

*"Turn me loose, set me free,  
somewhere in the middle of Montana."*  
— Merle Haggard

# A Legacy for Land and People

Although every year has its own challenges, this year has been truly difficult for our farming and ranching families. Record snowfall in February made calving season extremely difficult and contributed to livestock loss. A wet start to summer slowed crop growth, followed by a prolonged dry period and irrigation limitations.

Now, as I write to you in late October, we have bitter cold temperatures and our third measurable snowfall of the year, impacting crops and hastening the Bitterroot apple harvest. Couple these weather-related challenges with low cattle and commodity prices, and it's a challenging time for our valley's producers.

In addition to these annual challenges, a demographic shift is occurring here and throughout the country that threatens local agriculture.

## **CHANGING HANDS**

In Ravalli County, the average age of principal ag. operators is higher than the national average, at 61 years old. Over the next 15 years, around 25% of farmers and ranchers across the US will retire and 70% of family-owned agricultural land will change hands.

These facts beg the question: What can you and I do to make a difference?

We can continue to work together, partnering with local farmers and ranchers, to ensure agriculture remains a consistent economic driver, a big part of our way of life, and fundamental to our identity and character of the valley for generations.

A great example of the positive impact you've already made is the Trexler Ranch. Originally conserved in 2009 by the Wood family, it's now in the hands of the next generation, Reed and Kari Trexler. The ranch was the site of our annual Barn Dance this year.

That July evening, five generations of the Trexler family welcomed the community to

their ranch. Listening to Reed's father, Larry, describe how much it meant to him and their family, that conservation made it possible for his kids and grandkids to ranch here, felt like a coming-of-age moment for all of us.

Larry hasn't always felt this way about conservation. But now he believes deeply that conservation is a pathway for landowners to protect their family legacy.

In a community like ours, the high price of land often makes it impossible for young farmers and ranchers to get started. And it wasn't always clear to Reed and Kari that conservation could help.

Reed and Kari Trexler attest, "We knew we wanted to ranch. There's no guarantee that we could own a ranch, let alone a ranch in the Bitterroot Valley. Because this land was conserved, we were able to buy it, and continue the heritage of raising cows. Now we are ranching with our two sons Cole and Cash, raising grass-fed beef in our community."

## **BEYOND CONSERVING LAND**

Conservation is more than protecting the land, it's preserving and participating in what many would call "our Bitterroot way of life."

So buy your beef or lamb from your neighbor, get your fruits and veggies from local farm-to-market growers, and continue to support the lands and people that grow our food by supporting the mission of the Bitter Root Land Trust.

– **Gavin Ricklefs**, Executive Director

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# THE WONDER OF NATURE

The children's laughter filled the air as they played in a meadow near the bank of the Bitterroot River. Songbirds darted and dashed about, and the warmth of spring surrounded us.

The late afternoon sun shone brightly, lighting up Jessica's emerald eyes. She shared, "For our kids, and many of those on the spectrum, the world can be harsh, loud and overwhelming."

Jessica Fitzpatrick is the director of Heartism, a non-profit (a project of BRRC&D) that brings learning opportunities and a true sense of community to children with autism and their families. BRLT partnered with Heartism for an activity on the future Skalkaho Bend Park in May.

Excited to take the kids to the future parkland, Jessica smiled and said, "Nature is a refuge, a place of comfort and peace to pause, take in

serenity, and interact with the world in a more subtle way. Nature has no expectations to fill or societal norms to be held to."

Children with autism can be overwhelmed by their surroundings, including loud noises, too many people, and bright lights.

A report commissioned by Natural England revealed that when children with autism were engaged in outdoor activities, they



experienced increased levels of calm, increased levels of patience, and a willingness to join the group.

### **COME AS YOU ARE**

“Watching our kids outside, you could see and feel the release of tension and control that many live with. You could almost hear and see their bodies expand and move: smiles on their faces, waving of their arms, feet and legs moving freely, like a kite getting ready to take off and fly,”

says Jennifer Wiezel, Heartism board member, of the visit.

With Skalkaho Bend Park opening soon, children of all needs and abilities won’t have to go far to experience freedom, joy, and the relaxing effects of nature.

Conservation helps achieve that.

As Jessica puts it, “We are grateful the community supports the conservation of pristine lands and

delicate ecosystems in hopes that future generations can experience these wonders and benefits of our natural world.”

Jessica wants her daughter, Sequoia, and all children to know, “Nature says come as you are. You are accepted and held in beauty.”

