

SUMMER 2023

# VIEW *Points*



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

*"The trail leads not merely north and south,  
but up to the body, mind, and soul of man."  
– Harold Allen."*





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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 Journey of Collaboration

Trails. What can be better, more life affirming than taking a morning stroll along a dirt path that meanders through a beautiful stretch of northwest Montana forest? This time of year, we get to witness the emerging bright green needles of western larch and vibrant spring colors splashed across the forested landscape. Then, climbing higher, we catch glimpses of sparkling diamonds of sunlight dancing off of the big blue lake below. All I can say is WOW! We are lucky to live in such a cool place. Trails are popular because of experiences like this – and for good reason as they allow us to connect with what makes Montana a truly wild and wonderful place.

So when Flathead Land Trust was contacted 2 ½ years ago by the Trust for Public Land to partner with their organization on what would become the Harrell Forest Community Trails project, we jumped at it. Now we are excited to say that all the work to create a community conservation and trails project in Bigfork's backyard is finally coming to fruition. This spring we broke ground on the new trail system and trailhead and we can't wait to share it with you all by this fall.

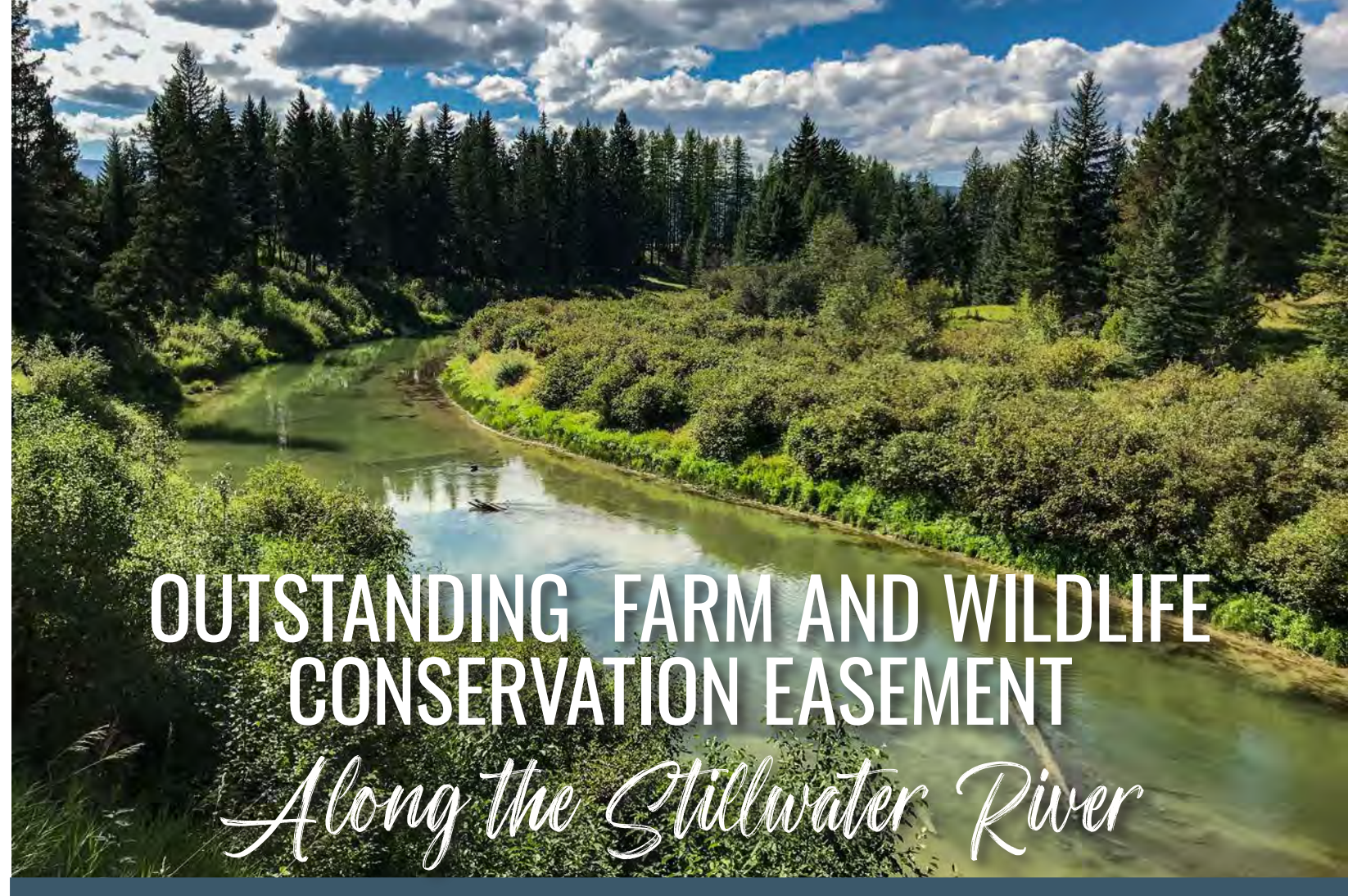
Of course, projects like this don't just happen on their own. We have many people and partners to thank. The Horn family, Trust for Public Land and Montana Land Reliance are just the tip of the iceberg. The community of Bigfork and the greater Flathead Valley have also stepped up huge, and continue to step up with our many other conservation projects, including Owen Sowerwine. Where would we be without such caring, visionary and generous people? We love the Flathead Valley for its remarkable landscapes, intact habitat and incredible recreation. But, it's the people here who make it exceptional.

