

Protecting Montana's Wild Places and Public Lands

Montana Wilderness Association

by Ben Gabriel

Since 1958, the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) has worked to protect our state's wild public lands. With ongoing funding from the Cinnabar Foundation, MWA continues to rally grassroots support for our work in communities throughout the state as we partner with local citizens, ranchers, small businesses, elected officials, outdoor recreation groups, and other individuals and interest groups that have a stake in the public lands we're working to protect. Our collective voice is indeed that much stronger because of the wide-ranging backgrounds and interests of our members, partners, and supporters.

Rallying for Public Lands

That collective voice resounded on January 11, 2019, when some 2,000 Montanans filled the Capitol rotunda in Helena for the Rally for Public Lands. MWA played a leading role in organizing and promoting this event during the 2019 legislative session. Public landowners from Miles City to Sanders County gathered to celebrate the outdoor way of life that defines our state and to make it clear to decision-makers that Montanans will not allow special interests to seize and exploit our public lands for private gain.

Two of Montana's biggest public land champions, U.S. Senator Jon Tester and Governor Steve Bullock electrified the crowd with speeches highlighting the importance of protecting public lands from those who would choose to transfer or sell them. Tester and Bullock also

stressed the importance of funding the infrastructure that enables us to access those lands.

Their message was heard by the legislators: Not a single bill aimed at land transfer was introduced.

Moreover, the legislature passed, and Governor Bullock signed Senate Bill 24, which provides some \$2 million in funding for state parks, trails, and fishing access sites by increasing the optional light vehicle registration fee from \$6 to \$9. This bill was one of our highest priorities for the session.

Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act Reintroduced

In June, Senator Tester reintroduced the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act (BCSA). Since then, MWA has been busy building the grassroots support he needs to get the bill through Congress.

Adding nearly 80,000 acres to the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas, the bill will permanently protect the wild Swan Front, Grizzly Basin, and the four most vital tributaries of the Blackfoot River—the North Fork of the Blackfoot River, Monture Creek, Morrell Creek, and the West Fork of the Clearwater River. Protecting these tributaries is critical for ensuring that the Blackfoot River and its native trout populations remain healthy for generations to come.

After the reintroduction of the Stewardship Act, MWA launched an intensive social media ad campaign that helped generate 500 calls to the offices of Senator Steve Daines and Congressman Greg Gianforte asking them to support the bill. We also distributed hundreds of yard signs throughout the state.

In September, MWA co-sponsored the Last Best Outdoors Fest in Missoula, featuring Senator Tester. The event highlighted Montana's \$7 billion outdoor recreation economy and the economic importance of passing the BCSA.

The Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) is one of Cinnabar Foundation's earliest and most consistently funded grantees.

First funded in 1986, MWA has received grants totaling \$332,500 for 33 of the past 34 years. MWA's grant total ranks third among Cinnabar's grantees. Only Montana Environmental Information Center (\$361,623) and Northern Plains Resource Council (\$363,000) have received more.

Protecting the Badger-Two Medicine

Sacred to the Blackfeet people, the Badger-Two Medicine is bounded by the Blackfeet Reservation, Glacier National Park, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It is the last unprotected wild land along the Rocky Mountain Front, and it is being threatened by potential development.

This year, we helped compel the holder of one of the two remaining oil and gas leases in the Badger-Two Medicine to retire the lease. We now are working with our Blackfeet and conservation partners to find a solution that would permanently protect the Badger-Two Medicine from any industrial development.

Another Banner Season for Trail Stewardship

Since 2012, MWA's Volunteer Trail Crew has been mobilizing volunteers to maintain and construct trails across the state. Project work focuses on landscapes MWA is working to protect, including the Continental Divide.

In 2019, approximately 270 volunteers worked over 5,500 hours on 63 miles of trail, including a project along the North Fork of the Blackfoot River, an area that will become designated Wilderness when Congress approves the BCSA and the act is signed into law.

MWA's work protecting Montana's wild places and public lands is powered largely by volunteers who contribute time, money and wisdom to MWA's campaigns. From volunteering on trail projects to serving on chapter and state boards, MWA's volunteers are the backbone of the organization.

MWA looks forward to many more years protecting Montana's wild public lands.



Grizzly Basin in the Swan Range, near the western boundary of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Photo: Dee Linnell Blank

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