Thanks to caring people like you, Sequoia and all children in our community will have this special place along the river for generations to come.



# RUNNIN' BEAR RANCH

STEVENSVILLE

Long days, and even longer nights on their dairy farm in southern Idaho didn't stop Doug and Janis Astle from pursuing their dream to ranch in the Bitterroot. In fact, it fueled their desire to one day work the land here.

If you asked the Astles, they'd say they're like anyone else, just living life, taking one day at a time. However, their story is anything but ordinary.

Many years ago, Doug and Janis traveled each year to western Montana for their sons' football clinic. What started as a visit of necessity, turned out to be something they looked forward to every spring.

*“There's always someone that needs a little space to have cows or whatever they'd want to farm. And if we don't set some of this aside in this valley, that opportunity will disappear faster than we might realize.”*

Struck by the rugged beauty of the mountains and the river, they made it their goal to ranch here one day. Janis' eyes twinkled with the memories of those visits, “We just fell in love with this place, the Bitterroot Valley.”

#### **A HARSH REALITY**

The reality is, it's not easy to find large tracts of land for farming and ranching in the valley.

The average parcel size in the valley is nine acres. That makes it difficult for farmers and ranchers, especially the next generation, to start and expand their own ag operation. The good news is, conservation is making a difference.

This momentum in the Bitterroot, exemplified by the Burnt Fork area, is making it possible for farm and ranch lands to stay intact and thrive. That's exactly what drew Doug and Janis here: to continue ranching and ultimately to conserve their ranch.

Doug adds, “I know what it took for us to get this land. So I think, oh my gosh, there's other folks like us--where in heavens are they going to find this? Land that's not broken up?”

The Astles were given a warm welcome by neighbors and other ranchers, like Jim and Sharon Schroeder.

Sharon recalls, “When we talked with them



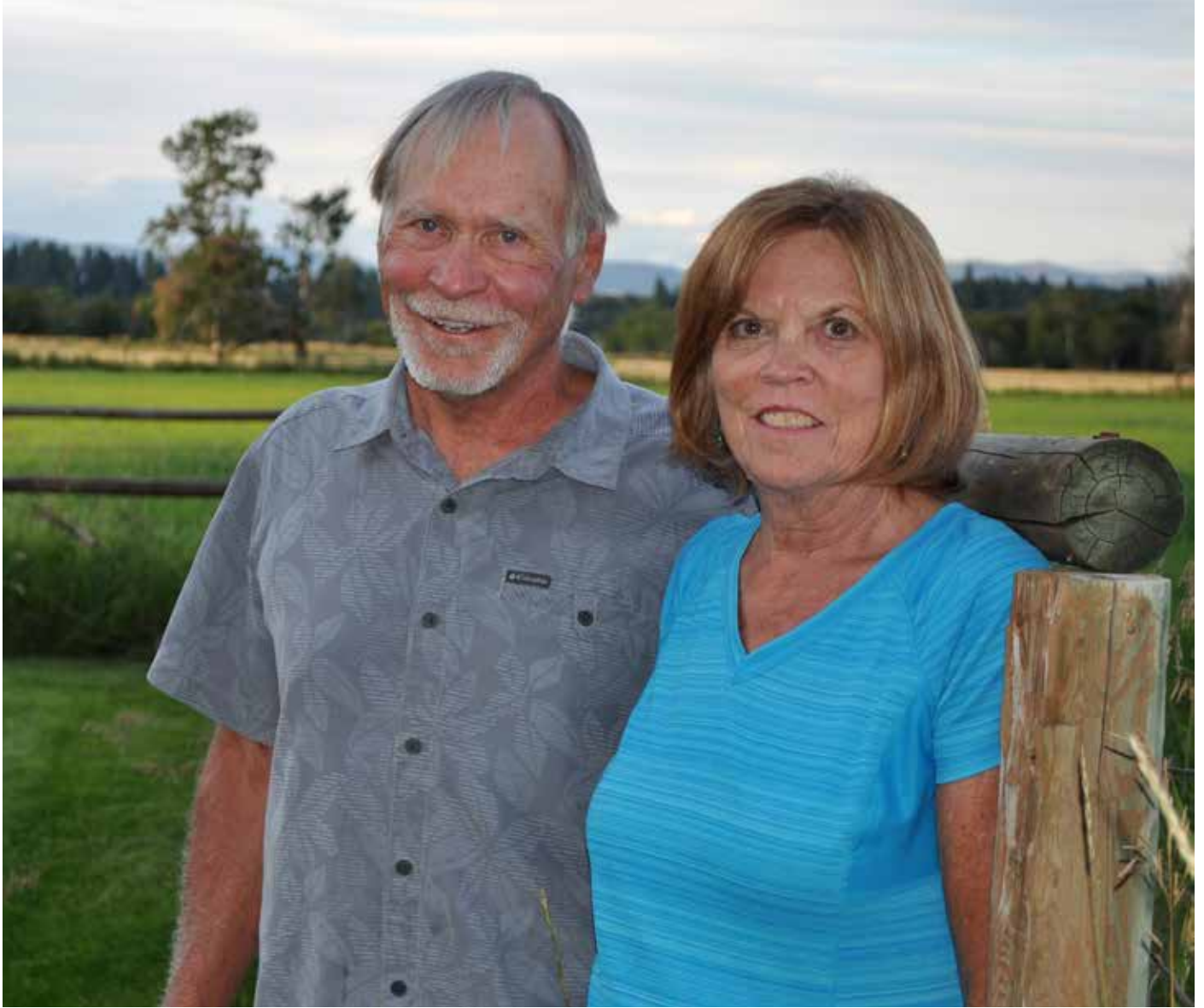
about our conservation easement, and how they could become part of that community, they were intrigued to hear more. It is comforting to know that the ground you love and nurture will be preserved in perpetuity and that you are making the right decision for future generations. We are thankful we live in a neighborhood where we share that value of preserving agricultural lands and are grateful to the Astles for joining the Burnt Fork community.”