Thank you for helping to make community-based conservation in the Flathead possible. Enjoy this latest issue of ViewPoints and I'll see you out on the trails!

Paul Travis, Executive Director

“Everything we do at TPL revolves around a very simple mission – connecting everyone to the outdoors. The Harrell Forest project has it all. Not only does it provide close-to-home recreation and education opportunities for Bigfork residents, but it protects the open space viewshed of the highly scenic Swan Hill. This is a win-win for everyone involved.”

-Trust for Public Land project manager  
Lucas Cain



## OUTSTANDING FARM AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EASEMENT

### Along the Stillwater River

While land has been rapidly subdivided in the Flathead Valley, Doug and Carolyn Kohrs have been buying parcels of land to reassemble a large tract of farmland with key wildlife habitat along the Stillwater River southwest of Whitefish. The Kohrs family began visiting the Flathead Valley from their home in Minnesota in 2001 and fell in love with Montana. From a 20-acre parcel purchased in 2005, Doug and Carolyn Kohrs have pieced together 655 acres. In December, the Kohrs took another step in keeping this large farm and valuable wildlife habitat intact by placing conservation easements on their 655 acres.

The conservation easements will permanently protect the Kohrs investment in farming and wildlife. The easements help to keep over 500 acres of rich farmland in agriculture – some of the best soils in Montana and the nation. The easements also protect amazing bird, fish, and wildlife habitat including riparian forest and wetlands along 1.7 miles of the Stillwater River. The types and diversity of wildlife captured by a game camera placed on the property are incredible. “Photos taken by the camera have documented grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, fox, elk, and deer using the property. We even discovered that elk have their babies on a back corner of our property,” exclaimed Doug. The

Kohrs have seen almost 100 species of birds on the property, including great gray owls, sandhill cranes, trumpeter swans, pileated woodpeckers and belted kingfishers. The habitat provided by the Kohrs property enhances winter range and wildlife habitat provided by the adjacent 1,557-acre Kuhns Wildlife Management Area and an additional 1,800 acres of contiguous public land. In addition, the conservation easements protect the ecological integrity, healthy river function, and water quality of the Stillwater River.

