



BITTER ROOT
LAND TRUST

LEGACY



Director's Letter

“The mountains are calling and I must go.” —John Muir

For me, those mountains are here in the Bitterroot. As a child I didn't know why I was drawn to the West, but when I gaze at our two mountain ranges every day it's not hard to imagine why. There's something truly magical about the way the sunlight hits the mountains, the way they look like a fake backdrop just before dark, and how, without them orienting me, I feel lost. Our lush valley nestled between the mountains provides the perfect haven in their shadows.

I enjoy asking other members of our community why they stayed in the Bitterroot or how they've come to call this place home. Their response is usually similar to my own: “You just know.”

You just know you never want to leave (like my 4th generation husband) or perhaps, like me, somehow you just know in your heart it is home.

You just know because of the Bitterroot's beauty, its open fields, small-town values, local farms and ranches, wildlife, recreational opportunities, its way of life.

You just know because of the boundless ways to play outside—whether that's hiking, fishing, hunting, birding, or just simply enjoying the view.

As a community both near and far, we crave these one-with-nature experiences. We're connected to the land and mountains in a way that resonates inside of us. Our individual connections to the land create a collective community who listens if the mountains are calling – no matter if we've been here for generations or are the first Bitterrooter in our family.

Our united community is here for one another in more ways than one. We come together around values we hold dear, including protecting the place we love.

Because of you, our Bitter Root Land Trust community, conservation is a legacy of the Bitterroot. Your ardent support has become a model for the conservation of this way of life not just in our special valley, but across our entire country. Your vision inspires others, stretching far beyond our valley's peaks.

The mountains of the Bitterroot called to me a long time ago, and after 17 years working every day in this valley on behalf of conservation, I finally understand why I am so passionate. It's all because of this community. It's all because of you.

— Lauren Rennaker, BRLT Executive Director



Lauren and husband Jeff, twins Cade and Lyla, and dogs Aspen and Willow.

A Farewell Message from Gavin Ricklefs

Seventeen years ago, the Bitter Root Land Trust Board of Directors gave me the opportunity of a lifetime: to serve as BRLT's Executive Director. In the ensuing years, you built BRLT from a start-up nonprofit, based on the hard work and vision of a core group of local volunteers and a 2-person staff, to a trusted community partner and national model of local conservation in action.

I am so proud of BRLT's dedicated Board,

passionate staff, and you, our community of supporters, for building a conservation legacy in the Bitterroot that future generations will be honored to inherit. I know how fortunate BRLT is to have such a strong, compassionate, and focused new Executive Director in Lauren Rennaker. Like the rest of you, I will continue to seek every opportunity to support BRLT's vital work as you shape a positive future for the Bitterroot. Here's to the next 17 years! - Gavin

Back to the Basics

Commonly Asked Conservation Questions

Whether you've been around the block with your support for BRLT for years, or you're new here (welcome!), below are some of our most asked questions regarding our work. If you have other specific questions, our door is always open. Please feel free to stop by, give us a ring, or visit our website for more information.

What is a land trust?

A non-profit organization that partners with willing landowners, including farmers and ranchers, to conserve and maintain all or a portion of their property through voluntary agreements known as "conservation easements."

What is a "conservation easement"?

A voluntary, legal agreement between a landowner and BRLT that allows the landowner to permanently protect the land they love by limiting present and future land use and development. The landowner is compensated for surrendering the development rights, unless they choose to donate the value.

Where do we work?

We work with private landowners in Ravalli County—from Florence to Sula and everywhere in between.

What happens to the land once it's conserved?

Landowners remain responsible for the management of their property and are generally free to use the property in the same manner as they had before the easement was signed.

What happens when the land is sold?

Conservation easements are tied to the land in perpetuity (forever). When the land changes hands, the new owner legally must comply with the terms of the conservation easement.

Does the general public have access to properties with conservation easements?

Conservation easements do not require the landowner to allow public access to their property, as the property remains privately owned. Conservation easements can be structured to grant permanent public access, but it is the landowner's decision to do so.

