



Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex

VOLUME 34

2026 Newsletter

Welcome to your public lands!

*An Introduction: Mike Muñoz,
Rocky Mountain Ranger District, BMWC Chairperson*

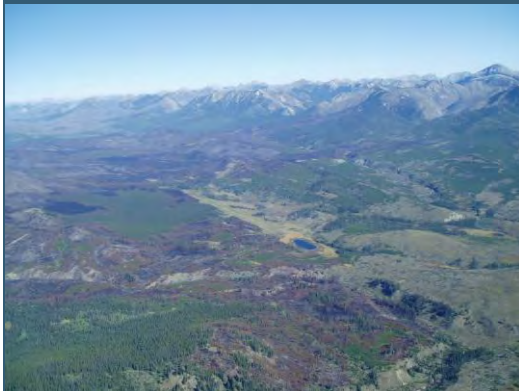
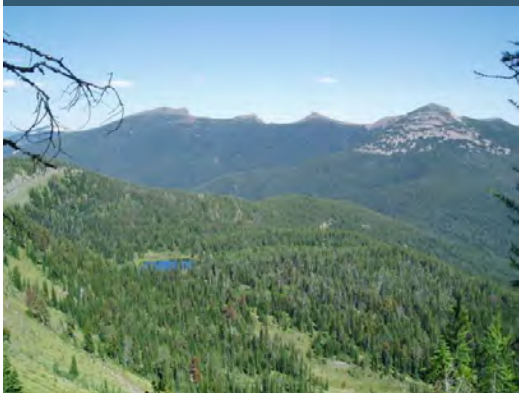
Public lands are incredible! Amazingly, Public lands exist at not only the federal level, but also at the state, county, and city levels. At federal levels, We the People, have Public lands set aside as Monuments, Wildlife Refuges, National Parks and my favorite, National Forests and Grasslands.

Nevertheless, I was reminded by a co-worker not too long ago of just how unknown National Forests are to some of our fellow citizens. One of my staff had a conversation with a pair of folks traveling the country from east to west, intent on visiting as many National Parks as possible.

Fortunately for them, they had to find a place to overnight on the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest between Yellowstone and Glacier Parks. They reserved one of our rental cabins on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District (RMRD) west of Choteau. They enjoyed an early morning hike on a trail all to themselves and peeked at wildlife they had not yet spied on during their sojourn. They stopped at the office and shared their story...raving in the wonders of National Forests, and the solace found from hordes of visitors at their prior stops, and elevated expectations of learning more about their National Forests!

I have often shared with others that there are non-wilderness places just as wild on the RMRD as those designated wilderness. Of course, knowing a landscape has Protected Area Status serves an enormous purpose for present and future generations, especially with statuses such as designated Wild & Scenic River, Wilderness, Conservation Management Area, and Traditional Cultural District.

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BMWC 2026 Newsletter: An Introduction

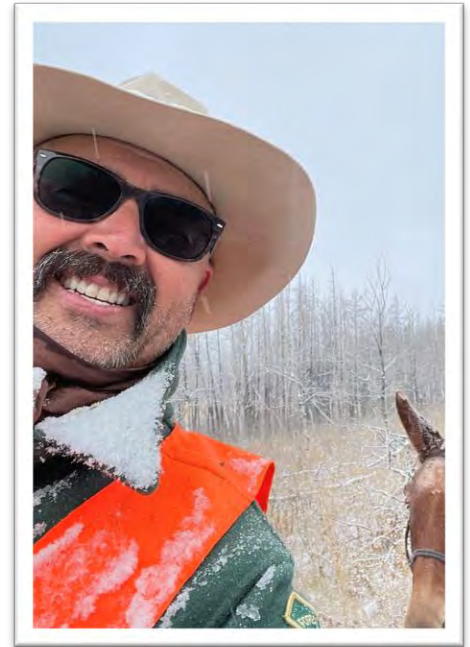
BMWC Chairperson and Ranger, *Mike Muñoz*

The Northern Rockies, which comprise the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC) and surrounding landscapes, remain among the most contiguous functioning ecosystems with vast expanses of solitude in the lower forty-eight. There are times of the year along a few stretches of land or river corridors which certainly challenge such opportunities for solitude.

As wilderness enthusiasts have come to realize, Protected Areas experience human impacts, especially popular places like the South Fork Flathead River and Chinese Wall. As a result, the need arises to administer and/or manage human activities across the landscape while still providing experiences of unhindered access. We often refer to this as wilderness stewardship. Seems to fit well with the Forest Service motto, 'Caring for the Land and Serving People.'