Much of the funding to conserve the Kohrs property was provided by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program to keep its productive farmland in agriculture. Funding from the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation, through the Heart of the Rockies “Keep it Connected” program, helped protect the property's important wildlife habitat.

“We knew we wanted to protect the land when we bought it,” said Carolyn. Now protecting the property has even more meaning. Doug and Carolyn's daughter Clara, one of three children, recently had the family's first grandchild, Quinn. “The conservation easement will help ensure that Quinn and future generations will be able to grow up enjoying the Montana we fell in love with.”





“ We knew we wanted to protect the land when we bought it, The conservation easement will help ensure that Quinn and future generations will be able to grow up enjoying the Montana we fell in love with.”

- Carolyn Kohrs, of the Kohrs Family Easement along the Stillwater River

Carolyn Kohrs, center, with her children, Clara, left, Clara's son, Quinn, and Hannah, right, on the Kohrs family land (Kate Heston/Daily Inter Lake)

# BUILDING ON EXISTING CONSERVATION

## *Northwest of Whitefish*



“ Little we see in nature that is ours, getting and spending we lay waste our hours, - Pat Nissen, paraphrasing poet William Wordsworth.”

## *Funds Still Needed for Owen Sowerwine*

Flathead Land Trust and partners, the Flathead Audubon Society and Flathead Lakers, continue to work toward permanently protecting the 400+ acres of State School Trust land just east of Kalispell known as “Owen Sowerwine”. Although fundraising has been going well, after receiving the final appraisal, our fundraising goal has increased. We continue to need community support to purchase a conservation easement for permanent protection of Owen Sowerwine. Now, while our Challenge Match Campaign is currently underway, is a great time to contribute and help close the funding gap. Through the challenge match, all donations given for the Owen Sowerwine project between now and the end of July will be matched 1 : 1, up to \$100,000. We are grateful to Molly Miller and Mark Jungerman, the Bibler Foundation and Alan and Sallie Gratch, as well as to donors of Flathead Audubon and Flathead Lakers for providing this incredible incentive. We hope to raise the funding needed to purchase the conservation easement by September.

A few other steps also need to occur in the next few months to complete the project. In late summer, an Environmental Assessment through the Montana Environmental Policy Act process will evaluate the proposed conservation easement. This will be released for public comment, and your support during this phase will be greatly appreciated. The project will also go before the State Land Board, from whom approval is needed, this fall.

The ecological and community jewel of Owen Sowerwine is nestled between conserved lands. It borders a mile of the Stillwater River, over a mile of the Flathead River, and at least 1.3 miles of braided channels connecting the two rivers. Its riparian forest, islands, sloughs, and wetlands provide a haven for birds, fish and wildlife, including federally listed grizzly bear and bull trout and 168 species of birds. Conservation of the natural habitat will not only safeguard this ecologically important area, but it will also protect water quality, secure public access for people to enjoy a natural, wild place close to Kalispell and secure long-term funding for Montana K-12 schools.

If you would like to learn firsthand about the Owen Sowerwine property and project, several walking and kayak tours will be offered in July. About 75 people enjoyed tours of Owen Sowerwine given by Flathead Land Trust, the Flathead Audubon Society, Flathead Lakers and the Flathead Lake Biological Station in May. You can donate to the project or learn about tours at [www.flatheadlandtrust.org](http://www.flatheadlandtrust.org).



A pair of Canada geese nest atop a chimney snag at Owen Sowerwine (Judy Dobler photo)

Near the Stillwater River less than five miles northwest of Whitefish, a twenty-four-acre open space property has been conserved from future development by Pat Nissen and his son, Jake. The property, conserved in March with a Flathead Land Trust conservation easement, is adjacent to and compliments another twenty-seven-acre property along the Stillwater River already conserved with Flathead Land Trust.

The Nissen property serves as a wildlife travel corridor for bears and other animals moving between the Whitefish Range and the Stillwater River, which is only 1,000 feet from the property. It includes a mix of open hay fields and a small forest that provides cover for wildlife. Conserving the property preserves this important wildlife habitat as well as its working agricultural land and the scenic value of the property along Highway 93.