What's the minimum size of acreage needed for a conservation easement?

BRLT does not have a strict cut off for size minimum. However, due to our current capacity, the considerable resources and time that go into completing a conservation easement, and high community interest, BRLT is currently only considering conservation easement projects on properties that are larger than 50 acres. This may change in future years, so please check back with us regarding updates to this criterion.

How does our community benefit from conservation?

The preservation of open space, continuation of family farms and ranches, protection of wildlife habitat, clean river/streams and drinking water, and places to recreate – like Skalkaho Bend Park and Steve Powell Park in Hamilton, and C. Ben White Memorial Fishing Access Site and Trail in Conner!

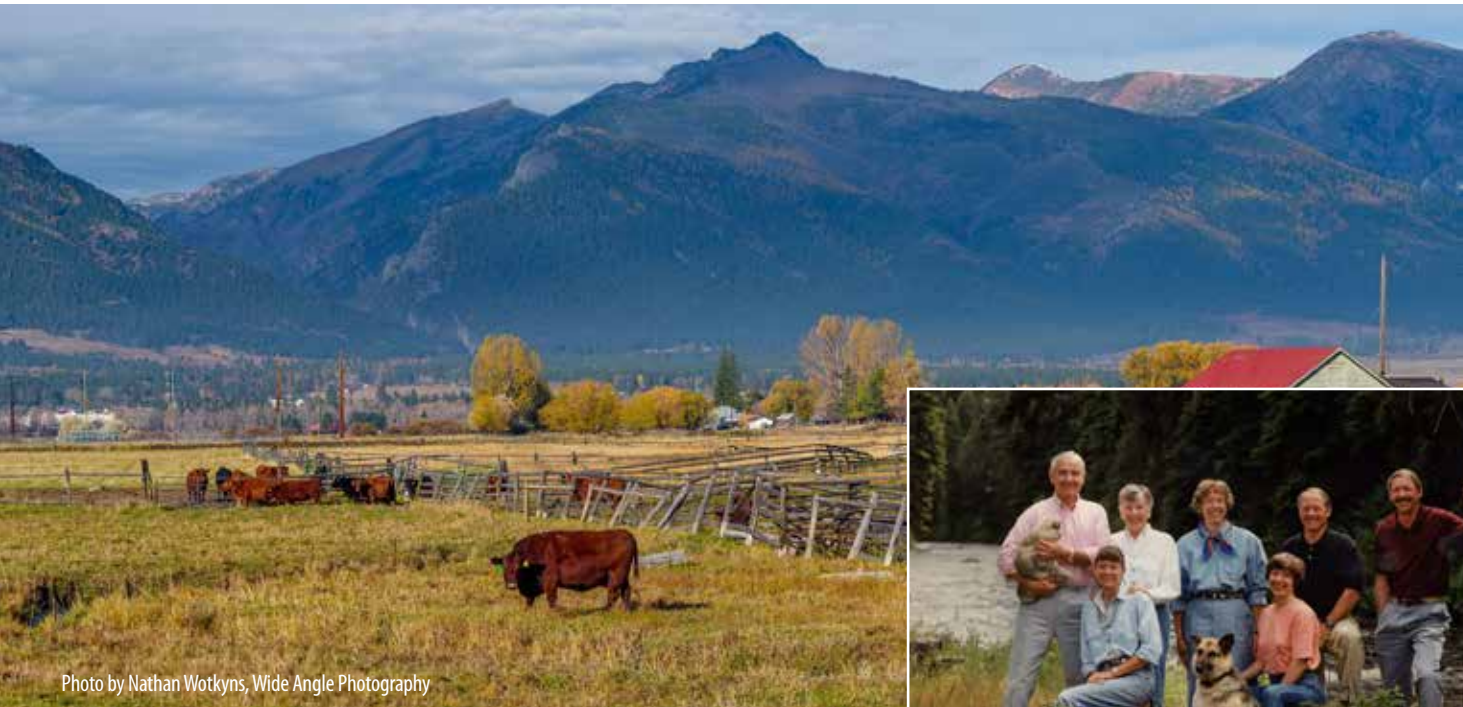


Photo by Nathan Wotkyns, Wide Angle Photography



A.C. and Jean Ellison and their five children (L-R) Rebecca, Cathy, Sarah, Mike, Dan, 1980

