

"These birds need open and varied habitats for rest and food, especially in winter. That makes conserving farms and ranches and other open lands critical to their survival."

– Kate Stone, Bitterroot Audubon



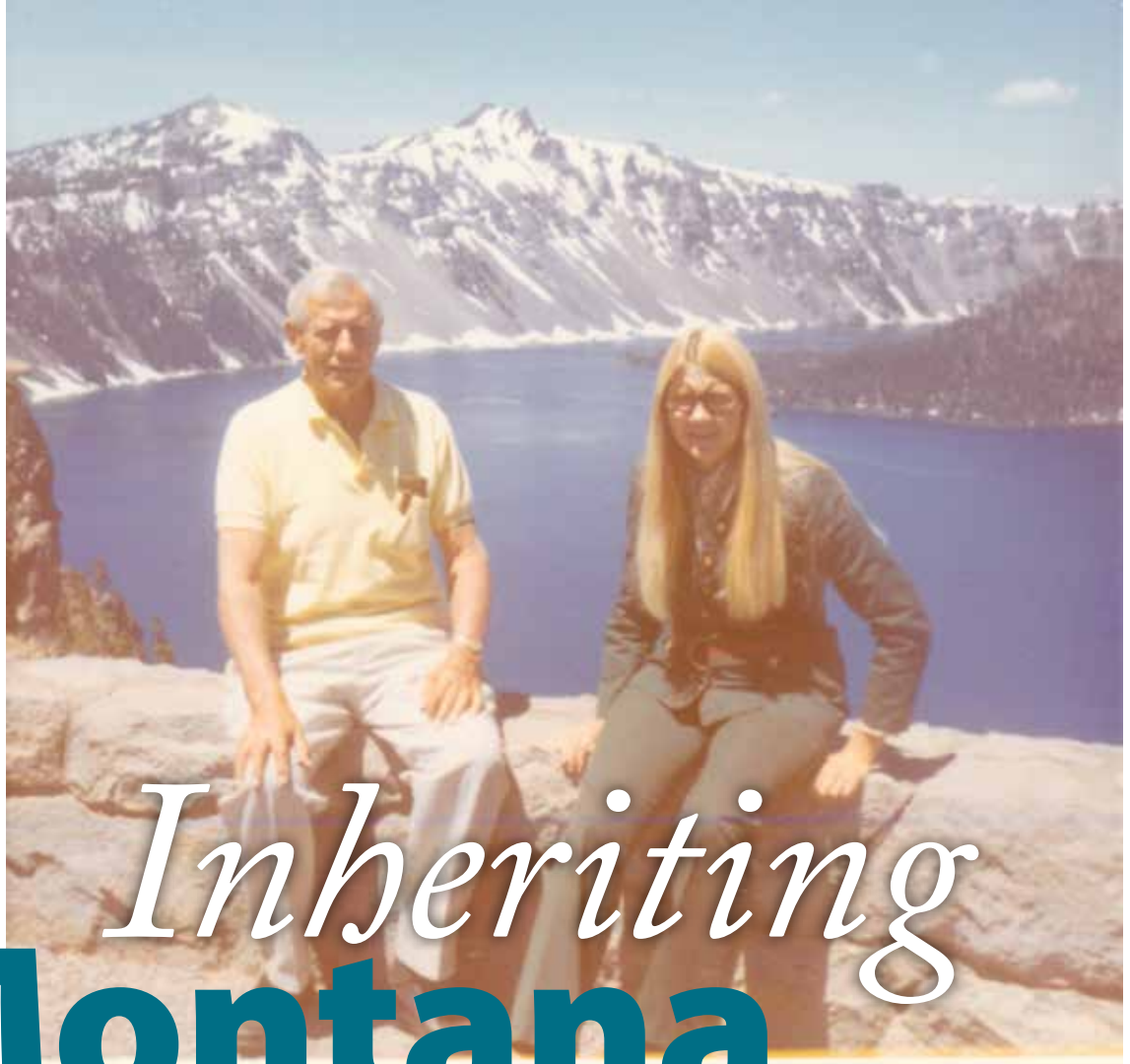


Photo courtesy of: Jean Steele

Inheriting Montana

It's almost certain that you've needed to restructure your daily living in some way due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Personal Story

Jean Steele
Outgoing Board
President

In contrast to this unpredictable hardship, we are offered not only the freedom, but also the comfort and permanence of open spaces here in Montana. As we navigate these unprecedented times, I look back on my life, and I'm reminded why I love the Bitterroot Valley so very much and how important it is to pass on this heritage...

