



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Conservation Success Stories Under the Current Montana Funding Situation and Examples of Priority Projects Under a New Funding Scenario

The federal Recovering America's Wildlife Act would dedicate up to \$30 million annually in existing revenue from the federal treasury to fully implement Montana's State Wildlife Action plan, increase opportunities for wildlife associated recreation and advance wildlife conservation education programs. Passage of this bill would benefit all Montanans and provide opportunities for future generations to see amazing wildlife, live surrounded by healthy wildlife habitat and enjoy the outdoors.



The following highlights just a few of the great conservation successes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and its partners have been able to achieve under past funding scenarios along with ideas for projects that could be priorities for new funding.

Photos (clockwise): birdwatching at Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area (Allison Begley), black-footed ferret (US Fish and Wildlife Service), landowner/agency workshop, chestnut-collared longspur, child at Spring Meadow State Park, grizzly bear, sage grouse, white sturgeon, greater short-horned lizard, and common nighthawk (Lee Nelson).

Priority #1: A focus on community types to work at a large landscape scale and address wide-ranging impacts. Large scale habitat conservation and restoration projects that provide long term benefits to habitat, wildlife, and people.

Success story: The National Resources Conservation Service launched the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010 as a highly targeted and science-based landscape approach to proactively conserve sage-grouse and sustain the working rangelands that support western ranching economies. This innovative partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, non-profit groups and businesses embraces a common vision – achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching. While the name of this initiative is species specific the protection of sage grouse habitat benefits 350 other sagebrush-dependent species, including songbirds like Brewer’s sparrow and green-tailed towhee, as well as game species like deer and pronghorn.

Priority project example: Montana’s Working Grasslands Initiative is designed to provide for viable populations of grassland-associated wildlife by providing voluntary, non-regulatory conservation tools to private landowners interested in retaining and enhancing Montana’s native grasslands through working lands agriculture. Globally, grasslands are the least protected and most altered of all major plant communities. Despite ongoing grassland conversion, Montana still boasts some of the last vestiges of native prairie in the United States. Northern breeding grassland birds, such as Sprague’s Pipit and Baird’s Sparrow, depend on Montana’s remaining intact grasslands as do breeding waterfowl, sharp-tailed grouse, pronghorn antelope, black-tailed prairie dog, and swift fox. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is poised to provide state-wide focus and coordination to grassland conservation through the implementation of Montana’s State Wildlife Action Plan (2015) and the Working Grasslands Initiative.



Priority #2: A focus on smaller scale geographic areas in greatest need of conservation.

Success story: A diverse group of folks calling themselves the Big Hole Watershed Committee adopted a drought management plan that called for voluntary curtailments of irrigation water use and angling when the river dropped below target levels. The introduction of a relatively new US Fish and Wildlife Service program called a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances in 2005 proved the perfect tool to implement on the ground conservation measures to jumpstart the grayling’s recovery. The agreements created site-specific conservation plans tailor made to mesh with a rancher’s operation to protect riparian habitat, improve in-stream flows, protect fish passage and keep fish from being lost in irrigation ditches. In return, ranchers who signed onto the program received peace of mind knowing they’d be protected should a judge decide that Arctic grayling belong on the endangered species list. Today, there are 33 ranching families involved in the program that’s been instrumental in doubling grayling populations since its inception.

Priority project example: The Flathead River in northwest Montana is highly prized for its wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. Restoration and conservation efforts of the river and adjacent uplands are designed to preserve and protect the functional values of the area to conserve natural values including fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, flood water retention, groundwater recharge, open space, aesthetics and environmental education along the river. This project will help maintain the habitat integrity of this portion of the river system while also exploring cottonwood forest restoration methods that may be applicable on other Montana river systems. Successful project implementation will improve habitat for over 50 native terrestrial species, fish habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, and increase opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting and fishing.