ELLISON RANCH – STEVENSVILLE, MT

Taking the Long View

Siblings come together to protect family ranch forever

The road to conservation is unique for every family that BRLT has the honor of working with to protect the land they love. The Ellison family’s legacy of over six decades spent ranching in the Bitterroot inspired siblings Dan, Mike, Sarah, Cathy, and Rebecca, to pursue the protection of their family ranch so that future generations would have the opportunity to create their own memories on the land someday.

“Mom and Dad bought the ranch in 1960,” says Dan, recalling memories of moving from Florence to what became the Ellison Ranch. “When it came time for us to move to Stevensville, we drove cows and calves from a ranch on Eight-mile Creek down the Eastside Highway on horseback. That’s just the way you did it back then.”

Parents A.C. and Jean led the Ellison family in making the ranch their own, farming hay and corn for silage to support their cow/calf operation. Bisected by North Burnt Fork Creek, the ranch has always been, and continues to be, critical habitat for wildlife including whitetail

and mule deer, turkeys, great blue heron, a variety of waterfowl, great-horned owls, sandhill cranes, and many raptor species.

“Back then, my folks weren’t too conservation oriented,” Dan continues. “They were totally focused on raising their five children and making a living in agriculture. But when we did a restoration project along North Burnt Fork Creek on the ranch in 2011, there was a bald eagle nest in a cottonwood tree there. Dad would drive Mom over to look at the eagles often, and it became a big deal for them—it got them started thinking about how to balance a livestock operation with what they could do for wildlife.”

The creek restoration project, a partnership with Montana Trout Unlimited, allowed them to fence both sides of North Burnt Fork Creek where it bisects the property, protecting riparian vegetation and preventing streambank erosion from cattle. A major replanting effort followed a year later, and its positive results are visible throughout the stream corridor.

Mike reflects on the need to expand protected lands in the Bitterroot Valley.

“Our family has lived in the Bitterroot for 70 years and has seen dramatic changes – not all of which are for the better. As teenagers we could spend a day fishing on the Bitterroot River and not see another person. The project in 2011 to protect the creek was a small, but important step for wildlife conservation. Now it’s a visible reminder of the value of open space in the valley, and will give future generations a glimpse of what life was once like in this part of the last, best place.”

protected by the Land Trust creates a wildlife corridor that represents the landscape of my Montana childhood seventy years ago. It is a model of open lands preservation.”

The project was made possible thanks in part to funding received from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program and the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program. With bond dollars passed by Ravalli County voters in 2022, the Open Lands Bond Program features an approval process that includes a comprehensive 5 phase review

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After their father passed away in 2012, Jean and the Ellison siblings made the decision to lease the ranch out to a local ranching family while they worked together to find a way to protect the ranch in perpetuity. Despite being miles apart from one another- in Helena, the Pacific Northwest, and even London- they came together in agreement that the conservation easement tool would be the right solution to accomplish that.

“There is no way we could have protected the ranch if we hadn’t worked together as a team,” says Dan. “We talked about it, looked at the pluses and minuses, and decided it was worth it to forego income if that ground would eventually be developed, as opposed to knowing that it’s going to stay in agriculture in perpetuity.”

Situated northeast of downtown Stevensville, the ranch is a proximal expansion of the more than 7,000 acres of contiguous private conservation easements completed by local landowners in partnership with BRLT and other land trusts in the Burnt Fork neighborhood. Officially completed in October, the Ellison Ranch conservation easement adds another 344 acres in the area that will be protected forever.

Reflecting on the project, Sarah says, “The valley has changed so much over the course of my life and this conservation easement preserves a portion of the valley. It keeps it rural. The connected land parcels that have been

by the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Board, County staff, and the Board of County Commissioners.