My father commuted two hours a day to his office so that I could have the benefit of great schools and a yard. Other than a beautiful variety of birds, the only wildlife I experienced were squirrels and an occasional rabbit. Yet my father wanted me to know the natural world: Among my birthday presents was a subscription to National Geographic.

Besides his engineering work, I don't think there was much Dad liked about the city; his heart was always in Montana.

Introducing family and friends to Montana was my father's way of showing people his heart and mind. He brought my mother (a real city girl) here on their honeymoon. Later, Montana friends described her first fishing trip: She appeared for the day's outing clad all in white—a silk blouse, linen trousers, and smart sandals. My father looked at her appraisingly and shook his head.

They were meeting friends at a favorite spot, but the trail went down a steep side-hill through a burn. My mother was one of the most liberated and independent women I've known, but that day she gamely followed Dad, sliding sometimes and climbing over logs.

Through the ordeal she somehow became a convert: She loved our family's yearly fishing trip to Libby.

It was the highlight of my year as well. Even as a small child, as we traveled to western Montana, I anxiously looked for mountain peaks to come into view on the eastern front

and, as we headed back to the city, sat backwards in the car, sadly watching them recede. And yet, from the trip, I think our family always gained sustenance that would take us to the next year.

It would carry us through one of the most difficult times of our lives.

My mother died when I was a teen. It inspired my father to live that lifelong dream—move to western Montana. Its majestic mountain ranges and clean flowing rivers helped to heal us and brought us closer together.

High school weekends and college breaks were spent camping and wade-fishing streams all over Western Montana with my Dad. He could seldom resist driving along a body of water without testing a fly. In wet tennis shoes and jeans, his casting was precise, and his success was uncanny. He'd move on to the next promising hole while I remained in the bushes, trying to untangle my fly. Finally freed, I'd slosh along after

him, trying to keep up.

Dad always said the best part of river and stream fishing was the new, beautiful view around every bend. Now each morning I walk my dog, Argyll, and spend several minutes gazing at the scenery before me, just like my dad.

My life has been shaped by that inherited love and appreciation for the natural world because of those precious moments spent with my dad outdoors.

Now I get to work with you, conserving what makes the Bitterroot Valley such a wonderful place to live. Together, we create nature parks for children and families, conserve our most precious resource—water—and partner with local farmers and ranchers to protect our rural way of life.

Thank you for passing on the love of land to your children, family, friends, and community, conserving the lands that matter most and keeping our beautiful valley the special place it is.

Did you know?

This Montana state fish is a species of concern and needs clean, cold, abundant water to thrive and spawn in. Westslope cutthroat trout primarily feed on aquatic insects and zooplankton. They get their name from the distinctive red “slash” on their jaw line.

The Westslope cutthroat's population has been seriously reduced by breeding with rainbow trout, habitat degradation, and increasing water temperatures. That means the river and stream conservation you make possible on the Bitterroot River, its forks, and tributaries gives this icon of the Big Sky its best chance to thrive in the future.





A FAMILY TRADITION CONTINUES

Gates Family Farm, LoneRock

With the rich soil of Lone Rock under his feet and a calm, clear winter sky above, Sam Gates looks around the family farm with great joy and satisfaction. He and his siblings recently conserved their 160-acre farm, honoring what their parents had worked so hard to create 65 years ago.

Sam's deep voice carried the love he has for his father, "This is what he wanted to do. This is where he wanted to be."

When you first get to the large, white farmhouse, some very vocal geese and chickens make your acquaintance, while friendly cats and dogs await your affections. Their large field, with views of St. Mary's to the west, is irrigated and leased to local folks. The Gates parents, Joseph and Lois, used to grow different crops and had good success raising pigs for a time.

Sam reminisces about simpler times. “There are just so many memories wrapped up in this place,” he said. “All of these things that have tied us together as a family are right here in this place where we grew up. My brother and I chased each other all over these 160 acres.” He motioned to the field, the creek, and the willows, “We were renegades, just running wherever we wanted up and down the creek. We had so much freedom.”