Pat Nissen has cared for the property for forty years, raising saddle horses and mules on the property and planting trees. He was committed to seeing it conserved.

“I could see where things were going around here and I wanted to save at least a little bit [of land]. I just want to go to the grave knowing that [the land] will stay exactly how it is. I have no control over anything else,” Nissen said in an interview with the Whitefish Pilot.

Flathead Land Trust was excited to work with the Nissen family on the effort according to Ryan Hunter, who worked on the project for the organization. “We are always looking for opportunities to enhance the conservation value of previously conserved property. The Nissens’ decision to conserve their land nearly doubles the acreage of protected property in the area, to the benefit of the whole community.”



Pat Nissen and his son Jake on their conserved property (Kate Heston/Daily Inter Lake)



# Harrell Forest Trails Under Construction



Photo: Casey Kreider Daily Inter Lake



Matt Sather, DREAM Adaptive Recreation Athlete

Just to the northeast of Bigfork, on Swan Hill, lies an undeveloped tract of land with rich history, and holding big plans for the community. Originally part of the Gates homestead, where Eva Gates Preserves were first created and sold, the parcel was held under a series of ownerships. The Knievel family (of Evel Knievel fame) owned the property for a while, according to neighborhood lore. Part of it nearly became a 17-unit subdivision before the economic downturn of 2008. Renowned longtime Bigfork resident, passionate conservationist and woodworker, Jack Whitney and his wife, Ursula, placed a conservation easement on the southern portion of the property in the early 2000's. The most recent landowners had a lofty vision for this area that laid the groundwork for a community trail system, currently under construction. Alan Horn and Cindy Harrell-Horn have deep roots in the community of Bigfork, so when they thought about parting with the property, they decided they would give back to the community. In an act of benevolence, Horn and Harrell-Horn recently donated the 240-acre parcel to the Trust for Public Land, with the intention of providing public access and community benefit.

Conservation has always been at the forefront of the vision for the project. When the Trust for Public Land took ownership, the intention was to transfer the property to Flathead Land Trust for local management with a conservation focus. Both entities collaborated with The Montana Land Reliance to place a conservation easement on the remaining portion of the property. The conservation easement, along with ownership transfer to Flathead Land Trust, came to fruition at the end of 2022. Under this legal agreement, the parcel can never be further developed, the conservation values will be forever protected, and the property will remain available for public education and recreation long into the future.

The process of designing and building a trail system takes a village, and fortunately, the village of the Flathead Valley has accrued plentiful experience in this realm. Forestration, Inc. of Whitefish designed 4.5 miles of stacked loop trails for Harrell Forest, occasionally overlooking Flathead Lake, the Swan Mountains and Swan River. Montana Made Trails hit the ground running this spring and trail building is currently underway. JD Thinning, Inc. has been busy constructing

trailhead amenities near the southwestern corner of the property, creating a 23-space parking lot for drive-in access to the trails. All is planned to come together for a Grand Opening Celebration at the end of September.

Accessibility is at the heart of Harrell Forest and the trails are designed to be family-friendly with safety at the forefront. DREAM Adaptive Recreation has pretested some trails with three-wheeled adaptive mountain bikes and plans to hold individual lessons and group rides at Harrell Forest. The trails will be accessible to hikers and mountain bikers, but due to the relatively small acreage the trail system will not be able to accommodate horses. Consistent with the conservation focus of the property, the terms of the conservation easement and funding requirements, motorized vehicles will not be allowed.

The vision for the project has always centered on community and input from community members has been and continues to be an integral part of the planning process. An advisory committee of multiple community members, as well as representatives from Forestration, Montana Access Project,

Trust for Public Land, The Montana Land Reliance and Flathead Land Trust, share their opinions and perspectives, areas of concern, and provide recommendations to guide decision-making and management of the property.