Speaking on behalf of the family, Dan concludes, “When the ranch is eventually sold, it will be sold with the conservation easement deeded. We hope that someday, a young couple will be able to live on the ranch and start a family built around ranching values – hopefully another generation that’s attracted to the Montana lifestyle of agriculture, livestock and open space that would continue to use and care for the ranch as it’s been used for decades.”



Photo by Nathan Wotkyns, Wide Angle Photography

Concert in the Wild

Outdoor classical concert takes
center stage for conservation

Photos by Nathan Wotkyns, Wide Angle Photography

This past July, hundreds of our community members of all ages had the opportunity to connect to conservation on the ground together for BRLT's IN A LANDSCAPE: Classical Music in the Wild. A 9-foot Steinway grand piano traveled across the country on a flatbed trailer to the middle of a hayfield on the Sunset Bench Conservation Easement in Stevensville. The experience that was the first-of-its-kind for our community.

Made possible by the generosity of conservation easement landowners Meg Hanson and Mike Sylvester, community partners, and the wonderful talents of pianist Hunter Noack, 400+ guests had a unique opportunity to gather on incredible



protected lands and listen to beautiful music while generously supporting the conservation of working farms and ranches, water, and wildlife habitat throughout the Bitterroot Valley.

With an impressive wireless headphone radius that reached up to 1 mile in distance, concert-goers were encouraged to walk around the property while enjoying their own personal classical soundtrack to the sights of cattle, horses, birds, forest, sagebrush, and a historic apple orchard. Some guests even enjoyed running underneath the water spraying above from a pivot that was irrigating the hay fields—a true Bitterroot cool down.

A vision like this takes a significant amount of time, dedication, and generosity from our community partners and wonderful volunteers to bring this experience to life. Thank you to the entire IN A

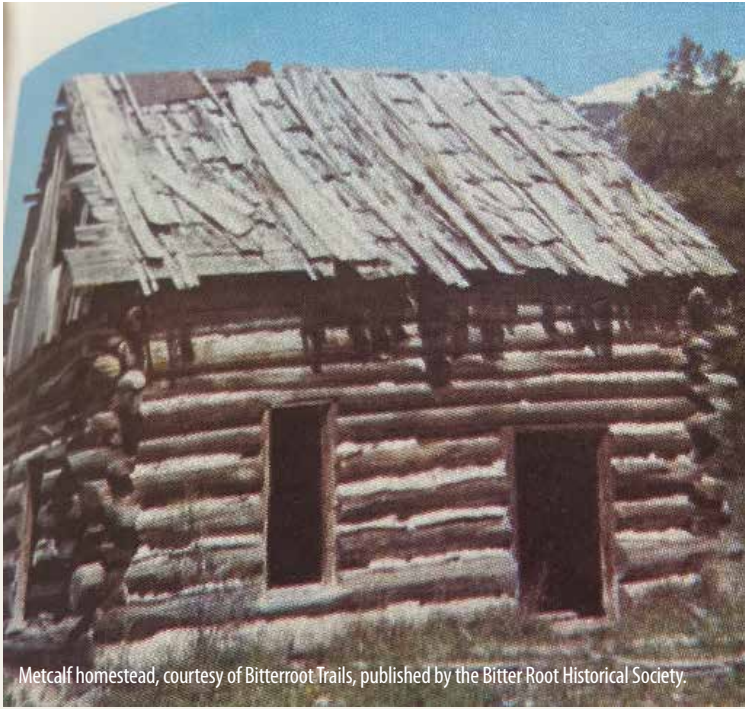
LANDSCAPE team, Stevensville FFA Club, BRLT Outreach & Next Gen committee members, longtime friend and supporter Jan Abel, the Roth family, Friends of the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge, and other partners and sponsors for making this evening possible.

Because of unique and irreplaceable experiences on conserved lands like our Concert in the Wild, our community will continue to care about this special place and way of life, ensuring more of our Bitterroot Valley will be protected for generations to come.

