

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST

LEGACY



Newsletter | **SPRING 2023**



Director's Letter

It's amazing how much our community can accomplish when we come together around shared values. Over the last 12 months, your support and the vision of local families has helped achieve the single greatest year for conservation ever in the Bitterroot.

You helped to conserve 2,270 acres of family farms and ranches, critical wildlife habitat, rivers and streams, and public hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities - catalyzing a 30% increase in BRLT's total conserved lands, in one year alone.

At the very same time you helped renew the Ravalli County Open Lands Program, providing another \$10 million for voluntary, landowner-driven conservation in the Bitterroot by an overwhelming 71% approval margin. These funds are available to help local landowners - your friends, neighbors, and perhaps you or your family members - protect the things we all love most about our valley. Last November's incredible renewal rate reinforced a valuable lesson: It's amazing what we can accomplish together when we identify shared values and work hard, to proactively invest in our future.

It's one thing to identify shared values, it's another to act on them. You have demonstrated your love for the Bitterroot Valley and commitment to its future in so many ways over the past year - as volunteers,

donors, advocates, supporters, and friends. You have inspired all of us here at the Land Trust to identify what we can do to make a bigger difference in the future of this valley we all love so much. We are currently working with 14 local families to help them protect the land, water, and resources that add to all of our quality of life on a daily basis. Clearly, demand for BRLT's conservation services is at an all-time high (coinciding with growth and land prices at all-time highs) and these families have been incredibly patient as we partner with them to complete their long-term visions for their land.

At the same time, the land trust is looking ahead. We know the need for conservation has never been higher and will continue as the Bitterroot is discovered by more people. This year, we are growing to meet demand, adding three additional staffers to help increase the pace of conservation in our community. Your continued support has given us the confidence to continue to grow as the need for conservation grows throughout the community.

So, what does this mean for you? It means more family farms and ranches producing local food in the future. It means a clean, clear, protected Bitterroot River and tributaries for fish and wildlife. It means more places to recreate and enjoy the beauty of the Bitterroot. And it means a greater connection to your friends and neighbors, knowing we all share a commitment to the future of this place we all love.

— Gavin Ricklefs
BRLT Executive Director

A TRIBUTE TO PEGGY RATCHESON, BRLT BOARD MEMBER

Peggy loved the Bitterroot Valley and Montana. She joined the BRLT Board of Directors in 2010 and served as Secretary, Vice President, and President. She believed deeply in BRLT's conservation work, drawing specific inspiration from her childhood trips from St. Louis, via Chicago, to Montana for summer camp, wanting to leave at least some of Montana as she remembered it in her childhood. We honor Peggy's life, volunteer service, and dedication to BRLT and conservation in the Bitterroot Valley. Her legacy will live on in the work of BRLT.

"Each of you reading this remembrance now, has an opportunity to help keep the Montana of your dreams alive: the Montana of mountains, lakes and rivers; open spaces, far-stretching vistas, and verdant forests; working lands and outdoor recreational opportunities galore."

- Peggy Ratcheson, excerpt from a story she authored for the winter 2020 edition of the Legacy



2022 DONOR IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

The figures included below are based on 2022 financials.
A yearly audit will be available upon request once completed in 2023.

WHAT DID YOUR SUPPORT MAKE POSSIBLE IN 2022?

\$1,291,617

TOTAL AMOUNT OF
SUPPORT RECEIVED
IN 2022

2,270

NUMBER OF ACRES
CONSERVED IN 2022

6

PROPERTIES PROTECTED
FOREVER THROUGHOUT
THE BITTERROOT VALLEY

WHERE DID OUR SUPPORT COME FROM IN 2022?

