

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST

# LEGACY

*"Supporting open lands is supporting a tremendous amount of moving parts that sustain this valley, and keep it in the hands of the people that understand it, and keep it producing."*

— Julie Sundblom



# Looking Ahead

As 2020 has come to a close and we all look forward to the promise of a better new year, I have been overcome with appreciation for you, your support for conservation, and the community we have built together around our shared love of the Bitterroot Valley.

What I value most about the conservation work you make possible is that it is one of the clear, positive,

community-supported shared victories during a very difficult period in our history. It transcends politics, it provides solace and reflection (at a time when both are needed more than ever). It brings the community together around the shared values—and it is not mired in the difficulties of the moment.

Conservation is forward looking: Our community conserves this special place – our local agriculture, wildlife, fisheries, and community access to the river – for future generations.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Engaging in this work gives all of us a chance to get outside the challenges of this particular moment in history and invest in something that transcends mask-wearing, transcends a broken political system, transcends the economic uncertainty and financial ruin that so many are experiencing.

This too shall pass, and when it does, we can all stand together and look back at the collective investments we've made in our working lands, wildlife, water, and recreation, and know we did something (during such a difficult time in our generation's history) that made a positive difference to future generations.

In the spirit of appreciation, thank you for being a critical part of this forward-looking work. I'm humbled by all that we've accomplished together. I hope you enjoy the inspiring stories of others in our community whose actions positively impact the Bitterroot's future.

– Gavin Ricklefs  
Executive Director



# A Young Girl Dreams of MONTANA



Do you remember that very moment when you knew Montana was the place you wanted to be?

I was young when I first fell in love with this place. At age 13, I attended a teenage girls' horseback riding camp located on the east side of Flathead Lake.

Even then, I knew how lucky I was.

The camp was attended by girls from all over the country and produced many long-lasting friendships. We all met in Chicago and rode the train together for three days and two nights to get to Whitefish.

We knew each other well before we even got to camp.

Rocky Bar O was a beautiful, large working ranch situated right on the banks of Flathead Lake. In spite of the resident leeches, we campers canoed and swam daily in the lake, even putting on a one-time water-ballet

show for the local community.

There was a cherry orchard we were allowed to raid, and a steep hill at the back of the property that we climbed many evenings to watch the sunset, marvel at the stars, or to sneak out to the store shaped like a teepee near the highway to buy candy.

Each camper was given a horse of her own to ride, groom, saddle, bridle and love for the summer. We took trail rides in the morning, came back for lunch and a rest period, then rode again in the afternoon. We took pack trips into Glacier National Park and, as older, more experienced riders, we were allowed to help wrangle the horses back to camp.

We were "real cowgirls" and the wranglers were "real cute" too.

*"It was right then I realized how easily land could be altered. I burst into tears at the sight of the sad transformation."*

## MAGIC OF MONTANA

Each year I would carry home on the train, a small pine tree stuffed into a No. 10 tin can to plant in my backyard, hoping that the magic of Montana somehow would sink roots in Missouri.

Fast forward many years later, after I was married to my

husband, Bob, we took road trips out West. One summer, we were driving from Hamilton to Big Fork, taking the road that runs along the east side of Flathead Lake, when I spied "The Teepee" still standing on the roadside, still a store of some kind. We followed the road down toward the lake to where my camp had been.

## WE FOUND THE SPOT

The big overhead ranch sign reading R/O still was there. The lodge where we had shared meals and group activities was still there. And the horse barn, still bearing the initials we had all carved into its sides, was still there.

But the property had been sold and broken into many small parcels. The Montana ranch that stole my heart as a young girl was no more. It was right then I realized how easily land could be altered. I burst into tears at the sight of the sad transformation. Understanding how much the Montana I used to know meant to me, I silently vowed to do whatever I could to protect it.

Being a part of the Bitter Root Land Trust has given me that opportunity.

Together, we can help keep the Bitterroot of our dreams alive for the future: the mountains, river and lakes, working lands and outdoor recreational opportunities that make this place so very special.

– Peggy Ratcheson  
Board President







# Learning Outdoors

Children and families need outdoor spaces, and this need has never been greater. Your swift action and support made it possible to fill this critical community need in 2020.

Your support, advocacy, and engagement helped create a place for families to connect with nature and the Bitterroot River—connections that are needed for happier, healthier lives. Skalkaho Bend Park couldn't have come at a more crucial time.

Since the virtual grand opening of the park, many community members have walked, biked, and found their way along the many trails, getting the fresh air and physical activity needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Skalkaho Bend Park has become a safe place for children and families to play, learn outdoors, and connect with friends.