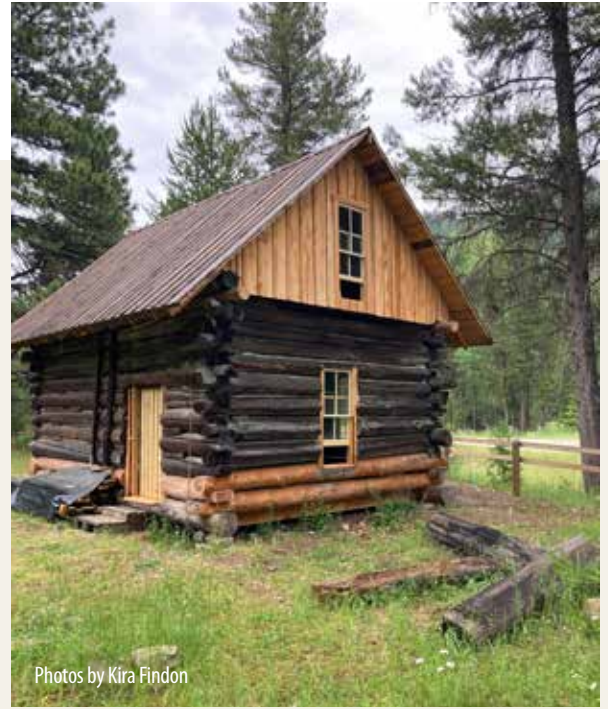
Stay tuned for a special feature on the concert this winter to air on the Montana PBS *Backroads of Montana* series.

To receive the latest updates, please sign up to receive our e-mail newsletter by visiting our website at bitterrootlandtrust.org or email stephanie@bitterrootlandtrust.org





Metcalf homestead, courtesy of Bitterroot Trails, published by the Bitter Root Historical Society.



Photos by Kira Findon

SMITHERS CONSERVATION EASEMENT | WEST FORK, BITTERROOT RIVER

Preserving West Fork History

Just southwest of Darby lies the West Fork Road which leads to a pristine and wild valley with miles of trails, wildlife, and blue-ribbon trout fishing. An area flanked primarily by Bitterroot National Forest, the

½ mile of Bitterroot River frontage at the confluence of Nez Perce creek. The property supports a mix of wildlife species along the river's edge, and within the lush evergreen, cottonwood, and aspen forest, as well as in the

property is home to the historic Metcalf Cabin, a log cabin built by the Metcalf family in 1907 whose presence is of historical cultural relevance to the area. For the past three summers, Pam and Mark had the help of Kirby Matthew, retired team leader of the US Forest Service Region 1 Historical Preservation Team, to restore the historic cabin and hopefully keep it standing for another one hundred years.

Kirby and his team replaced the bottom two log courses which had decayed, replaced the rock footings, then removed the existing roof and replaced the roof to its original steeper slope (this had the effect of dramatically increasing the upstairs space which must have been the sleeping quarters for the Metcalf family of 5 who lived there). Next, they added or replaced flooring to the first and second stories, built windows and doors which were all missing, and

“We feel very lucky that Kirby wanted to do our cabin restoration since our location is pretty far down the West Fork and he has lots of choices of historical projects to do.”

picturesque drive along the West Fork of the Bitterroot River quietly brings travelers back in time through the sights of historic log homes and buildings. Nestled beneath the forested hills along the river sits a special piece of land that was protected in perpetuity in 2016 by landowners Pam and Mark Smithers, in partnership with BRLT.

The Smithers' property includes wetlands and riparian habitats, notably

beautiful meadow and pond. The riparian forest along the river provides cover for wildlife including bird and bat species, and the grasslands and forests provide habitat for deer, elk, rabbits, sage grouse, and fox. Birds of prey like American kestrel, peregrine falcon, and red-tailed hawk utilize the open grasslands for feeding, while moose frequent the pond.