YOU CAN ALWAYS GO HOME

Life isn't quite so simple anymore. Children, even rural kids, aren't as connected to the natural world, playing in fields or running through the trees like Sam and his siblings did. Often they don't get to spend as much time with other family members like grandparents. That won't be the case for this family, or this farm.

“I definitely didn't want to see this place broken up,” Elizabeth Gates said. “I never would have been able to come back here again if that had happened.” Sam's daughter, Elizabeth, and her partner are raising their infant daughter on the farm, carrying on a family tradition. “I cherish the childhood

memories I have here, spending precious time with my grandmother.”

Now four generations of the Gates family have made this farm their home. While his siblings live close by in Missoula, Sam lives on the farm and will see his granddaughter grow up here, play in the same creek, and enjoy the same freedom he felt as a boy.

“I think my dad is smiling down at us right now and I think mom would be too now that we've completed the process. It's a wonderful thing when you know that you can always go home.”

Sam feels good about the decision to conserve the farm. “Right from the very first time that we started talking about it, everyone was on board,” he said. “I think my dad is smiling down at us right now and I think mom would be too now that we've completed the process. It's a wonderful thing when you know that you can always go home.”

It's incredible what happens when we come together to protect this special way of life that is uniquely Bitterroot. This is something we can all be proud of.



Photos: Elizabeth Gates

A Decision That Inspires

SYLVESTER'S SUNSET BENCH

Blue skies overhead, and the perfume of blooming sagebrush still in the air. Views in every direction. The bench we were standing on is perched just to the south of the Burnt Fork drainage, where nearly 3,000 acres of working lands have been conserved over the last decade.

Mike Sylvester and partner, Megan Hanson, look around at the ground they recently protected and think about what might have been. These 155-acres were slated for development. The land was subdivided and complete with septic, wells, and underground electrical.

"This is the right thing to do." Mike smiled and took a deep breath, "Other parts of the country have already changed so much. To have these open spaces is amazing."

Mike and Meghan saw a brighter, more open future for the land. This was one of those special pockets in the Bitterroot Valley that could either be kept intact, or become part of the valley's escalating changes on the land.

IT'S WORKING

"It's a secluded haven for wildlife like turkeys, eagles, and deer in the sagebrush and ponderosa pine forest on Sunset Bench," says Mike. Some white-tailed deer on the ridge grab their attention for a moment.

Conservation has made the difference here. What could have been a dramatic shift to the character of the Sunset Bench and the wildlife that live here has, instead, been protected for the next generation. This landowner-driven tool—the conservation easement—is keeping land and our Bitterroot way of life intact.

"My hope is that this inspires more conservation and more landowners."

