

FALL/WINTER 2024

VIEW *Points*



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

*"Conservation is a state of harmony
between (humans) and land."
- Aldo Leopold*



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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



The People Behind the Progress

A Year-long Tribute to Flathead Land Trust's Indispensable Individuals

Flathead Land Trust clearly stands on the shoulders of giants. The passion and expertise of countless individuals has propelled us forward. As we celebrate our 40th Anniversary in 2025, many of the pillars of our organization will be highlighted - individuals who have laid the foundation for our current success. We are thrilled to embark upon this celebration!

It would be impossible to overlook Don Murray's role in Flathead Land Trust's development. For nearly 40 years, he has been an integral member of the Flathead Land Trust team, gifting countless hours. Don served as board member, board president and continues to serve on our lands committee, which he has since its inception in 2007. Providing for community as a lawyer for nearly 45 years, currently as partner at Hash, Rudbach, Hutchison, & Murray, PLLP, Don brings an invaluable skill set to Flathead Land Trust. His reputable work in water law and environmental cases has served us well. For many years, he donated considerable time and expertise as our primary legal reviewer for conservation easements. The magnitude of Don's contributions to this organization over the years is immeasurable.

In a conversation with our Executive Director, Paul Travis, this fall on the bank of the Flathead River, Don reminisced about the progress of Flathead Land Trust over nearly four decades. In the early years, all conservation easements completed through Flathead Land Trust were donated easements. "There was no money available to help pay landowners to help conserve their property. I remember thinking that would never happen, but today it happens with regularity." Since those early years, multiple grants and funding sources have become available, many of which Flathead Land Trust now routinely utilizes "to conserve private lands that otherwise are under tremendous development pressure."

Reflecting on the growth of the organization, Don added, "We have branched out and done so many things that I don't think historically we ever dreamed we would do." Praising

leadership and partnership, Don takes great satisfaction in the significant progress Flathead Land Trust has made. "What I've seen through all these years, when we're now doing things that we never even dreamed of even a decade or two ago, is collaboration - not only with us and other agencies, but also bringing communities, agencies and private organizations together to work collaboratively."



“What we’re doing in collaboration with other organizations has just blossomed. It’s very exciting!” -Don Murray

Please join us as we celebrate our 40th Anniversary in 2025. Stay tuned for special events throughout the year.



IN THE BEGINNING

The evolution of Flathead Land Trust has been quite a journey! The story ignited as a group of passionate conservationists saw firsthand the consequences of the Flathead Valley's rapid growth during the 1970s and 1980s. With concern for safeguarding the Flathead Valley's open spaces, critical habitat, clean water and agricultural heritage, a group of forward-thinking conservationists coalesced. The spark for Flathead Land Trust was kindled in 1983.

THE VALOR OF VOLUNTEERS

After years of fervent discussions and planning, Flathead Land Trust incorporated in 1985. A grassroots movement sustained the organization for over a decade, fueled by volunteers often paying for project costs directly from their own pockets.

At the outset, completed projects were few and far between. It took two years before the first came to fruition - a cooperative project with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, protecting the Blasdel Waterfowl Production Area. A full year later, the first conservation easement closed, protecting Alice Sowerwine's 157 acres on Fennon Slough. Lack of time and resources became more evident over the next stretch, however. Only one more purchased conservation easement and one more cooperative project were completed during the first ten years. A full decade of volunteerism sustained the organization, and finally, in the mid 1990s, the first paid executive director was hired. Flathead Land Trust continued to grow.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

Once paid staff were on-board and a physical office was procured, conditions were conducive to undertake even more work. In order to tackle large conservation projects, it became clear that Flathead Land Trust needed to harness the power of partnership. Collaboration from multiple partners has grown over time and continues to this day. Many large conservation projects were, and continue to be, only possible through the synergy of partnership with federal, state and county agencies, other land trusts, nonprofits and tribes.

A major partnership was born in the formation of the Flathead River to Lake Initiative in the early 2000s. This incited a flurry of collaborative work along the main stem of the Flathead River from Columbia Falls to the North Shore of Flathead Lake. Passion for protecting this highly sensitive area continues to fuel the work that the Flathead River to Lake Initiative oversees. Now with over a dozen partners, nearly 9,000 acres of critical lands have been collectively conserved, adding to a network of over 14,200 acres of protected lands in this focus area.