Funding of a project of this size also takes a village and in the spring of 2022, project partners secured two major grants through the Montana Recreational Trails Program (RTP) and the Montana Trail Stewardship Grant Program (MTSGP). In addition, Flathead Land Trust raised \$40,000 from many generous donors through Whitefish Community Foundation's Great Fish Community Challenge in the summer of 2022.

The Bigfork Harrell Forest Trails are mutually beneficial for the community and visitors to the area, as well as for the environment. The project will provide public access, extraordinary front county recreational opportunities, as well as protection and landscape connectivity for wildlife species such as whitetail deer, turkey and black bear. It has been a long process of planning and collaboration, but by the fall of this year, the Harrell Forest Trails will be open for everyone to enjoy.





# A SLICE OF *the Swan River* CONSERVED

“The wilderness corridor along the Swan River is a national treasure that needs to be preserved as natural habitat and for its recreational value. It has been my privilege to have worked with Flathead Land Trust in establishing a conservation easement and it is my hope other like-minded landowners will consider doing the same” – Ed Goldberg

Ed Goldberg permanently protected 40 acres along the Swan River east of Bigfork in May with a conservation easement. The parcel borders a third of a mile of the Swan River and contains a mosaic of riparian forest and wetlands supporting a myriad of birds and wildlife. The riparian forest contains large mature spruce, cottonwood, aspen and birch trees; a thick understory of shrubs including hawthorn, serviceberry, alder, and willow; and standing dead trees and woody debris on the forest

floor. This natural, largely undisturbed forest provides quality wildlife habitat used by grizzly bear, black bear, mountain lion, coyote, fox, deer, and at least 114 species of birds. The reach of the Swan River along the property also provides unique winter habitat vital to trumpeter swans, hooded mergansers, and other waterfowl. In addition, the riparian forest and undeveloped floodplain helps protect the healthy function, water quality and ecological integrity of the Swan River.

## Partner Profile : FLATHEAD CONSERVATION DISTRICT

The Flathead Conservation District made it possible this year for 7th graders from West Valley School to take part in the Bird Education program with Flathead Land Trust. Students learned about bird adaptations and the importance of conserving bird habitat with the help of the Flathead Conservation District Education Grant Program, which supports conservation education activities in Flathead County. A grant from this program allowed the students to see live birds of prey, dissect owl pellets and travel to Church Slough to see spring waterfowl migration. The grant was key in getting a new school interested in the Bird Education Program by providing funding needed to implement first year participation. West Valley School otherwise would not have had the funds to cover costs associated with buses for a field trip, purchasing owl pellets for dissection, or facilitating Kari

Gabriel to bring her live birds of prey to the school for the program. We really appreciate the support of the Flathead Conservation District for this important education program!



## GROSSWILER AND MARVIN FAMILIES AWARDED 2023 MONTANA *Wetland Stewardship Award*

The Grosswiler and Marvin Families of Kalispell were among five individuals and families honored with 2023 Montana Watershed and Wetland Stewardship Awards by the Montana Watershed Coordination Council (MWCC) and the Montana Wetland Council. The awards honored individuals or groups who embody excellence and commitment to watershed or wetland conservation, protection and restoration. The Lt. Gov. Kristen Juras recognized the award recipients at an awards ceremony on April 26 at the Holter Museum of Art in Helena.

In 2017 and 2018, the Grosswiler and Marvin families placed 396 acres of land in the rapidly growing Flathead Valley under conservation easement with Flathead Land Trust. The conservation easement protects agricultural lands, open space, wetlands and critical habitat for migratory birds. As part of the West Valley Wetlands, the land supports a diversity of wetland birds and the only known staging area for sandhill cranes in the Flathead Valley. The project involved multiple partners and generous donors. It included construction of the public West Valley Bird and Wildlife Viewing Area with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to inspire future generations to care about conserving wetlands.