Likewise, it also readily displays the mission of the Agency or USDA Forest Service which is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. I interject one other thing in my rambling. I also really like saying the USDA Forest Service. Including the USDA has meaning as it is well known as the People's Department. Being a part of the People's Department, with a Forest Service mission like we have, and the best motto ever, written in exactly the right order, Caring for the Land first and foremost because without a healthy living landscape we have nothing from which to Serve the People.

The mission of wilderness stewardship in the BMWC is accomplished not only through dedicated, federal employees across multiple disciplines and levels, but also through a tremendous number of partners throughout a myriad of decades, including the nearly three decades I've served as a Ranger here on the RMRD, and a couple of go-arounds as the BMWC Chair.



You're Invited!

To the
Limits of Acceptable
Change (LAC)
public meeting to be
held on
Saturday, April 11,
9:30 to 14:30
at the Flathead
Supervisor's Office
located at
650 Wolfpack Way,
Kalispell

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Introduction ***continued...***

Our Partners have and continue to include (this list is long... so hold on): Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation, Professional Wilderness Outfitter Association, Montana Conservation Corp., Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Montana FWP biologists and wardens, Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, Forest Service Law Enforcement & Investigation, Backcountry Horsemen (multiple chapters), National Association of Forest Service Retirees, Northern Rockies Fire Science Network, US Fish & Wildlife Service, National Smokejumpers Association, The Wilderness Society, Montana Wild, Crown Managers Partnership, Rocky Mount Elk Foundation, Continental Divide Trail Association, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Glacier Two Medicine Alliance, Montana Discovery Foundation, Hockaday Museum of Art, Swan Valley Connections, National Forest Foundation, National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, American Trails, Flathead River Alliance, American Rivers, Montana Outfitter & Guide Association, Recreation Aviation Foundation, Society for Wilderness Stewardship, Ninemile Wildlands Training Center, University of Montana Wilderness Institute.... and the list goes on.

These Forest Service partners are partners with one another as well and have contributed to sustaining wilderness character and values in their own, unique, and diverse ways, representing multiple backgrounds from all levels of society, across economic spectrums, as well as knowledge and skills, from both near and far-away places.... **that have shaped our connections to the landscape, sprouted connections with one another, as well as helped form our diverse, surrounding communities.** As Aldo Leopold, an early advocate of wild places and leader in development of the Forest Service as an institution, once said, "In diversity is stability." And valuing diverse perspectives has certainly mattered in our collective wilderness stewardship, with the institution of the USDA FS serving to nurture not only a connection with the land but continued civil partnership with one another.

The BMWC managers look forward to continuing work with everyone on all things wild, including resolving conflict and meeting challenges that come with providing stewardship of wilderness. We also continue striving to help people recognize impacts we have as humans interacting with the landscape and how we can reciprocate our commitment to this place – *a legacy from the past which we have received as a gift in the present to pass on as a treasure to future generations.*

As always, to that unending endeavor, my colleagues and I look forward to interacting with you in Kalispell during our annual spring Public LAC meeting. And I certainly look forward to more people discovering their National Forests as the two traveling folks mentioned earlier, so they too can contribute to Our Public Lands, especially the BMWC!

Good day. All day. Every day.... Ranger Muñoz



BMWC Staff at the Northern Rockies Wilderness Skills Institute

Last year, 19 BMWC staff attended the 2025 Northern Rockies Wilderness Skills Institute, and 3 staff members were lead instructors as well. A large group of crew leaders and interns the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation also attended. The NRWSI is held annually at the Powell Ranger Station, in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. It is a training partnership between multiple partners including the Forest Service, Ninemile Wildlands Training Center, and other partners like the Backcountry Horsemen. The program currently features one week of training hosted each year, featuring the following classes: Wilderness and Trails Foundations, Wilderness First Aid/CPR, Defensive Horsemanship, Crosscut Saw A/B, Advanced Crosscut Saw and Axe Train the Trainer, Advanced Wilderness Stewardship, Advanced Trail Maintenance, and Field Leadership Development.

Last year, a late spring snowstorm overnight reminded everyone of the backcountry conditions we need to be prepared to work in the wilderness. In the evening hours, participants enjoyed stories from a retired packer from the Lolo National Forest and live local music in the hay barn. Planning is underway for this year's Northern Rockies Wilderness Skills Institute. This training is open to all Forest Service employees, volunteers, and partners, if you are interested in attending in 2025, follow along at <https://wildernessskillsinstitute.org/nrws/> for registration information.