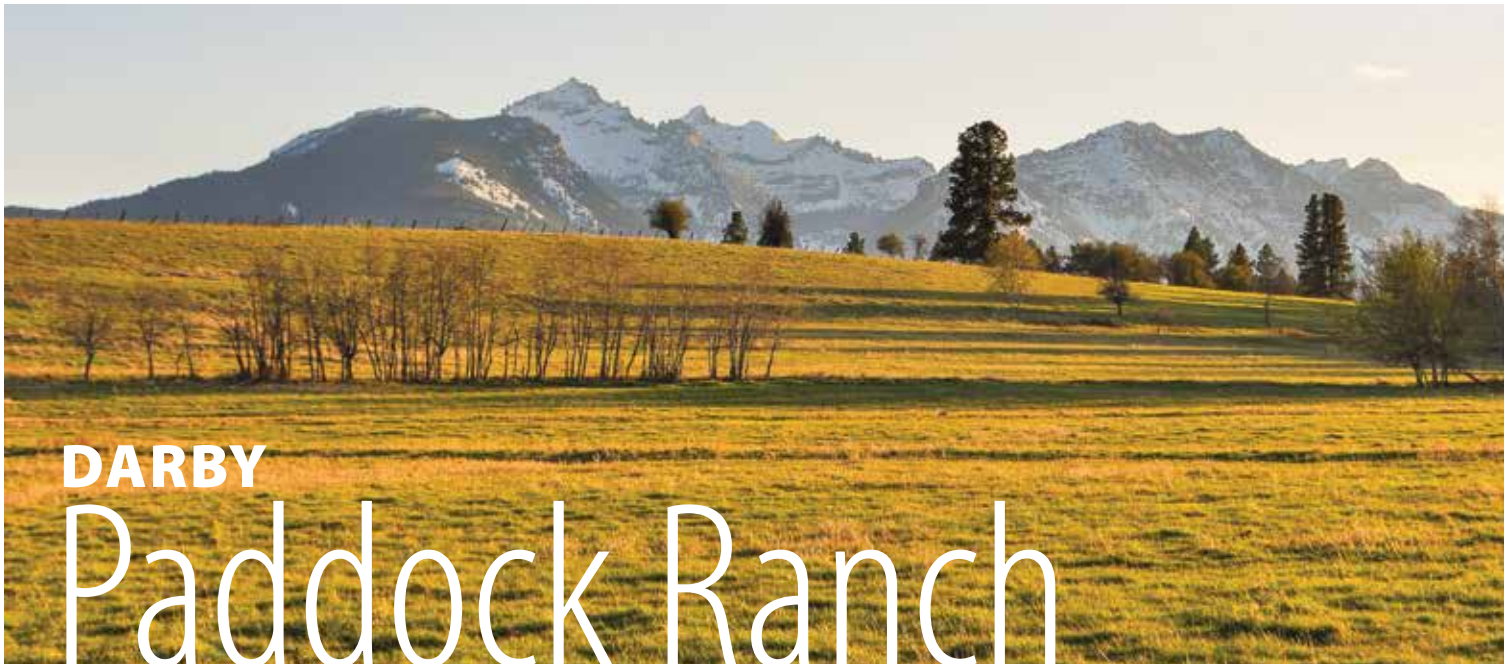
"We feel fortunate to have the option to have this choice." Mike continues, "The decision was clear: These are special places. They're not making any more of these."

Mike looks at Megan and says, "My hope is that this inspires more conservation and more landowners."

Caring supporters like you and passionate landowners like Mike and Meghan are why conservation can be a solution, safeguarding the character and integrity of the Bitterroot Valley.

Thanks to you, it's working.





DARBY

Paddock Ranch

Anna Mae Paddock sat at the kitchen table, bathed in light from the windows, surrounded by dozens of lush house plants that cover nearly every flat surface of the room. The greens and golds inside were a stark contrast to the two feet of blinding white snow and piercing blue winter sky outside.

It's a good day, Anna Mae was the first landowner to conserve her family ranch this year (2020). Paddock Ranch sits in a critical corridor for wildlife between Lake Como and the Bitterroot River. Adjacent to a number of other conserved lands, her family ranch is now protected in perpetuity.

"It's community-supported, local programs like the Open Lands Program that make conservation possible for many landowners."

THE TIMING WAS RIGHT

"I don't want the land to be broken up," Anna Mae stated. Over the years, her parents had to sell off parts of their land to keep the ranch going. That can be overwhelming for families. The ranch is their business, their livelihood, and a big part of their personal identity. After years of running the ranch herself, the time was right. Anna Mae reached out to BRLT, and learned about the conservation options available in the Bitterroot, including the voter-approved Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program.

"I couldn't have done this without it," said Anna Mae of the Open Lands Bond. It wasn't an option for Anna before the community approved the Open Lands Program in 2006, and protecting the ranch didn't seem possible. It's community-supported, local programs like the Open Lands Program that make conservation possible for many landowners.

Anna Mae has a close connection to the wildlife that roam her ranch, having lived there nearly her entire life. "Just the first five years of my life were spent in Stevensville. All of the rest, I've been here." She takes comfort in knowing the wildlife will continue to traverse the ranch. "There is a meadowlark out there that kind of scolds me when I go up the hill. They seem to like it best, more or less, away from the people. And once in a while, there's a blue jay. You don't see them much—they like the pine trees."

HERE TO STAY

A good portion of the property has old pine forests, open benches with stunning views of the Three Sisters (Como Peaks), and Rock Creek flows nearby. This is critical habitat for wildlife for the myriad birds Anna Mae enjoys watching on her walks around the ranch.