Three generations: Tanner Marvin, Gracie Marvin and Catherine Baier gather on their family's property in West Valley (photo by Kate Heston/Daily Inter Lake)

## Farmland Conservation in Mission Valley Protects Key Winter Habitat for Birds of Prey

The Mission Valley is a haven for birds of prey in the winter, hosting one of the largest concentrations of wintering rough-legged hawks in the country. Over 800 birds of prey have been counted in a single day in the Mission Valley during surveys completed by the Owl Research Institute, with rough-legged hawks and red-tailed hawks making up most of these wintering birds of prey. These phenomenal numbers of raptors feed on voles which are abundant on the extensive agricultural land and other intact open spaces in the valley.

Last December, a conservation easement was placed on a 315-acre family farm south of Pablo Reservoir in the heart of the area used by impressive numbers of birds of prey in winter. The NRCS ALE program provided funding to conserve the 315 acres since the main purpose of the conservation easement was to keep the property's rich soils in agriculture to produce food for people. However, the farmland is also incredibly valuable for birds of prey. "The use of the 315-acre family farm and the surrounding area by birds of prey in winter is astounding," said Laura Katzman of Flathead Land Trust. "It seems like every other power pole in the area had a hawk, eagle, or falcon on it this winter."

Several other landowners in the area have voiced interest in conserving their land as well. "We are thrilled with the interest in conserving farmland in the Mission Valley," said Katzman. "We hope to apply for more NRCS ALE funding this winter to reward other farmers for staying in agriculture and being good stewards of a key area important to the survival of iconic and majestic birds of prey."





# MANY THANKS TO OUR 2022 DONORS & SUPPORTERS

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Heart of the Rockies Initiative  
– Keep It Connected Program  
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NRCS Agricultural Land Easement Program  
Trust for Public Land  
Whitefish Community Foundation  
– Great Fish Community Challenge

### \$10,000 - \$50,000

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Community Foundation for a Better Bigfork  
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Flathead Lakers  
The Cinnabar Foundation  
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### \$1,000 - \$10,000

Bibler Foundation  
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Karen Reeves and  
Doug Chadwick  
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Erick and Jennifer Robbins  
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Nan Smalley  
Paula and Bob Smith  
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Merry Lynn Southers

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Julie Stetter  
Mark and Nancy Svennungsen  
Darcy Thomas  
Constanza von der Pahlen  
Susan Waldron  
Adam Alexander Wesley  
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Marilyn Wood  
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## BUSINESS MEMBERS & SPONSORS

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REI Co-op  
Rocky Mountain Outfitter  
Sportsman and Ski Haus  
The Simple Chef Catering  
Snappy Sport Center

## CONSERVATION EASEMENT STEWARDSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

Anonymous  
The Kohrs Family  
Chrysta Bourne  
Iron Horse Development

\* Preservation Partner Monthly Donor

# 2022 ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL SUMMARY

As the Flathead Valley and northwest Montana change at an unprecedented rate, conservation of our precious land, water and heritage is more important than ever. With the help of our supporters, Flathead Land Trust is rising to the challenge.

Below are some of the highlights of 2022.

◆ In May, we celebrated with FWP and MT State Parks the acquisition and opening of the new Somers Beach State Park along the north shore of Flathead Lake.

◆ In December, we placed 315-acres under a purchased conservation easement on a family farm in the Mission Valley just south of Polson, with prime farmland soils and important to wintering birds of prey, farmed by the family for over 50 years.

