goes less noticed. Working with our landowner partners to ensure that conservation agreements are upheld and protected lands are well stewarded over time is a critical component to our work, and an important part of our pledge to the community that these lands will continue to be conserved.

Every year, we fulfill this obligation by communicating with partner landowners and, with the help of volunteers, visiting properties to ensure the terms of conservation easements are being upheld. With sixty-nine conservation easements currently held by FLT, and growing, we are making a lot of property visits each year and documenting each visit in annual reports kept on permanent file. This work involves making numerous document interpretations, documenting changes to properties and asking and answering landowner questions. These visits help maintain good relationships with our partner landowners and help resolve questions and potential concerns.

Our partnership with landowners, however, often goes beyond annual property visits. We have partnered with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Flathead Lakers to help landowners restore riparian vegetation along the Flathead River on the Bourne, Diamond B, Louden and Seabaugh conservation easements. We have also partnered with Flathead Wildlife to help a landowner put up wood duck nesting boxes on the Boehm conservation easement. These partnership efforts help to enhance the habitat provided on already conserved properties.

After the headlines fade on newly completed conservation projects, our work at Flathead Land Trust has only just begun. We are committed to working with our partner landowners for the long-term in the stewardship of conserved lands and you can have faith that we will never waiver in that commitment.





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690 N. Meridian, Suite 207 · P.O. Box 1913
Kalispell, MT 59903-1913

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DONOR AND PARTNER APPRECIATION YEAR-END CELEBRATION – DECEMBER 13

We want to **THANK YOU** in-person for the incredible year we've had. Join us for our year-end party as we show our appreciation for you – our dedicated donors, members and partners who make successful community-based conservation possible. We'll provide food, drinks, music, and some exciting updates of what we have on tap for 2023. You won't want to miss it.

Contact Paul at ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org or 406-752-8293 to RSVP and for more details.