Priority #3: A focus on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) through broadscale or fine scale actions dependent on the species needs and current status; 1) Protect and enhance existing habitats that benefit SGCN, 2) Restore strategically located habitats for SGCN where habitat no longer exists, 3) Research species ecology, limiting factors, and habitat, and 4) Disease management.

Success story: Grizzly bear recovery in the Greater Yellowstone Area was successful through a combination of research, monitoring, habitat conservation, and efforts to increase human tolerance and appreciation of the species. The Greater Yellowstone Area grizzly bear population was determined to be recovered because multiple factors indicate it is healthy and will be sustained into the future. These factors include not only the number and distribution of bears throughout the ecosystem, but also the quantity and quality of the habitat available, federal agency commitments to maintain secure habitats, and the states' commitments to manage the population in a manner that maintains its secure status.

Success story: Trumpeter swans were classified as a Species of Greatest Conservation need in Montana's original State Wildlife Action Plan. The habitat needed by nesting trumpeter swans includes community types of greatest conservation need; wetland and riparian. Since 2004, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Blackfoot Challenge, the US Fish & Wildlife Service and a host of partners including private landowners have been working cooperatively to restore trumpeter swans to wetlands in the Blackfoot watershed. The goal of the program to restore the population until seven pairs of swans successfully fledge young swans for two consecutive years. 2011 marked the first year trumpeter swans successfully nested and fledged young in the Blackfoot watershed in more than 100 years. Since then, the population has continued to rebound. Blackfoot wetlands are currently hosting record numbers of trumpeter swan pairs with record productivity of over 20 young per year.



Priority project examples: 1) Black-footed ferret recovery in Montana is dependent on healthy and socially tolerated populations of black-tailed prairie dogs. Prevention and management of Sylvatic plague along with the conservation of prairie dog habitat is critical to enable reintroduction of ferrets in places where long term persistence is likely. 2) The harlequin duck is a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in every northwestern state in the US, but little is known about population status, habitat requirements, or other limiting factors. Research on how migration, connectivity, and fidelity to breeding and non-breeding habitat influence harlequin duck population persistence is necessary to guide conservation efforts for the species and its river habitat in Montana. 3) Montana's 15 species of bats are threatened with habitat destruction, disease, and intolerance by humans. Very little is known about most of these species, including basic information such as habitat use and requirements. Identifying key hibernation and breeding habitat is critical to guiding targeted conservation or protection efforts. Monitoring populations



for any sign of white-nose syndrome is critical to early response actions. Educating the public on safe ways to exclude bats from human structures and on the importance of bats is critical for long term species conservation. 4) As the mountain goat is an alpine specialist, the rapidly changing high elevation environment is raising concerns for long term persistence of the species. There is a clear need to evaluate ecology, limiting factors, and habitat to inform and develop tools that support conservation and management decisions in native mountain goat habitat.

Priority #4: A focus on short term inventory efforts to determine species status and any need for future conservation work.

Success story: Concern over declining golden eagle populations in North America has been growing over the past decade. Some nesting populations in the intermountain west have been documented to be in decline in association with reductions in native habitat and in some cases prey populations. To get better Montana-specific population information for this species, conservation partners prioritized golden eagle nest surveys beginning in 2012. During three years of surveys, many regions of the state were extensively surveyed, and golden eagle nests were found in greater number than expected. In 2015 alone, 80 active nests were found in central and eastern Montana during a search of the highest quality habit. Having more knowledge on where eagle nests are allows agencies to provide more informed management recommendations to developers such as wind energy companies. Knowing we have a large and well distributed population of nesting golden eagles lessens the risk of the species being listed under federal protections due to a lack of survey information.