## PARKLANDS: NICETY OR NECESSITY?

As teacher Bryan Dufresne shares, "Before school started back up, I dropped my son, Finn, off at the skatepark. He met some friends. They ripped the park. They played. Played. Everything every kid needs. Period. Then they got hot. They headed to River Park, now connected to Skalkaho Bend. They swam, moved logs around to create a diving board, and threw flips into the river. They laughed, chatted, and rumbled. Played. This is the power of community. Our kids are better for it. They are healthier for it. They are happier for it. As I speed toward mortality, I just want to leave

the world a better place than I found it. I want to build something that outlasts me. For every child. Especially, certainly, mine, and my grandkids, and my great grandkids I probably will never meet. And their kids. And your kids. And our kids. Build something that outlives me. That provides the purest of happiness."

It's easy to see just how much community parklands like these are more than just a nicety: they are a necessity. More teachers are seeing the benefit to having outdoor-based learning that's accessible to their students.

Kindergarten teacher, Mr. Ollie, jumped at the chance to pass on some hiking wisdom to his students.

He brought his Corvallis Primary Kindergarten class on a field trip in early October. His message to his small students was clear, "pack it in, pack it out, hikers." As the group hiked through the park, every bend in the trail, bridge crossing, and leaf falling to their feet became a learning opportunity.

## INSPIRING THE FUTURE

The future conservationists can't wait to come back and shouted in unison, "let's come back later!"

Thank you, and many other supporters, for helping to shape their future, and the future of the Bitterroot Valley. When the children learn at the river and among the trees, they carry that knowledge into the future. And the future of the Bitterroot Valley becomes that much brighter.

# THANK YOU for your leadership, Bitterroot Businesses!

## It takes a whole community to make conservation possible.

Our downtowns throughout the Bitterroot Valley are the heartbeat of this community. They support many causes and fulfill many needs that go beyond conservation. These men and women sponsor veterans, high school sports teams, after school programs, food pantries, clothing drives, art, music, and children with special needs. All because they care.



*"When we restore and protect nature, we also restore and protect ourselves. People who are more connected with nature are happier, feel more vital, and report having more meaning in their lives. The Bitter Root Land Trust, along with conscientious land-owners, and the community, are working tirelessly to ensure generational access and connection to the awe-inspiring wonders that only the natural world affords. It's what we believe at ABC Acres, and why it's so important we work together to ensure a healthier and better tomorrow."*



*"The Bitter Root Land Trust is a champion for everything we cherish and seek to protect within Montana. Our water, lands, and ranches are at the center of our rich way of life. Camp Sula is proud to partner with and support the Bitterroot Land Trust."*



- Big Creek Coffee Roasters
- Bitterroot Laundry/EASI Cleaners
- Bitterroot Spraying
- Boyle, Deveny, & Meyer, P.C.
- Bug Off
- Clearwater Credit Union
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- Farmers State Bank
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- Good Food Store
- Jones Korman Insurance
- Mildenberger Motors
- Payne West Insurance
- Ravalli Family Medicine
- S G Long Financial
- SpaceAge Ceramics, LLC
- State Farm Insurance
- Trail West Bank
- Weber & Vanario, CPAs P.C.



# Kerslake Ranch

## A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

It was sunny and warm. The perfect day for a huckleberry lemonade, conversation, and “big gun sprinklers” to keep the rhythm of the afternoon. It was an unusual break from daily chores on Kerslake Ranch, east of Stevensville.

Sari Kerslake and her mom, Julie Sundblom, were in between irrigation sets. The land they’re irrigating was conserved in 2013 by Hattie Farrell, a Burnt Fork legend who had run the ranch with her late husband, George, since 1963. Back then it was a dairy, evolved into a beef cattle operation, and is now the base of operations for

the Kerslake Ranch.

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Before this 93 acre ranch was conserved, Sari and her husband, Dan, were leasing Hattie’s place and a few other fields to grow grass hay. Over many years, they developed trust with Hattie, at first working hard, leasing the land, and then becoming friends. “She began to trust us after we had worked the land those 5 years. And that’s how it all started,” recalls Sari.

The average age of a Montana

rancher is 60 years old. The Kerslakes were less than half that age at the time. Land is expensive, and in high-demand. Finding and financing land would prove to be nearly insurmountable barriers. As Sari puts it, “We looked terrible on paper. We had no money, it was tied up in equipment, and we didn’t own any land.”

After several years of working with Dan and Sari, Hattie began thinking about moving off the ranch into town, and wondering who would own the land after her.