Submitted by Colter Pence, Wilderness, Wild & Scenic Rivers, and Trails Program Manager





Enhancing Horsemanship Skills in Forest Service around the Bob Marshall Wilderness

Ian Bardwell, Wilderness & Trails Manager

Over the past five years, Forest Service packers and backcountry crewmembers from around the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Region 1 have dedicated a week each year to honing their horsemanship skills under the guidance of renowned horseman Martin Black. This annual training has become a cornerstone for improving the employee's abilities when using stock to accomplish their duties. By improving their understanding of equine these employees are finding they can use the stock to do more and stay safer when in the field. It also allows them to safely use a greater number of the stock available to them as they become more proficient in their horsemanship.

Its no secret that well-trained horses and mules have become harder to acquire and more expensive over the past decade. This precipitated the need to improve the abilities of our stock-handlers so that they could help train the young, and in some cases re-train, the animals that the Forest's could afford.

Organized by the Rocky Mountain Ranger District, the packers and backcountry crewmembers had the opportunity to participate in a clinic at Gates Park in July 2024, led by Martin Black. The clinic focused specifically on horsemanship skills applicable to backcountry work, emphasizing techniques and how stock think to help enhance the participants expertise in handling and caring for their horses in a wilderness environment.

Working with Martin Black is giving our packers and backcountry crewmembers new tools and understanding that allows them to use a wider variety of horses and mules, helps make the animals better, and keeps the stock users safer. These trainings help ensure that the legacy of skilled packing continues for maintaining the essential support for backcountry stewardship projects.





The Great American Outdoors Act at work

Rory Glueckert, Helena-Lewis and Clark NF Recreation Program Manager

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), signed into law on August 4, 2020, was landmark bipartisan legislation that strengthened conservation and maintenance of America's public lands. It permanently funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million annually, supporting state and local conservation projects, recreation grants and federal land acquisition. Additionally, it created the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, which allocated up to \$9.5 billion over five years to address deferred maintenance across federal lands. The funding was distributed among agencies, with 70% to the National Park Service, 15% to the Forest Service, and the remainder to BLM, FWS, and the Bureau of Indian Education. The funds have been used to repair roads, trails, visitor centers, water systems, and other infrastructure. Celebrated as the most significant conservation legislation in nearly half a century, the Act has safeguarded ecosystems, improved public access, generated jobs and boosted local economies.

The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC) and Adjacent Lands Priority Area Trail Maintenance Project was originally identified through the National Forest System Trail Stewardship Act of 2016. One of only 15 Priority Areas nationwide, the BMWC encompasses the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Great Bear Wilderness Areas and spans three National Forests - Flathead, Lolo, and Helena-Lewis and Clark. In addition, the Priority Area extends to trails adjacent to the Wilderness complex. This area includes a wide variety of motorized, non-motorized and wilderness trails. A history of underfunding rendered sections of the trail system inaccessible, while a lack of annual maintenance activity only increased the deferred maintenance backlog.

Against that backdrop, a five-year GAOA project focused on reducing deferred maintenance on trails within the BMWC was initiated in 2021. This project aimed to reduce nearly \$4M in deferred maintenance on the 3,247 miles of trail within the BMWC and Adjacent Lands Priority Area, as well as the 225 miles of deferred maintenance activities associated with the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Priority Area. This project was implemented on a multi-Forest, large landscape level phased approach, receiving \$1.1M annually over five years. The project utilized force account crews, partnerships, volunteers, youth and contracts to accomplish the deferred trail work. Partners included the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation, Montana Conservation Corps, Flathead Area Mountain Bikers and Whitefish Mountain Resort. Maintenance activities included deferred clearing, brushing, heavy tread maintenance, replacing and improving drainage structures, constructing turnpikes and puncheons. The brushing and clearing resulted in the opening of multiple trails that had been inaccessible, particularly in areas with high tree mortality.

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The Great American Outdoors Act continued

- Project accomplishments through the 2025 field season include the following:
- Over \$4M reduction in deferred maintenance, across 485 miles of the BMWC's trails
 - Constructed 14 turnpikes, 4 retaining walls and 7 puncheons
 - Deferred clearing projects on at least 24 different trails
 - Over 30 tread reconstruction projects



Celebrating 20 Years of Artist Wilderness Connection: A wilderness focused artist-in-residency

Submitted by Colter Pence

I love the idea of the Artist Wilderness Connection. What a gift to the artist to be sent to the wilderness and be allowed to create. Their experiences were captured in their art for all to enjoy wilderness! ---written comment left by a Hockaday Museum visitor after viewing the Artist Wilderness Connection art exhibit

Last year marked 20 years for the Artist Wilderness Connection (AWC) program, a wilderness-based artist-in-residence partnership project between the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation, Hockaday Museum of Art, Flathead National Forest and Swan Valley Connections. Grateful to our project partners & district wilderness staff for a successful 20 years!