\$594,909

UNRESTRICTED DONATIONS
FROM HOUSEHOLDS

\$663,118

GRANTS

\$28,750

BUSINESS
DONATIONS

\$4,840

OTHER

CONSERVATION VALUE & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN 2022

\$6.2M

ON-THE-GROUND
CONSERVATION VALUE
ACHIEVED THROUGHOUT
THE VALLEY

315

GUESTS AT OUR
4TH ANNUAL
BARN DANCE

71%

OF RAVALLI COUNTY
VOTED YES TO RENEW THE
RAVALLI COUNTY OPEN
LANDS BOND

LOOKING AHEAD...

3,605

ACRES IN-PROGRESS

14 NEW ACTIVE PROJECTS ARE
UNDERWAY FROM FLORENCE TO
DARBY

+3

NEW FULL-TIME STAFF

BRLT WILL ADD 3 NEW STAFF IN
2023 TO MEET THE INCREASED
PACE OF CONSERVATION

\$293,589

GENERAL ENDOWMENT FUND

WE'VE GOT MORE WORK TO DO!
LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY WILL
BE A MAJOR AREA OF FOCUS FOR
BRLT IN THE FUTURE



Honoring the 'Last Best Place'

DEVOE FAMILY CONSERVATION EASEMENT – STEVENSVILLE, MONTANA

Nestled between the foothills of the Bitterroot Valley's Sapphire Mountain Range and the Bitterroot River sits 820 acres of family property made up of pristine wildlife habitat, rangeland and scenic landscape that will remain forever preserved, thanks to the shared vision of a brother and sister who were ready to do their part in leaving a legacy for generations to come.

Once a part of the historic town of Rosemont, the property was officially conserved in perpetuity in February 2023 by co-landowners and siblings Charlie and Sarah DeVoe. The family property was originally purchased in the 1970's by their father as an investment opportunity, who had the intent to install wells and power across the land, which had been split up into 20-acre tracts to prepare for subdivision and building of homes. The price may have been right for that outcome, but Charlie always had a feeling the land should stay undeveloped.

"You can always make more money," says Charlie. "But you can't make more land."

When their father passed away, and the fate of the property was left to Charlie and Sarah, they both agreed that the land they had been coming to for years to camp, hunt and spend time together needed to be protected.

"To our family, this property is the prettiest place on earth," says Charlie. "When you're sitting up here in the foothills of the Sapphires and looking out across the valley... there's truly nothing else like it. I don't know a time in the last 40 years that we haven't seen wildlife of one kind or another when coming up here. It would be horrible for the wildlife habitat and unique nature of this property should it ever be split up and sold off separately. Instead of selling off the individual parcels and leaving a big part of our family's experiences and memories behind, our family decided to

put the remaining 820-acres into conservation, together as one property."

A diverse landscape that showcases many favorite attributes of the Bitterroot Valley, the property features over 150 different types of wildflowers amidst the sagebrush shrublands and montane grasslands, forest, natural springs, streams and riparian habitat – all which supports locally important species such as elk, black bear, mountain lion, mule deer, fox, owls, Brewer's sparrow, and sage thrasher, as well as the ever-elusive wolverine and badger. Charlie remembers a day when he and his wife Alana counted over 300 head of elk spread out across the entire front of the property, the herd spanning over a mile across the land.

"There's not another place I've found with more diverse amount of wildlife in such a small area," says Charlie. "The animals are here year-round, and they've been here



much longer than we have. You start to take that away, and they're going to run out of places to live."

In addition to pristine wildlife habitat, the conservation of the open space grasslands provides opportunities for local ranchers to continue cattle grazing practices by leasing some of the ground, ensuring that these lands will remain available for agricultural use in perpetuity.

"For the past 25 years, we've leased pasture out for grazing every year to local ranchers. It helps us, because it keeps the fire hazard down and benefits the health of the land, while offering a place for ranchers to run their cattle during a time when land is getting harder and harder to find around the Bitterroot. It's a 'win-win,'" says Charlie.

As an added conservation value, all that the cattle and wildlife must navigate around is a hand-built dry cabin – the only standing structure on the property.