She wouldn’t just sell it to anyone. “I grew up on a big cattle ranch and feel we should save all the ranch land we can,” Hattie said with conviction.

Hattie believed in the young Kerslake couple and reached out to them. She told Dan, “I would love to have you buy the ranch. Look at this option: it might be a way to make it work.” Hattie saw a pathway to transfer her ranch from one generation to the next. That’s when she approached BRLT to conserve her family land and help transition it



to the next generation.

But the Kerslakes still needed to make buying the ranch pencil out.

They met with Ross Rodamacher at Farmers State Bank. After running all the numbers and scenarios he said, “You know, I think you kids can make this happen.” An individualized loan was created to make the transition from on ranch family to the next as seamless as possible.

They poop on it from fall to spring.”

Sari and Dan have been thinking about the future of the ranch, now that they’ve owned it for seven years. “Dan and I think about who will come after, and if we have kids someday—or not—we’ll find someone who wants to keep this going,” smiles Sari.

“It could be young ranchers just like you, Sari,” Julie said. Mom’s words ring true for so many farming and

*“I grew up on a big cattle ranch and feel we should save all the ranch land we can.” – HATTIE FARRELL*

### LOOKING AHEAD

Now seven years later, on this warm September day, Dan and Sari are working on some diverse business practices. Honey bees now buzz the ranch, pollinating and creating local honey. Sheep and cows dot the pastures, and their hay operation continues to grow.

“All our hay was sold before we made it this year. Which sounds great at first, but then it’s a delicate balance to achieve and deliver on all those sales,” Sari said. “Our sheep and cows graze the fields and make our ground much more productive because they naturally fertilize it.

ranching families in the Bitterroot, “Supporting open lands is supporting a tremendous amount of moving parts that sustain this valley, and keep it in the hands of the people that understand it, and keep it producing.”

Self-reliance, trust, and hard work brought this story to life. There is a way to pass on our Bitterroot way of life, our rural heritage, and ensure it is vibrant and thriving now, and for generations to come. Hattie, Dan, and Sari have provided a model showing how to do so. Together, we can help keep local agriculture and open lands thriving for future Bitterroot generations.







Photo: Perry Backus

## It Feels Like A Good Solution

Pine needles and leaves crunched under her feet. The sun shone brightly in the September bluebird sky, and the West Fork River hummed along its orange, glowing tree-lined banks in Conner. Marty Stomberg smiled quietly from beneath the large brim of her hat.

She paused her steps, “We’re just here to care for the land, the best way possible.” Her family has been caretakers of this land along the West Fork River for many years. “My son, Ben, grew up here. You know, kids fledge. When he came

of age, he came back. It was his playground as a kid, and he came back as an adult, wanting to care for it.”

Marty’s son, Ben, passed away tragically in 2010. This pine-covered bank on the West Fork has been the family’s special place to honor Ben’s memory. And to share this peaceful spot with the entire Bitterroot community is meaningful to them. Marty recalls with glossy, blinking blue eyes, “We started thinking, this is a thing to do for Ben. It’s the thing that I’m going to do for him.”

More than just the Stomberg and White families have benefited from forested land and river access. Locals and visitors alike have been coming here to “High Bank” to wade fish, launch boats, and spend time together with family and friends for decades. All because of the generosity of Marty and her family.

### IT BREAKS MY HEART

Marty motioned to the nature around her, “It breaks my heart we’ve lost so much river frontage, so many

future of their land. It was a balancing act navigating tenuous family dynamics and finances. But it was their graceful determination that made this vision come true.

### ACCESS TO THE RIVER FOR ALL

And now, thanks to you, and many more caring supporters, access to the river was not lost. It was protected. Organizations and stakeholders from across the valley came together around conservation: The Open Lands Program, FWP, Connell Foundation, Ravalli

*“It doesn’t feel like a compromise, really. It just feels like a good solution.”*

hot springs, and places to go. But this will be public access. Open land makes recreation available to the people of Darby, to the people of Conner. They can have a place to go to the river.”

The family knew permanently protecting the community’s access to the river was the right thing to do.

“We’ve had offers, and we turned them down because it just didn’t feel right. We started asking the Bitter Root Land Trust, ‘what if?’ What if it was a better fishing access, a small campground? The next access is about 20 miles up the road,” said Marty.

For many years, Marty and her family, sister Barb and her husband Robert Dickman, and brother, Don White, worked with the land trust to see what is possible for this special piece of ground, and how it could benefit the people of Conner and Darby.

The road was long and difficult.