#### **WITHOUT A DOUBT**

There's no doubt Doug and Janis believe they made the right decision, “We were drawn to this valley by the incredible beauty, and especially to the ag lands. What sealed the deal though, was the people. They were all so good to us. So this—conserving this ranch—is how we can give back.”

The Astles are thinking long-term about who will need this land in the future. “There's always someone that needs a little space to have cows or whatever they'd want to farm. And if we don't set some of this aside in this valley, that opportunity will disappear faster than we might realize.”

Thanks to the Astles, and thanks to you, we can set some land aside for the future. The next generation farmer or rancher will have the opportunity and the freedom to work the land, raise cows, or grow crops.



## A Decision From the Heart

### **SEVERSON FLYING E RANCH, STEVENSVILLE**

“You know, maybe I’m sacrificing a little bit, but it’s really, really minimal compared to what my grandmother and my dad did before me. They are the ones that held this place together.” Dan’s eyes twinkled in the warm light of the afternoon sun that shone through tall, oversized windows in his upstairs family room.

You wouldn’t know it now, but for a time this room of the 120-year-old house on Severson’s Flying E Ranch was called “home” by chickens. That was decades ago, when world wars and economic decline took their toll on the Bitterroot Valley.

The family, and the ranch, would prove to be stronger than their circumstances.



“It used to be you had to subdivide the land for it to be valuable and sell it. But now, with tools like conservation easements, the land can continue to be farmed and it’s good for the community.”

It was Dan’s grandmother, Toi Long Logan, who spent a lifetime caring for the ranch, working hard, and paying off debts, so they wouldn’t lose the land—all the while putting herself and her two daughters through college. After World War II, Dan’s dad came home and got to work rebuilding the ranch right alongside the whole family.

When the ranch was passed down to Dan, he contemplated how to honor their sacrifice and hard work, and secure the future of the ranch.

### **A TURNING POINT**

Then, in 2006, Ravalli County voters passed the Open Lands bond program which provides funding to conserve water, wildlife habitat, and working farms and ranches.

It was a turning point for Dan. To him, it meant that the people of this valley were willing to come together to protect our beautiful valley and rural way of life.

After he and Debbie conserved the ranch in 2011, Dan recalls, “When my neighbors started telling me they were glad about what we did, that meant everything to me.”

Since then, over 2,400 acres have been protected with nine local families, in the Burnt Fork alone. The area includes 15 miles of streams and creeks, varied wildlife habitat for birds, deer and elk, and

large amounts of productive hay ground.

For Dan, it was a decision made 100% from his heart. “The feeling of protecting this place—second only to seeing your kids grow up right. I have four kids—two sons and two daughters—and now it’s possible for this farm to continue for future generations of my family or another family that believes in the importance of agriculture for the community.”



While there may still be pressure for some farmers and ranchers to subdivide, it’s because of you—our supporters—the land trust can continue to work with families like the Seversons, and help them figure out if conservation is right for them.