"Our daughter was living in

Honduras as an exchange student in the early 2000's with limited ability to communicate back home to Montana, when there was a coup in the country. That time was a little nerve racking for dad," Charlie laughs warily. "I needed a project to keep my mind occupied, and that's when I built the cabin."

With a growing family that now includes grandkids, Charlie and Sarah are overjoyed with the land's conservation outcome.

"We did this so that our family and others after us will have the opportunity to continue to enjoy the beautiful and irreplaceable views, flowers, plants, trees and wildlife on this special property. The wildlife will still have room to roam, no matter what. And above all else, anyone who has spent time here in the Bitterroot knows, this is truly the 'last best place.' And, if we don't try to maintain open space, it will be gone forever."

Fortunately, not only for the DeVoe family, but for the many



Bitterroot community members and visitors who value the area's legendary open space, wildlife and agriculture, another portion of the 'last best place' will remain protected forever.

"I feel strongly that the only thing that will be able to preserve more land like ours are organizations like the Bitter Root Land Trust," says Charlie. "Without them, and similar conservation efforts, this type of land will be changed forever. I am forever grateful for the Land Trust for helping to make this happen for us."



Rooted Forever

C. BEN WHITE MEMORIAL FISHING ACCESS SITE & TRAILHEAD

By Kyle Anderson, Community Lands Project Manager

When Marty Stomberg and Don White moved onto their family property by Conner, it was to raise their family in a lifestyle rooted in walks through the trees, afternoons along the river, and horseback adventures up onto the National Forest. When neighbors requested permission to hike the property, the family policy—which didn't feel old-fashioned at the time—was “Yes”. As seasons and times changed, walks in the woods were one constant to rely on.

Four decades later, as the family co-owners (Marty, Don, and Barbara Dickman) thought about their land's future, ensuring that neighbors could continue to visit the property would be a guiding light towards public ownership. And once the property was set to become an official FWP Fishing Access Site, planning some ways for people to enjoy the forest was at the top of the agenda.

A favorite old horseback route for the family had been to follow game trails that lead up onto the National Forest, and top out on a ridge high above the river. Up there, there's an opening in the pines where you can get a spectacular perspective of the landscape at scale. This is where the West Fork River's canyon yawns open, ending its narrow, winding course through the mountains down from Painted Rocks Lake and its headwaters creeks. Below the canyon mouth, green hayfields mark the beginning of the Bitterroot's quintessential patchwork of farms and woodlands that reaches from here all the way to Lolo. On a warm summer evening, with wildflowers blanketing mountainside, it's a magical spot to catch your breath. But as years went by, the work to keep a path clear of deadfall had eventually gotten to be too much, and the family's old riding route fell out of use.

Renewing a path up to the ridge was an enticing thought, but to actually build trail up the rugged mountainside (crossing both state and federal lands) would take a serious effort on both permitting and physical construction. We got a team together and



Marty Stomberg and Barb Dickman are honored at the official trailhead opening celebration in May 2022.

figured out how to make it work: The Forest Service surveyed a trail route. FWP built a trailhead parking area. A Trapper Creek Job Corps crew came out to construct a trail bridge. Full Moon Trails spent an entire November working their mini-excavator bit-by-bit up the rocky mountainside. Volunteer groups cleaned up dumpsters' worth of decades-old junk at the site. And BRLT kept everyone coordinated.

As for the result— you should go and see! The new trailhead is off Leavens Road (right by the intersection with West Fork Road), 10 minutes south of Darby. You can take a heart-pumping hike up to the ridge, and if you like, keep going to explore the forest roads and trails up on Hart Bench. On horseback or a bike, you can do a 6-mile loop by going up Hart Bench Rd. and taking the C. Ben White Trail back down. However you like to enjoy the forest, we hope the new trail can become a part of it!