Marty and her son Ben, sister Barb, and husband Bob Dickman, and later, Ben’s father, Don White, worked diligently to keep the land intact. They cashed out retirement funds and sold other assets to put themselves in a position to make decisions for the

County Fish & Wildlife Association, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Five Valleys Audubon, and Bitterroot Audubon.

The partnership with the Stomberg and White families, the Bitter Root Land Trust, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, ensures forest and river access for camping, fishing, horseback riding, hunting, and hiking are here to stay.



Photo: Perry Backus

Marty says it best, “It doesn’t feel like a compromise, really. It just feels like a good solution.” When family and community find a way to make great conservation happen, the people of this valley benefit.



## Inspired by Family, the Outdoors, and History

When my father, Del, returned home from WWII, he passed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. In that moment he made a promise to return to California and to get to know the west. So, in 1957, he loaded the family into the car, and we left Ohio on a move that would solidify my love of nature and the West.

As we drove across the country, over vast open prairies, through small towns and big cities, I realized how special our country was and how important it was to understand the beauty and greatness of this place.

California became our home, and I, the wide-eyed traveler to parks, state and local, and the best places of all, our national Parks—the sequoias, the redwoods, the great rivers and streams, the majesty of Yosemite. My father loved wildlife and talked about protecting the

many animals we were blessed to see, but most of all to relish the beautiful backcountry often missed by the casual traveler.

Looking back, I can see just how fortunate I was. Not all children are afforded those experiences in nature.

That's why my late husband Alan and I made outdoor adventures a priority when we raised our two girls, Cabrelle and Christina. We'd take weekend trips to all our favorite places, where we often discovered special areas which we felt were ours, and ours alone. Traffic would often delay our weekend trips and we longed for an escape.

During this time, the population in northern California continued to explode and we saw open spaces shrinking all around us.

As a history teacher for 30 years, I was always inspired by those intrepid explorers, Lewis and Clark, and their dauntless guide, Sacagawea. Their story fueled my desire to move to Montana, “the last best place.”

### EVERYONE DESERVES THE OUTDOORS

Now that I've lived here for many years, it has been a joy to volunteer at BRLT, and see the progress that has been made in local conservation: Steve Powell and Skalkaho Bend Parks, dozens of farms and ranches, and most importantly engaging people from all walks of life to work together to conserve what we have, right here in our very own backyard.

After all, everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy time outdoors, because when people connect with nature, our entire community benefits.

—Jan Abel

BRLT supporter and volunteer



**You can make a difference now by giving a gift that lasts beyond your lifetime. Be a part of Forever Bitterroot by making a planned gift to the Bitter Root Land Trust today.**

Do you love the bugle the elk make in the fall? Or the song of the sandhill cranes as they glide into a freshly cut hayfield? What about the expression a child makes the first time she catches a cutthroat at your favorite fishing hole?

You've walked the banks of the Bitterroot River many times, cherishing these moments, drawn by the spell that only our storied river can cast.

Over time though, you've seen the access to the river, the wildlife habitat, and the family farms and ranches diminish.

The population of our valley and Montana is growing at an increasing rate and is expected to keep climbing over the next few years. With that growth come changes—many for the better—such as jobs, opportunity, and prosperity.

However, there are also negative impacts: thousands of acres of wildlife habitat and working farms and ranches could be lost forever, and with them our way of life—the very essence of the Bitterroot Valley.

### YOU CAN HAVE BOTH

Yet, there is a way to have both prosperity and open lands. And that's where you come in.

No matter your age or income, there are many ways to leave a lasting gift for Bitterroot water, wildlife, and working lands. Gifts include naming the land trust in your will, gifts of property, investment gifts, and others. There is no better time than now to protect our precious water, wildlife, and working lands and know your values will live on.

For confidential conversations about how you'd like to help, contact Gavin Ricklefs, Executive Director at [gavin.ricklefs@bitterrootlandtrust.org](mailto:gavin.ricklefs@bitterrootlandtrust.org) or give him a call at (406) 375-0956.



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

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Photo: Jason Savage Photography

## Don't get stuck inside all winter...

### STAY ACTIVE DURING THE WINTER MONTHS

- Soak up the warmth at a regional hot spring
- Cross-country ski the trails at Skalkaho Bend Park in Hamilton
- Bundle up and take a stroll around your neighborhood
- Grab your binoculars, a pen and paper, and start a winter wildlife journal

Everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors, no matter their age or ability. Check out [accessibleinfo.com](http://accessibleinfo.com) for information on natural areas with wheelchair accessible trails and easy trails with minimal obstacles.

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

**Be 1 of 300!** The year-end match challenge has been extended to January 31st. Your gift will help unlock this \$45,000 match.