# Noxious Weeds on the Run

## SKALKAHO BEND PARK UPDATE

A lot has happened down at the future Skalkaho Bend Park the past few months. At the end of August, we paired-up with the Hamilton High School cross-country team to knock-out some noxious weeds at the future park.

The runners were excited to volunteer their time removing weeds, getting the park ready for the public.

Sophomore Colter looked up from a patch of knapweed, “We need more land that’s close by for people to use. Having the river run right through is so important.”

The cross-country team looks forward to adding the future park to their training route because it’s so close to home and school. Team member Jake wants parents and teachers to know, “It’s important to protect lands for the community, being able to bike, fish, run. It’s not always easy for people to get to the river and have access to outdoor activities.”

Creating this park with you--our supporters--is a momentous accomplishment for the entire community. Caring for the land is the next step. We’ve only just begun with volunteer projects like this.

As Cheyenne, a sophomore on the team, puts it, “I always want to give back. I’m glad I get the opportunity. I’ve lived outside of Montana, and the truth is, you don’t have places like this--mountains, rivers, nature. We get to run here. It makes you feel lucky and grateful.”

And she feels lucky because of you.

Passionate supporters like you who make it possible to bring more young people to land and water, in a way that is meaningful to them.

With your help, we will connect more people to each other and to conservation in 2020 than ever before. Cheers to a new year and new opportunities!

## It’s your community. How will you make an impact?

Volunteering can be a great way to learn something new, or share your expertise. It can be a fun way to make new friends, or introduce someone to the land trust.

Would you like to help, but not sure where to start? The first thing to do is give Emy Royce, Communications Director, a call at (406) 375-0956, or send her an email at [emy.royce@bitterrootlandtrust.org](mailto:emy.royce@bitterrootlandtrust.org). She’d love to connect you with a volunteer opportunity that matches your interests, and keep you up to date on upcoming opportunities.



# IT'S BECAUSE OF YOU...

THE LAND, THE  
FORESTS, THE WATERS,  
THE WILDLIFE, AND OUR  
WAY OF LIFE ARE SAFE



## LOOKING OUT FOR TOMORROW, WITH A PLANNED GIFT TODAY

Do you see and feel the changes happening around our beautiful valley?

Each day the struggles our farmers and ranchers face become more acute; wildlife habitat becomes more fractured; the strain on our water resources increases; and children, bombarded with technology, social media, and screen time, desperately need connections to nature, close to home.

**With all of these pressures facing rural Montana, are you looking ahead, wondering “what will the Bitterroot Valley be like decades from now?”**

Thankfully, you have the ability to make a difference for the future of this special place.

You can make a greater impact that goes beyond your lifetime, with a gift through your will or

trust. Perhaps you’ve thought, “I don’t have that kind of money,” or “I don’t have that much land.” Or maybe you’re not sure where to start.

The good news is, it’s easy to start a conversation about your vision for the future, and how conservation can help.

For confidential discussions related to planned giving options that include gifts of land, naming the land trust in your will, trust, or other estate plan, please contact Gavin Ricklefs at 406-375-0956, or send him an email at [gavin.ricklefs@bitterrootlandtrust.org](mailto:gavin.ricklefs@bitterrootlandtrust.org). We look forward to listening to your passion for conservation, and how you want to help.

If you have already included us in your estate plans, let us know so we can thank you for your leadership.



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*Conserving the Bitterroot Valley's water, wildlife, and working lands for all generations, with you.*

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### YOU'RE INVITED...

## Something Special Awaits You

Are you looking for the perfect gift? We might just have the very thing. Bring your family and friends and enjoy art inspired by the beauty of our local waters, wildlife, and working lands. Talented artists from around the Bitterroot Valley will display paintings, pottery, textiles, jewelry and more at the fourth annual Art and Conservation Open House to raise funds for local land conservation. You can hang out and chat with us too. We'll have hot cocoa, holiday treats, and live acoustic music to warm your heart and soul while you admire how these artists have captured what makes our region so special.

**Where:** Bitter Root Land Trust Office, 170 S Second St, Suite B Hamilton, Montana.

**When:** Friday, December 13 from 5pm to 8pm and Saturday, December 14th, from 11am to 2pm

**For more details, visit our Facebook page or give us a call.**



Do you want the latest updates on conservation projects, volunteer opportunities and events? Sign up for eNews at:

[bitterrootlandtrust.org](http://bitterrootlandtrust.org)  

Artwork: Bobbi Dye