THANK YOU TO C. BEN WHITE FAS & TRAIL FUNDERS:

Montana Dpt. of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks
Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust
Bitterroot National Forest Resource Advisory Committee
Ravalli County Open Lands Program
Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association
Rapp Family Foundation
Michael J. Connell Foundation
Bitterroot Audubon
Five Valleys Audubon
OnX Maps
Bass Pro Shops - Cabela's Outdoor Fund
And private individuals

SOUGH CONSERVATION EASEMENT

A Sanctuary of Open Space

Three miles south of Hamilton lies the winding Skalkaho Highway that takes many scenic travelers through an isolated section of the Sapphire Mountains each year, a 23,000-acre remote area that is densely forested and abundant with wildlife.

The road was constructed in the early 1920's to link the mining areas of Anaconda and Phillipsburg with the agricultural communities of the Bitterroot Valley. Today, and for many more tomorrows to come, all that travel along this highway will pass by a section of wildlife habitat that will never be changed, developed, or disrupted, thanks to one landowner's vision.

"It makes me wish that more people in the Bitterroot would conserve more of this place."

The 75-acre "Sough" property was officially conserved by BRLT in partnership with landowner Suzanna McDougal in December 2022, a decision that had been more than 30 years in the making.

"I've always wanted to conserve this property since I purchased it in the early 1990's," says Suzanna. "I fondly remember walking the land with BRLT founders Fletch Newby and Steve Powell back then, talking about the possibilities of conserving it. They pointed out many unique and historical aspects of significance

throughout the property, including indications where the lapping waves of Glacial Lake Missoula had made marks on the big rocky outcroppings. Since then, I've spent a lot of time pondering when the right time would be for me to conserve it. I've realized that I'm not getting any younger, and this past year reignited the spark and I made the jump to finally get it done."

Unique in many ways indeed, the property has qualities that differ from the irrigated farms and ranchlands that are so distinct in other parts of the Bitterroot Valley. It consists of mostly dry land, yet there is a highline ditch that flows on the south border which has created a riparian habitat on the dry land. The riparian area and its aspen, cottonwood and birch trees support various animal visitors year-round, including a wide variety of bird species, bobcats, mountain lions, and mule deer, and occasional visits from the Skalkaho herd of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep.

"As sheep populations across Montana continue to struggle with disease and habitat loss, protecting sheep winter range is crucial to ensuring their continued existence on the landscape," says Rebecca



Mowry, wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "As the demand for housing in the Bitterroot Valley continues to grow, conservation easements are becoming more and more vital to preserve habitat for the wildlife Montanans so treasure. The Sough conservation easement represents this perfectly, with its proximity to Hamilton, its attractiveness as a building site, and its importance to a small but very visible bighorn sheep herd."

The valuable habitat for the wildlife who share the property with Suzanna was one of the driving forces



behind her decision to place it into conservation. She tells the story of a Bighorn ewe giving birth to a lamb on top of what she affectionately refers to as “Dragon Rock.”

“From a distance, I was able to watch this baby lamb come into existence; from the day it was born and over the next few weeks as she learned from her mother to jump from boulder to boulder. Another Ewe came along with another lamb, and the two babies would play up on the rocks. They seemed to both be excited to have a playmate.”

This story and many others like it

make it no wonder why one would feel a strong connection with this land and care deeply about its fate. Because of this, Suzanna shares that she has done her very best throughout the years to keep her “human footprint” as minimal as possible, by participating in the State of Montana’s Forest Stewardship Program and planting hundreds of native flowers and trees throughout the property, including ponderosa pines that have grown to more than 25 feet tall. The cheatgrass that had once invaded almost 4 acres has been removed, with fast spreading fescue

grass planted in its place.

“It was a positive experience, working with BRLT to get this done,” Suzanna reflects. “The staff coming out here, sharing their knowledge with each other and with me... It makes me wish that more people in the Bitterroot would conserve more of this place. It took me awhile to get to this place of finally being ready to conserve it, but now that I have, it feels good.