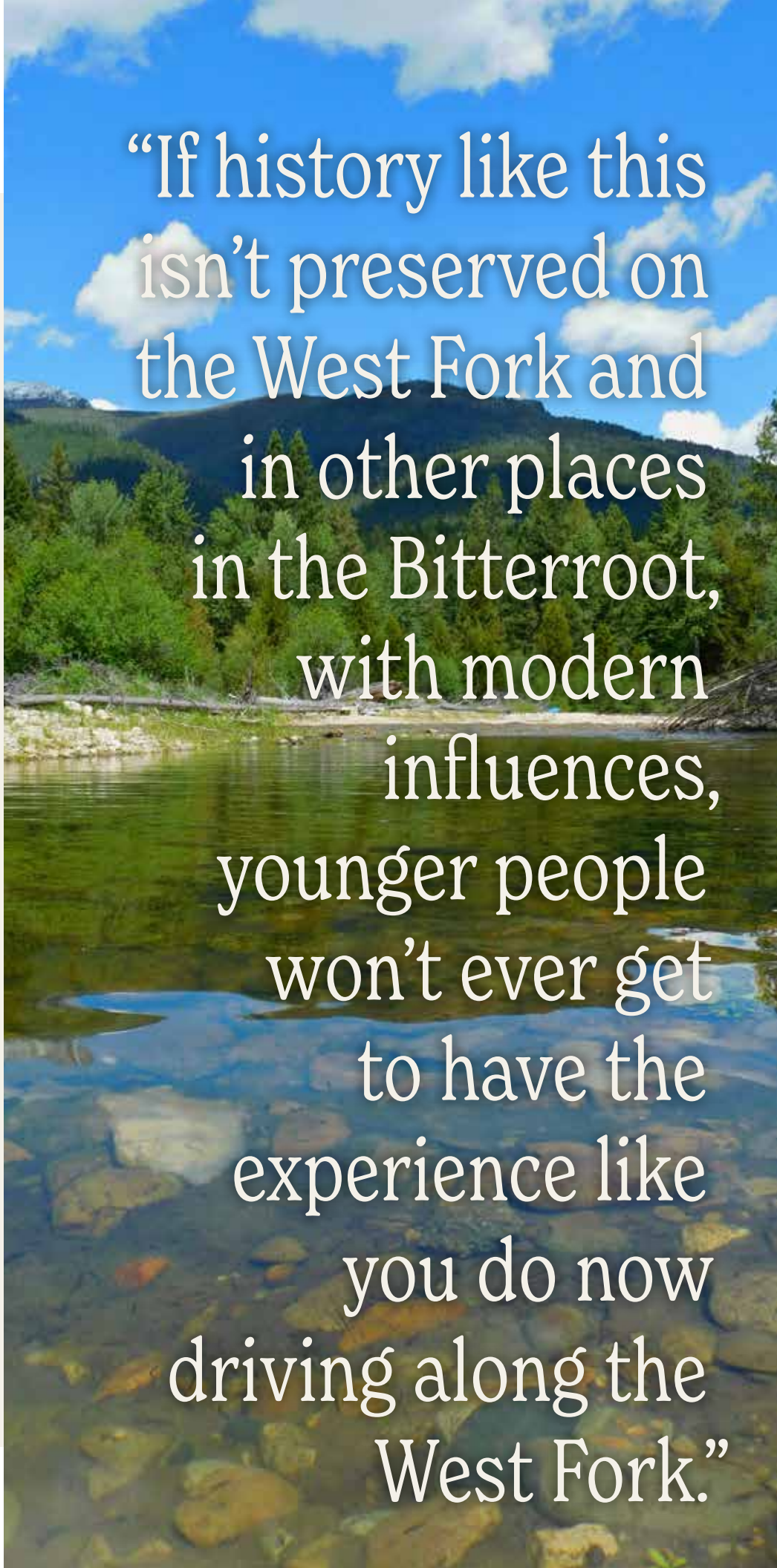
In addition to a wide variety of habitat for wildlife, the Smithers

sealed it inside and out. They used wood from the Smithers property and from Kirby's property in Deer Lodge, which was an important goal, buying as little new lumber as possible. Next summer they will finish the project with chinking.