THE CONVICTION OF COMMUNITY

Bringing together a passionate, action-oriented community was the next step. Beginning with the West Valley Wetlands project in 2018 and creation of the West Valley Bird Viewing Area, numerous projects have only been possible through the passion and philanthropy of our generous community. Since then, support of multiple large collaborative

(Continued on page 4)



(Continued from page 3)

Weaver easement, viewed from Bison Range



Johnson-Greene easement



Heart Rock Ridge easement

projects has been overwhelming. Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area, Somers Beach State Park, the Harrell Forest trails and permanent protection of the Owen Sowerwine area would never have come to fruition without collective backing.

FUELED BY FUNDING

It takes resources to conserve resources. Flathead Land Trust soon recognized that offering landowners financial options besides selling to developers was crucial for land conservation. In the early 2000s, a bare-bones staff was able to secure the first Federal Farm and Ranch Protection Grant in Montana. Now morphed into the Agricultural Land Easement Program (ALE), this federal program is vital today for Flathead Land Trust to help landowners protect farms and ranchlands. Multiple additional funding sources have been added to the repertoire over time to finance a multitude of projects. Grants through the North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA), the Heart of the Rockies Initiative Keep it Connected Program, and the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust continue to be critical for bringing conservation projects to fruition. Funding through organizations such as the Whitefish Community Foundation, the Cinnabar Foundation and AGL Foundation, and our generous donors, has also been indispensable to our progress. This list is only the tip of the iceberg! Discover all of our invaluable supporters on our website: flatheadlandtrust.org.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Our continued success branches from the dynamic and dedicated people that are actively engaged in Flathead Land Trust today, many of whom have been involved for over a decade – or several! These are the zealous people working behind the scenes and those ingrained in day-to-day missions, bringing a multitude of conservation projects to light. Facing a new wave of development, we are committed to increasing the pace of conservation. Building on the momentum created, we will continue to capitalize on the catalysts that have propelled our organization forward. We welcome you to join the next phase of our journey as we celebrate our 40th anniversary over the course of 2025.

HIGHLIGHTING RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

Several projects have already come to fruition this year, with many more busily underway. So far in 2024, we have safeguarded 1,150 acres under five conservation easements, from the Mission to the Flathead Valleys. Last newsletter, we recognized two of these easements, on the Jaquette farm in the Creston area and the Owen Sowerwine property along the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers. This issue, we are thrilled to share stories of our latest three easements on the Weaver property along Mission Creek, Luci Yeats' Heart Rock Ridge property in the Bad Rock Canyon area and the Johnson-Greene property, just north of Swan Lake.

Securing Heritage and Haven

A 122-acre ranch and wildlife haven in the Mission Valley, once platted for subdivision, has been protected in perpetuity with Flathead Land Trust. John Weaver, retired conservation biologist and land steward, added this parcel along Mission Creek just east of the National Bison Range to his conservation portfolio in April. Dr. Weaver's adjacent 159-acre property to the south, containing a section of Sabine Creek, was placed under conservation easement with Flathead Land Trust in 2015.

The newly conserved property adds to a network of protected land especially important for grizzly bear and birds. It is strategically located downstream from the Mission Mountain Wilderness, a grizzly bear stronghold, and secures a critical slice of wildlife corridor connectivity along a mile of Mission Creek, a known travel route for grizzly bear. The new Weaver conservation easement also adds to and enhances an 18,000-acre protected wetland complex providing critical nesting habitat and a vital migratory stopover in the Intermountain West portion of the Pacific Flyway. The parcel boasts diverse bird use, with 96 species flourishing in the riverine forests, wetlands, and agricultural fields.

Varied and vibrant riparian vegetation and wetlands on the Weaver easement are crucial for the health and integrity

of Mission Creek and its spring-fed tributary flowing into the property. Rare fireflies utilize the wetland and creek habitats.

Homesteaded in the early 1870s, the ranch has a rich tradition of agriculture. Over half of the property contains "farmland of local importance" as determined by the Natural Resource Conservation Service. Now permanently protected, these rich soils will be available for farming in perpetuity.