Many thanks to the decision of Suzanna for finalizing her 30-year dream to protect this special piece of the Bitterroot for years to come.

Classroom with a View

LOCAL YOUTH TAKE THE LEAD ON RIPARIAN RESTORATION PROJECT

Behold the next generation of conservationists! This spring, BRLT worked with Girl Scout Troop 3647, Boy Scout Troop 1962, and students from Hamilton High School's "Classroom Without Walls" ecology class to restore a variety of native trees along the North Fork of Bear Creek. The habitat restoration project is on Graze and Roam Ranch, a 115-acre conservation easement near Victor that was protected with BRLT in 2013.

Volunteers planted 160 new trees, set a couple hundred willow live stakes (harvested with gracious permission from Bitter Root Irrigation District), and protected dozens of existing tree sprouts that had been suppressed by browsing animals. The restoration area was fenced to protect the plantings until they can hold their own with

"My favorite part about working on the riparian habitat was seeing all of the different kinds of birds that live in this protected area, especially learning about new species...Making a difference on this preserved land is important to us."

the abundant deer and elk in the neighborhood. Project funding was contributed by the Bitterroot Audubon Society (a longtime BRLT partner), along with a generous donation of re-usable browse protector fencing from MPG Ranch.

Once the trees mature, they'll complete the almost-continuous tree canopy that shades the North Fork of

Bear Creek, while providing food and cover for wildlife. "We see a way that we can operate our cattle ranch and do the restoration at the same time—benefitting our needs as well as the natural landscape and the wildlife that uses it," says Joe Senger, owner of Graze and Roam Ranch. "This project is an opportunity for true synergy, and we think it's going to be pretty powerful when it's all said and done."

Sage, a senior at Hamilton High School, says of the experience, "My favorite part about working on the riparian habitat was seeing all of the different kinds of birds that live in this protected area, especially learning about new species I didn't know about. Making a difference on this preserved land is important to us."

Thank you to all of the wonderful volunteers, partners, and landowners Joe and Brenna Senger who helped to bring this project to life.

If you are interested in learning about upcoming volunteer opportunities, contact BRLT Communications Manager, Stephanie Sipe, at stephanie@bitterrootlandtrust.org. For more information about Graze and Roam Ranch, visit grazeandroam.com



COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

Learn how to engage with BRLT! Whether it's on the ground, online or on the dance floor, we love connecting with the people that make this work possible.



Love Your Land Trust | Photo Contest Recap

In honor of the month of love, this February we held a social media photo contest and asked you to share with us photos that represent your love for conservation in the Bitterroot. All of the submissions wonderfully represented the conservation values that BRLT works with local landowners to protect—our valley's wildlife, water, agriculture, fishing, beautiful open spaces, and our rural way of life we all love so much. Thanks to all who participated, and congratulations to the winner, Taylor TeBos of Tae Anne Creative Co.! Stay tuned for the next photo contest.



2nd Annual Burnt Fork Poker Ride

SATURDAY, MAY 20, 2023

All in for conservation! Presented by BRLT's Next-Gen Committee, this family friendly event takes horseback riders, bicyclists, and runners along a 10-mile route in the Burnt Fork neighborhood of Stevensville. The poker stops are located along the way at different ranches that are conserved by BRLT in partnership with local landowners. Visit bitterrootlandtrust.org to register.



5th Annual Barn Dance

SATURDAY, JULY 22, 2023

Join us for a night of live music, dinner and dancing under the big sky as we come together with our community to celebrate the conservation of working lands, wildlife and water in the Bitterroot Valley. Held on a historic conserved cattle ranch, this annual event will feature live music and is open to the whole family. A limited number of tickets will go on sale on June 1, 2023 at bitterrootlandtrust.org.



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wildlife, and working lands, with you.*

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Photo: Courtesy of Tae Anne Creative Co.