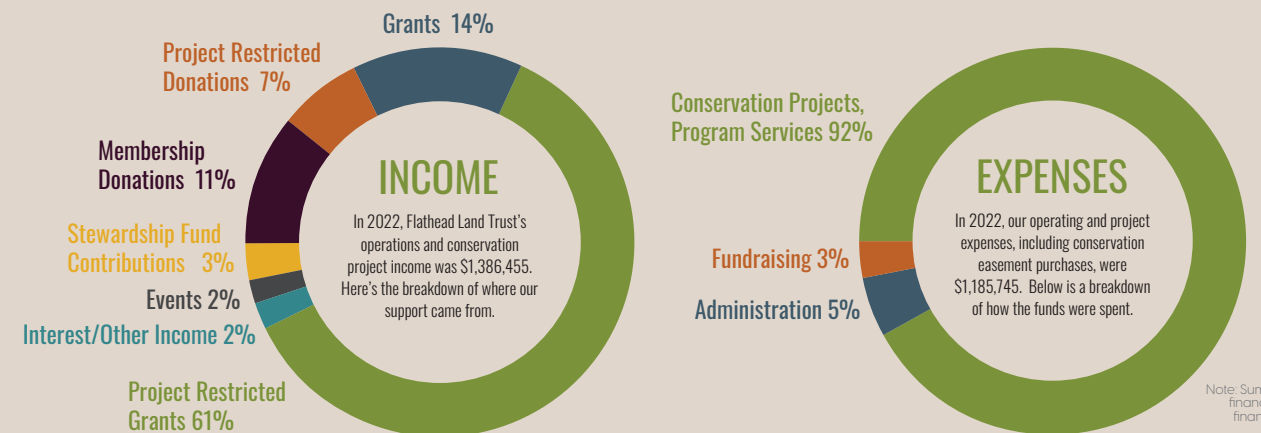
◆ Also in December, we purchased conservation easements to protect the Kohrs family's 655 acres of high quality farmland and habitat important for grizzly bears, elk and a plethora of other

wildlife along the Stillwater River and adjacent to Kuhns Wildlife Management Area.

◆ Ownership of the Harrell Forest property was transferred to Flathead Land Trust and a conservation easement was placed on the property with the Montana Land Reliance.

◆ We are excited to be working with our partners Flathead Audubon, Flathead Lakers, MT DNRC and others towards permanently protecting the over 400-acre Owen Sowerwine property just east of Kalispell with a purchased conservation easement, while also providing funding for Montana's K-12 schools. This continues to be a major focus of 2023.

## BETWEEN 1988 TO 2022, FLATHEAD LAND TRUST PLACED 72 PROPERTIES UNDER CONSERVATION EASEMENT AND PARTNERED ON 20 COOPERATIVE PROJECTS, FOR A TOTAL OF 18,081 ACRES CONSERVED.





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

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## Upcoming Events



### Great Fish Community Challenge - August 10 – September 15

We're thrilled to be part of the Whitefish Community Foundation Great Fish Community Challenge again this year! Since 2015, the Great Fish Community Challenge has raised over \$22 million for more than 85 local nonprofit organizations. Watch for events and ways you can give back to Flathead Land Trust and benefit conservation during this great campaign starting on August 10th. For more information, go to: <https://whitefishcommunityfoundation.org/great-fish/>.



### The Land Affair - September 13

We're back at Diamond B Ranch for The Land Affair this year, on Wednesday, September 13! You won't want to miss Flathead Land Trust's annual fundraising event at this stunning property, protected by a FLT conservation easement. Live music in the new (heated) barn will be provided by Randy Marshall and locally-sourced Montana food and beverages will be served. The event directly benefits our conservation efforts throughout the Flathead and northwest Montana. Tickets will be on sale for \$50 each at [www.flatheadlandtrust.org](http://www.flatheadlandtrust.org).



### Harrell Forest Grand Opening - Late September

Together with our partners, the Trust for Public Land and the Montana Land Reliance, we will celebrate the opening of the trail system on-site at Harrell Forest. Stay tuned for details on the Grand Opening event.

**For more upcoming events, please make sure you are on our eNews mailing list and check the website for new events.** To sign up for e-News, email us at: [info@flatheadlandtrust.org](mailto:info@flatheadlandtrust.org).