Community support of the Open Lands Bond guarantees family ranches like Anna Mae's will be here for generations as a strong economic driver and keep wildlife corridors intact. It takes a whole community coming together to ensure ranches like these are here to stay. Thanks to you, this ranch is.



What Can the Birds Teach Us?

I'm amazed every time I see birds like Snow Buntings, Blue Jays, or Golden Eagles. Rare sightings in the Bitterroot Valley, and such a joy to see flitting about or coursing high overhead. The interesting thing is we don't know as much as we could about these birds or the many other birds that spend the winter here in our beautiful open lands.

We need a better understanding, and to do that, I asked some of my neighbors in the Burnt Fork area of Stevensville if they'd mind me walking their farms and ranches to collect information for the Stevensville Christmas Bird Count (CBC). The entire count area is 177 square miles from the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, to parts of the Bitterroot National Forest, to

all variety of private lands.

My neighbors did more than welcome me; they joined me in the count.

On a clear, cold December morning, my cheerful group of volunteers traversed two of the ranches that anchor the conservation neighborhood in the Burnt Fork: Severson's Flying E Ranch and the Sunset Bench Ranch, both conserved several years ago.

Many thanks to Dan and Debbie Severson, and Jim and Sharon Schroeder for welcoming us and joining the count.

Alan Maki (Corvallis rancher) and Kyle Anderson (BRLT Stewardship Coordinator) joined this fun bird-venture, and my parents even made an appearance. We were quite the crew! We wandered through the Burnt Fork's tangled riparian areas,



Photo: Merle Loman

Bird list for our CBC adventure:

Canada Goose	33
Mallard	8
California Quail	8
Ruffed Grouse	1
Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	45
Eurasian Collared-Dove	19
Mourning Dove	12
Great Blue Heron	1
Golden Eagle	1
Cooper's Hawk	1
Bald Eagle	4
Red-tailed Hawk	17
Red-tailed Hawk (Harlan's)	2
Rough-legged Hawk	1
Downy Woodpecker	2
Blue Jay	1
Black-billed Magpie	36
Common Raven	10
Black-capped Chickadee	16
White-breasted Nuthatch	1
Pygmy Nuthatch	32
European Starling	6
Townsend's Solitaire	4
House Sparrow	80
House Finch	9
Snow Bunting	1
American Goldfinch	5
American Tree Sparrow	3
Dark-eyed Junco	1
Song Sparrow	1
Red-winged Blackbird	2

open pastures, hayfields, fragrant juniper woodland, and ponderosa pine stands. Along the way, we identified many bird species that have unique winter habitat needs.

For 55 years, the Stevensville CBC, has been connecting people to the importance of habitat and shaping our understanding of winter birds. Many volunteers collect this information, which is used to look at long-term trends in species' distribution and abundance. What we've intuitively known, and now know from the years of scientific data, is that these birds need open and varied habitats for rest and food, especially in winter. That makes

conserving farms and ranches and other open lands critical to their survival.

THE MORE WE KNOW

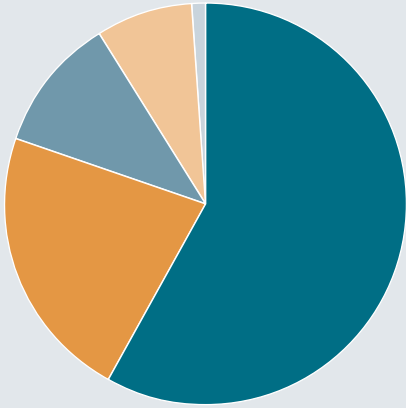
Most CBC observers remarked that bird abundance and activity seemed low this year; mild weather and lack of snowpack mean birds don't concentrate at low elevations. Our group had a similar experience—not a ton of birds, but many unique sightings.

The Stevensville CBC is special in terms of the sheer number of birds and types of bird species counted each year. The more we know, the better off these birds and their habitat will be.

—Kate Stone, *Bitterroot Audubon*

Projects like these are made possible by volunteers from all backgrounds—farmers, ranchers, biologists, and people of all ages and abilities. If you'd like to be a part of the Stevensville Christmas Bird Count next time, email stevicbc@gmail.com.