Priority project examples: Learning more about Montana's Species of Greatest Inventory Need can minimize negative impacts of Endangered Species Act listings to landowners, recreationists, and other user groups by minimizing the number of species that meet listing criteria due to sparse information. Examples: 1) The chimney swift is a small bird that inhabits urban areas and has the potential to be greatly appreciated by bird watchers but also problematic when inhabiting chimneys in occupied homes. More information on this species will allow managers to manage population for long term persistence while minimizing conflict with city dwellers, 2) Northern bog lemmings are unique but poorly understood small mammals found in wet meadows, fens, or bog like environments. Lemmings in Montana are threatened primarily by habitat alteration or destruction. More information on this species' specific habitat needs may allow for more informed habitat alteration and prevent Endangered Species Act listing that could impact timber production.

Priority #5: A focus on fostering interest and involvement in the resources Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks manages through public outreach and education so that people increasingly value these resources and the experiences they provide.

Success story: Montana WILD is a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks education center located in Helena, MT. Each year Montana WILD has over 10,000 visitors come to the center to learn about conservation and Montana's fish and wildlife. Staff and volunteers teach more than 5,000 students from over 100 schools from across the state, and an additional 3,000 adults and families from community programs and youth organizations. Montana WILD teaches a host of programs on outdoor recreation, field science like bird survey methods, living with wildlife, conserving habitat, and becoming good stewards of our state's natural resources.



Priority project example: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks needs to partner with other organizations to provide outreach to a broader cross-section of the public regarding habitat conservation needs and tangible day-to-day benefits of conservation practices such as the importance of creating wetland buffers with benefits to drinking water, conserving key native wildlife habitats adjacent to sprawling communities and maintaining setbacks for retaining or restoring riparian health to protect productive agricultural fields. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks needs to partner with organizations such as the Montana Office of Tourism to create and implement a marketing campaign promoting wildlife watching.

Priority #6: A focus on 1) Providing diverse opportunities for people to connect with Montana's outdoors to meet the needs of those who use and value the resources we manage, 2) Retaining, recruiting, and reactivating participants in hunting, angling, trapping, state parks visitation, and other outdoor recreation by providing relevant and meaningful opportunities and services.

Success stories: MFWPs existing Habitat Montana program has conserved over 400,000 of acres since 1987 providing opportunities for hunters, anglers, birders, and recreation enthusiasts of all types. Montana Fish, Wildlife Parks existing wildlife and fisheries programs have successfully conserved and managed a wide array of species sought out by wildlife enthusiasts such as bald eagles, loons, and cutthroat trout. The Parks Division provides opportunities for hiking and camping in places where the opportunities to view a diverse variety of wildlife exists. Overall there are 89 designated wildlife viewing sites in Montana and 40 Important Bird Areas. Important Bird Areas are great places to bird watch and designated wildlife viewing sites typically support birds, big game, and even large carnivores.



Success story: The Hooked on Fishing program is currently reaching approximately 2,500 Montana students each year. The program is successful at meeting the needs of schools for an academically sound, yet enjoyable program for students and teachers, as well as the need of FWP to provide an educational program that builds citizens who are safe, informed, skilled, and responsible users of the states' aquatic resources. In addition, in 2017, 52,717 Montanans participated in some form of fishing program, clinic, or event. To accomplish both the Hooked on Fishing program and other fishing programs, 33,435 hours were donated by volunteer fishing instructors and other volunteers, which is equivalent to 18.6 full time employee hours.

Priority project example: More collaborative projects are needed to secure wildlife viewing opportunities like that recently completed near Kalispell. The project between MFWP and a Montana land trust created a public wildlife viewing area northwest of Kalispell. The entire project is within a high priority aquatic focal area and is critical for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and as part of a vital staging area for sandhill cranes. This area supports some of the highest numbers and diversity of wetland birds in the Flathead Valley. One hundred twenty-nine species of birds have been documented using the area including tens of thousands of waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors. This project is especially critical for sandhill cranes which use a 4-square mile staging area including this wetland during their fall migration. Over 400 sandhill cranes have been seen at one time staging in this area which also serves as a nocturnal roost site for the birds.