Conservation of this distinctive landscape not only safeguards the Montana way of life, our wildlife and water quality, but local residents and visitors benefit from the scenic views and open space.

Protecting Habitat and History

Thanks to Luci Yeats and her late husband, Dave, a 76.5-acre property near Bad Rock Canyon is now permanently protected. Safeguarding a vital wildlife corridor and a historic working landscape, the "Heart Rock Ridge" family farm near Columbia Falls was protected in April with a donated conservation easement through Flathead Land Trust.

Perpetuating a rich family agricultural heritage, the Heart Rock Ridge parcel is part of a family farm continuously farmed since the early 1900s. The family farm has always involved community,

(Continued on page 6)



Mission Creek on Weaver easement



Stacking hay on Heart Rock Ridge property, 1942



Foxes on Johnson-Greene easement, Photo courtesy of Hughes Goodwin

OUTREACH & FUNDRAISING

Great Fish Community Challenge

Flathead Land Trust was honored to participate in Whitefish Community Foundation's Great Fish Community Challenge for our eighth consecutive year. This year's campaign was another record-breaker, raising \$6,678,402 for 80 local nonprofits!

Flathead Land Trust raised a grand total of \$121,984, our biggest year ever! Many thanks to the generosity of 238 supporters donating nearly \$97,500, an incredible \$14,500 matching grant from the Whitefish Community Foundation's Circle of Giving donors and a \$10,000 incentive grant designated to Flathead Land Trust by Rosemary and John McKinnon. We're deeply grateful to all our donors and to the Whitefish Community Foundation and The Circle of Giving for making this vital work possible.

Owen Sowerwine Celebration

In July, together with our partners, Flathead Audubon, Flathead Lakers, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation and Montana Audubon, we celebrated permanent protection of the stunning 405-acre Owen Sowerwine property, just east of Kalispell. Over 100 community members helped to celebrate this incredible collaboration, 50 years in the making.

The celebration was an opportunity to recognize the incredible people that made it possible. Flathead Land Trust awarded our annual Conservation Leadership Awards to two incredible groups: Flathead Audubon Society and Montana Audubon, who have been

champions of the Owen Sowerwine property for decades. Special thanks to all the partners for their unwavering dedication, and to all of the generous donors to the project, especially Jim and Lisa Stack for closing the funding gap! This conservation easement, held by Flathead Land Trust, brings the dream of Owen Sowerwine, the property's namesake, to life. This dream of a protected wildlife haven and cherished community resource will live on for generations to come.

Outreach Events

In February, Laura Katzman, with Rob Domenech of Raptor View Research Institute and avian specialist Jess Garby, led a Winter Birds of Prey Tour in the Mission Valley, showcasing birds of prey using conservation projects in progress. In May and June, Flathead Land Trust hosted two guided tours of the Harrell Forest Community Trails property, which Flathead Land Trust now owns and manages. Participants enjoyed a wildflower walk with Jennifer Guse followed by an enlightening geology tour with Paul Travis.

Throughout the year, Laura Katzman, in partnership with Flathead Audubon, continued the Bird Education Program with West Valley and Bigfork 7th graders. Field trips to view the sandhill cranes in West Valley in fall, a special visit from Kari Gabriel with her live birds of prey in winter and a trip to view waterfowl migration at Church Slough in spring framed the program. Evergreen 8th graders built on their teacher-led 7th grade experience with a fall field trip to Owen Sowerwine to observe cavity-utilizing forest birds. Through these school programs, we aim to cultivate a deep appreciation for our natural world and inspire future generations to protect it.

Evergreen eighth-graders look for birds at Owen Sowerwine this fall



(Continued from page 5)

originally producing vegetables that Luci's great-grandfather carted to Whitefish by horse and wagon to sell. Luci and her two sisters are now caretakers of the family land that continues to produce vegetables and hay and support cattle. Four generations of the Loeffler and Rogers families have worked and tended the land in the shadow of Columbia Mountain, and this year Luci and Dave's son and his family will move back to the farm to live.