HOW YOU MADE A DIFFERENCE IN 2019



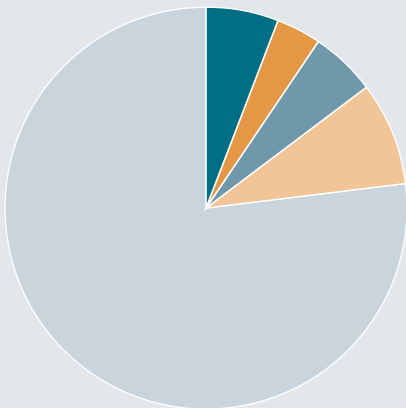
INCOME SOURCES

- Conservation Acquisition Funds* \$1,210,690
- Individual Donations \$462,861
- Private Foundations \$226,833
- Government Grants \$163,410
- Investments \$19,110

Total: \$2,082,904.00

*Conservation Acquisition Funds:

- USDA Farm Bill
- Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program
- State of Montana Recreational Trails Program



EXPENSES

- Education and Outreach Programs \$109,417
- Administration \$69,743
- Fundraising \$98,612
- Land Stewardship Programs \$157,874
- Conservation Easement Programs \$1,439,474**

Total: \$1,875,120

**Includes both Conservation Acquisition pass-through expenses and other program-related funds (Conservation Acquisition funds pass-through directly to local landowners and don't appear on BRLT's 990)

THANK YOU

When You Come Together For Conservation, Everything Is Possible

2019 was an incredible year for conservation in the Bitterroot. There is so much to be proud of, not just in acres conserved, but also in lives changed.

Thanks to you, and so many in our community:

- Conserved open lands from Lone Rock to Darby kept wildlife corridors intact in 2019 for moose, elk, eagles, osprey, sandhill cranes, bats, fox, butterflies, and moths.
- 4 hardworking, Bitterroot families have realized their dreams by conserving their working farms and ranches.
- Multiple community parkland projects continue to move forward and will connect people from all walks of life to the beauty and wonder of the Bitterroot Valley.
- Community connections are at an all-time high. Elder walks at Steve Powell Park, the Barn Dance, working lands tours, and educational activities at the future Skalkaho Bend Park have brought more people to the land than ever before.

Together, we are connecting families and children to the water, wildlife, and working lands of the valley to ensure this place we call home will be here for generations to come.

Because of you, tomorrow looks better, brighter, and more open.

GOOD NEWS

YOU'RE SHAPING THE FUTURE

Conservation in the Bitterroot will receive a huge boost over the next five years. BRLT and local partners have secured a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to support landowner-driven conservation efforts on local family farms and ranches.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Big picture, this means our community will have more resources available to help local agriculture and local ag. families flourish, more of our beautiful Bitterroot Valley will be protected and passed down to future generations, and more productive local farmland that grows our food will be available to enhance our economy, heritage, and way of life.

That is an incredible step forward for conservation in the Bitterroot.

RCPP is a Farm Bill program focused on locally-driven conservation partnerships. It is a prestigious, highly competitive multi-year, multi-million dollar award that expands the range of farmers and ranchers we can work with - from large acreage traditional cattle and hay production, all the way to small scale, direct-to-consumer, local vegetable farms and everything in between.

KEEPING IT LOCAL

For the past ten years, BRLT has partnered with the NRCS to insure your generous support and local Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program are leveraged to the fullest extent with Farm Bill

conservation dollars. Together, we have built a model for local working lands conservation.

This RCPP funding is for Bitterroot Valley land conservation transactions only. It will go directly to willing private landowners, farmers, and ranchers who wish to voluntarily conserve their farms and ranches right here in Ravalli County.

It's the result of a strong collaborative effort between BRLT, the Local Working Group, the Right to Farm & Ranch Board, the Open Lands Board, and the NRCS. We are grateful for their partnership, and look forward to working with them to implement this funding over the coming years.

A NEW CHAPTER

You and many other supporters are the link to making this grant a success and making a real difference for the people of the Bitterroot Valley. We are thrilled to work with local landowners, our local partners, NRCS, and you. Together, we'll honor our agricultural heritage, and enhance our economy and way of life for future generations.

Thanks to you this exciting new chapter of local conservation has begun.

You can stay up to date on the progress of this grant and other success stories in real-time by signing up for the eNews email on our website homepage bitterrootlandtrust.org.





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for all generations, with you.*

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**Look inside
for a special
announcement!**

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