"We feel very lucky that Kirby wanted to do our cabin restoration since our location is pretty far down the West Fork and he has lots of choices of historical projects to do. He brought a wealth of experience and capable helpers with him, plus he is just a fun guy and has lots of good stories to tell," says Pam. They also had help from Mary Williams, retired USFS historian, who provided much appreciated context with her deep historical research on the Metcalf family. Mary pointed to a photograph in the Bitterroot Historical Society's book *Bitterroot Trails* which showed the cabin's original form. While Kirby's experience restoring USFS cabins was indispensable, the photo Mary found gave visual proof to what the cabin originally looked like, which helped in the restoration process.

"If history like this isn't preserved on the West Fork and in other places in the Bitterroot, with modern influences, younger people won't ever get to have the experience like you do now driving along the West Fork," said Kirby. "That experience is important in helping you appreciate special areas like this even more."

Because of families like the Smithers, and support from caring community members like you, a future of beautiful, conserved open lands to protect the memories of Bitterroot life in the past remains possible.



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The Ripple Effect of Your Support

How BRLT Leverages Grants to Multiply Your Impact

When you make a gift to the Bitter Root Land Trust you may wonder: “What is the impact of my gift?” Every individual donation to BRLT, no matter the size, makes a difference. Your contribution creates a ripple effect that goes far beyond what you might imagine. Like a stone skipping across a pond, every individual gift triggers waves of action, growth, and success for conservation in the Bitterroot Valley.

HOW DO WE TURN YOUR GIFT INTO THESE RIPPLES OF IMPACT?

By leveraging government and foundation grants—making every dollar you give go further.

At BRLT, we work hard to maximize the impact of every donation we receive. Often, government agencies and private foundations offer significant funding opportunities for conservation projects, but the application process is competitive and showcasing community support goes a long way. A local, grassroots investment like yours makes a big difference when we apply for these grants—it shows a strong commitment from our community and makes our proposals more compelling. In other words, your gift helps unlock even more funding, allowing BRLT to conserve more land, protecting wildlife habitat, water resources, open space to recreate, and working farms and ranches that make our valley so special.

DECADES OF RIPPLES

Another example of how we leverage community support is showcased by the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond, originally passed by local voters in 2006 and renewed in 2022 by an overwhelming 71% passage rate. Through the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program, dollars go specifically towards conserving open spaces in Ravalli County. BRLT then utilizes these local dollars to attract and secure additional funding from state and federal agencies, including the USDA Farm Bill and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It’s a valuable example of how your local support acts as the first ripple in a much larger wave of conservation success.