Luci reflected on the personal significance of conserving this legacy easement. "As a steward of this property, I appreciate the opportunity to help protect the conservation values which I have grown up with and have come to treasure more and more as the years have gone by. As a child I roamed this land, and the larger acreage now owned by my sisters. I look forward to seeing my grandchildren look for shed antlers, see the first bluebirds of spring and watch the red-tailed hawks soaring overhead."

Nestled between millions of acres of protected mountainous lands and thousands of acres along the Flathead River, the property sits in a strategic location for wildlife at a landscape scale. The Heart Rock Ridge property helps allow wildlife to travel from the Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area past an area of intense land development near Columbia Falls and downstream to protected areas along the Flathead River. Productive valley bottom and moist riparian habitats on the property provide dependable food sources for seasonal wildlife use as they travel. Grizzly bear, black bear, mountain lion, coyote, fox, elk, white-tailed deer, porcupine, and at least 75 species of birds all benefit from this wildlife haven.

"There is no better time than the present to conserve a part of our valley for future generations." *-Luci Yeats*

Wildlife and Water Quality

Lying just above Swan Lake near the confluence with Swan River, a 51-acre parcel of forested land is now permanently protected. In August, Paul Johnson and Candace Greene placed this ecological gem under a donated conservation easement with Flathead Land Trust, safeguarding habitat for birds, wildlife, and forested views for travelers along Highway 83. Preserving this wooded hillside above Swan Lake also safeguards the exceptional water quality of the lake.

The conservation easement honored family ties to the area. Paul Johnson reminisced, "Montana has been a special place to my family going all the way back to when my father drove a red bus in Glacier over 80 years ago. We are pleased to be able to preserve a small piece of what so many people love about Montana."

Previously owned by F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co, the property changed hands multiple times, and was once threatened with development. Driven by a passion for conservation, Johnson and Greene purchased this undeveloped property in 2020. Surrounded by residential neighborhoods to the south and west along the shores of Swan Lake, the newly established conservation easement offers a respite for wildlife. A vital habitat corridor just to the east and northeast consists of a patchwork of state land, Stoltze Land & Lumber Company property, and larger private parcels. This travelway connects the property to the vast expanse of the Swan Mountains within Flathead National Forest, ultimately reaching the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. This significant connection serves a diverse range of wildlife, many of which find refuge on the Johnson-Greene property. White-tailed deer, elk, black bear, mountain lion, red fox, and an estimated 63 bird species all utilize this wildlife haven.



Pam Willison of Flathead Audubon and Larry Barrin of Montana Audubon Accept 2024 Conservation Leadership Awards



FLATHEAD LAND TRUST

Conserving Our Legacy of Land and Water

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Upcoming Events



Member and Partner Appreciation Year-end Celebration, Thursday, December 12, 6:00 p.m.

Please join Flathead Land Trust board and staff at this free event as we commemorate another extraordinary year of community-based conservation! Our work is not possible without your support! We will celebrate our 2024 successes and preview 2025 with great food and drinks. This is also our annual membership meeting, so your voice will be heard as we will be asking you to vote on a change to our bylaws. We're looking forward to seeing you there! Please contact Paul at ptravis@flatheadlandtrust.org or 406-752-8293 to RSVP and for more details.



Winter Birds of Prey Field Trip, Co-Sponsored by Owl Research Institute, Saturday, February 1

Denver Holt, world-renowned owl and bird of prey expert and founder of the Owl Research Institute, and Laura Katzman of Flathead Land Trust will lead a tour of the wintering birds of prey in the Mission Valley on Saturday, February 1. The Owl Research Institute monitors raptors each winter in the Mission Valley with monthly surveys. The tour route will be based on those surveys and will include lands that are important to wintering birds of prey that are in the process of being conserved. Group size is limited and carpooling will be required. To sign up please e-mail: lkatzman@flatheadlandtrust.org.



40th Anniversary Celebration - Saturday, June 21

Save the date: Celebrating 40 years of conservation! Please join us for a picnic-style celebration on Doug and Carolyn Kohrs stunning property on the Stillwater River west of Whitefish. This gorgeous land, protected by a conservation easement through Flathead Land Trust, is the perfect spot for our celebration. Stay tuned for details!

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.