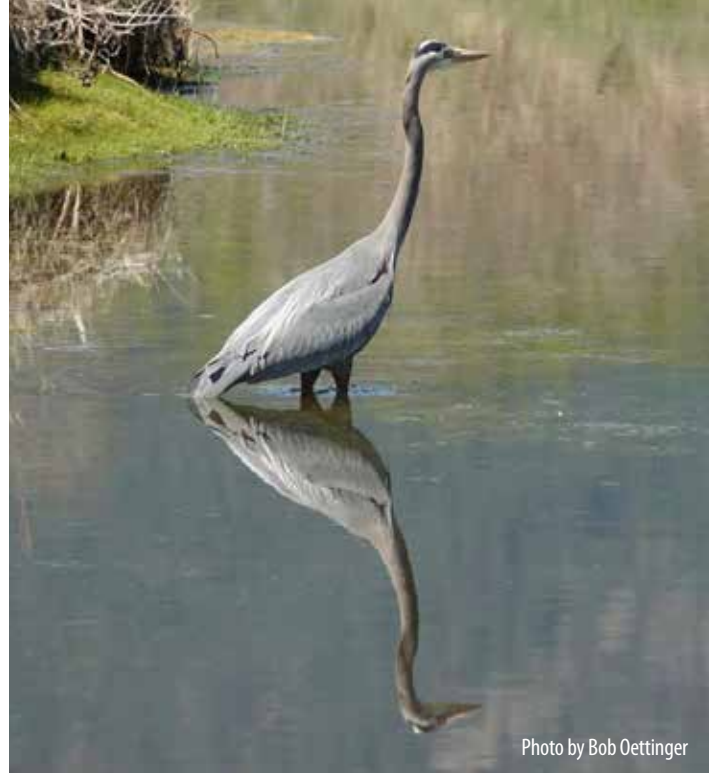


Photo by Bob Oettinger

A NEW RIPPLE BEGINS FOR FORESTED LANDS IN THE BITTERROOT

We’re excited to announce that Bitter Root Land Trust has been awarded funding through the USDA-NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This substantial federal grant focuses on forest and riparian (river and streamside) conservation, marking a significant victory for the Bitterroot Valley. With this funding, BRLT, NRCS, and local partners will collaborate with private landowners to address key forest health challenges in our region, including wildfire risks and wildlife habitat loss. The grant will support habitat improvements, timber management, fuels reduction practices, and conservation easements. Importantly, this success was made possible by the generous contributions of our individual donors, whose gifts help us leverage large-scale resources and amplify the impact of conservation in our cherished valley.

YOUR GIFT IS THE FIRST RIPPLE

Think of your donation as the first stone dropped into a calm body of water. That initial splash creates ripples that grow and spread, reaching farther and farther across the water. Your gift helps us secure larger grants, which in turn allows us to complete more critical conservation work. From protecting family farms and preserving critical wildlife corridors, to ensuring public access to recreation and clean water, your donation is the starting point for the lasting protection of our valley.

So next time you visit the Bitterroot River or canyon creek skip a rock and watch those ripples spread. It’s a perfect reminder that every action—especially your support of BRLT—has a lasting, far-reaching impact for conservation. Thank you for being part of the ripple effect!

Where did our support come from in 2023?

\$1,174,886: Total Amount Received in 2023

\$681,329: Individual & Business Donations

\$367,153: Foundations & Partners

\$126,404: Government Grants

For every \$1 raised from general donations, we have secured approximately \$23 for on-the-ground conservation. **Thank you!**

Meet the New Faces at BRLT!

Please join us in giving our newest team members a warm welcome.



Dylan Ritter | *Conservation Project Manager*

Dylan has lived in the Bitterroot Valley for 25 years and recently joined the Bitter Root Land Trust team in the spring of 2024.

Dylan started his career picking rocks on a small farm in Hamilton eventually working his way up to working with landowners to conserve the land that has helped shape him. A graduate of the University of Montana he holds a B.S. in Ecosystem Science & Restoration with an emphasis on aquatic ecosystem restoration. Dylan has had the pleasure of working with many different groups and agencies all over Montana to collect data on a wide variety of wildlife and is an active member of The Beaver Institute BeaverCorps where he works to mitigate human-beaver conflicts. He is passionate about public lands, open spaces, and conservation and is driven to protect Montana landscapes for future generations of humans and wildlife.

When not in the office or out in the field Dylan spends his time seeking special corners of Montana looking for wildlife, wildflowers and fossils. He and his partner along with their dog Rally spend their days cooking with friends, floating, hiking and traveling the world.



Elyse Caiazzo | *Conservation Project Coordinator*

Elyse joined the BRLT team in June 2024, bringing with her a passion for land conservation and a strong background in agriculture.

Elyse spent most of her young adult life working on farms and in restaurants in Portland, Maine. She developed a love for agriculture while working at her college farm, harvesting in the summer and assisting with winter lambing. In 2021, she followed this interest in agriculture and food systems to Missoula, to complete an M.S. in Environmental Studies. She researched land transfers and family farm succession planning in Montana. Her passion for conservation and land legacy grew as she spent more time in ranching and farming networks in Western Montana. Her favorite part of living in Montana is constantly learning and experiencing new landscapes.

Outside of work, she enjoys hiking with her dog Atlas, gardening, and spending time by the river with friends, swing dancing, and reading.



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Cover: Jean and A.C. Ellison, landowners of Ellison Ranch, 1954, courtesy of the Ellison family.



Bitter Root Land Trust board and staff. Photo by Nathan Wotkins, Wide Angle Photography.