The AWC program has provided rare opportunities for artists to immerse themselves in and be inspired by wilderness; and for our communities the chance to connect with wild places through the eyes, experiences, and creativity of our program artists.

Last year hundreds of community members and visitors connected with the Bob Marshall and Great Bear Wilderness Areas through the artwork and experiences of program artists – engaging with four artists as part of the 2024 Wilderness Speaker's Series, and a four-month long exhibition of AWC art, showcasing over 50 donated pieces at the Kalispell Hockaday Museum of Art.

The program was born from a 2003 conversation with then Hockaday Museum Director Linda Grady, after the forest and museum successfully partnered on a wildfire photo exhibit. "What about a wilderness focused artist residency that featured the treasured Bob Marshall", Linda asked, looking at the larger landscape outside of Glacier National Park.



Ted C. Hansen
Sentries of Vinegar Mountain
Oil on canvas

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Celebrating 20 Years of Artist Wilderness Connection: A wilderness focused artist-in-residency-cont.

The AWC program places artists in selected administrative cabins for seven and up to 14 days on the Hungry Horse or Spotted Bear Ranger Districts. Placing artists in remote wilderness cabins accessed by foot and stock is one piece that makes this program unique. Over the years, the program has hosted painters, illustrators, writers, musicians, photographers, sculptors and mixed media artists.

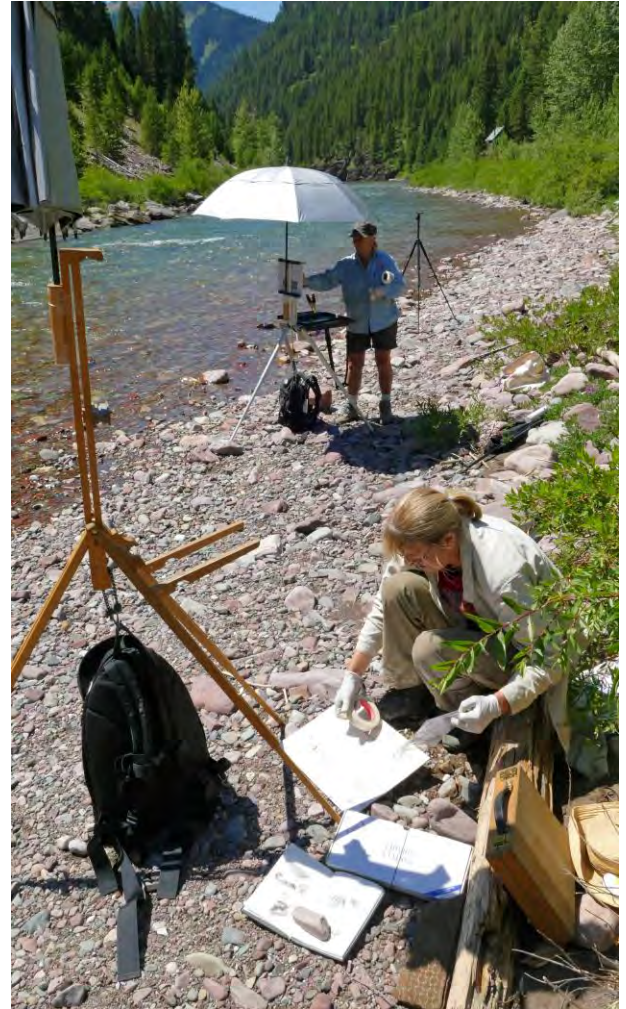
After their residency, artists share their experience through a community outreach done in collaboration with program partners. Outreach has included exhibits, artist talks, workshops for the public, teachers, students and wilderness workers and performances. Artists also donate a representative piece of art created from their residency experience.

In 2004 first program artists traveled the 50-mile gravel road to Spotted Bear for a week residency experience. The Spotted Bear mules inspired the first program art piece, as Flathead sculptor Myni Ferguson shared, the pack animals broke through the trees and crossed the river where she fished, with “water splashing, manes flying”.

As the program moves into year twenty-one, the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest joins the project, providing artist placement opportunities on the east side of the Bob out of the Rocky Mountain Ranger District. Offering artists a chance to explore different perspectives, place & environment across the divide.

Next time you visit the Hungry Horse Ranger Station, take time to view and reflect on the AWC artwork in the front lobby and space outside the conference room. What wilderness impressions are you left with?

As a way of engaging with art from the AWC program, please enjoy the next page depicting what artist Bri Dostie experienced while staying at Granite Cabin in the Great Bear Wilderness in 2023. This coloring page invites you to help create your own wilderness art. What wilderness memories or goals does this evoke for you?

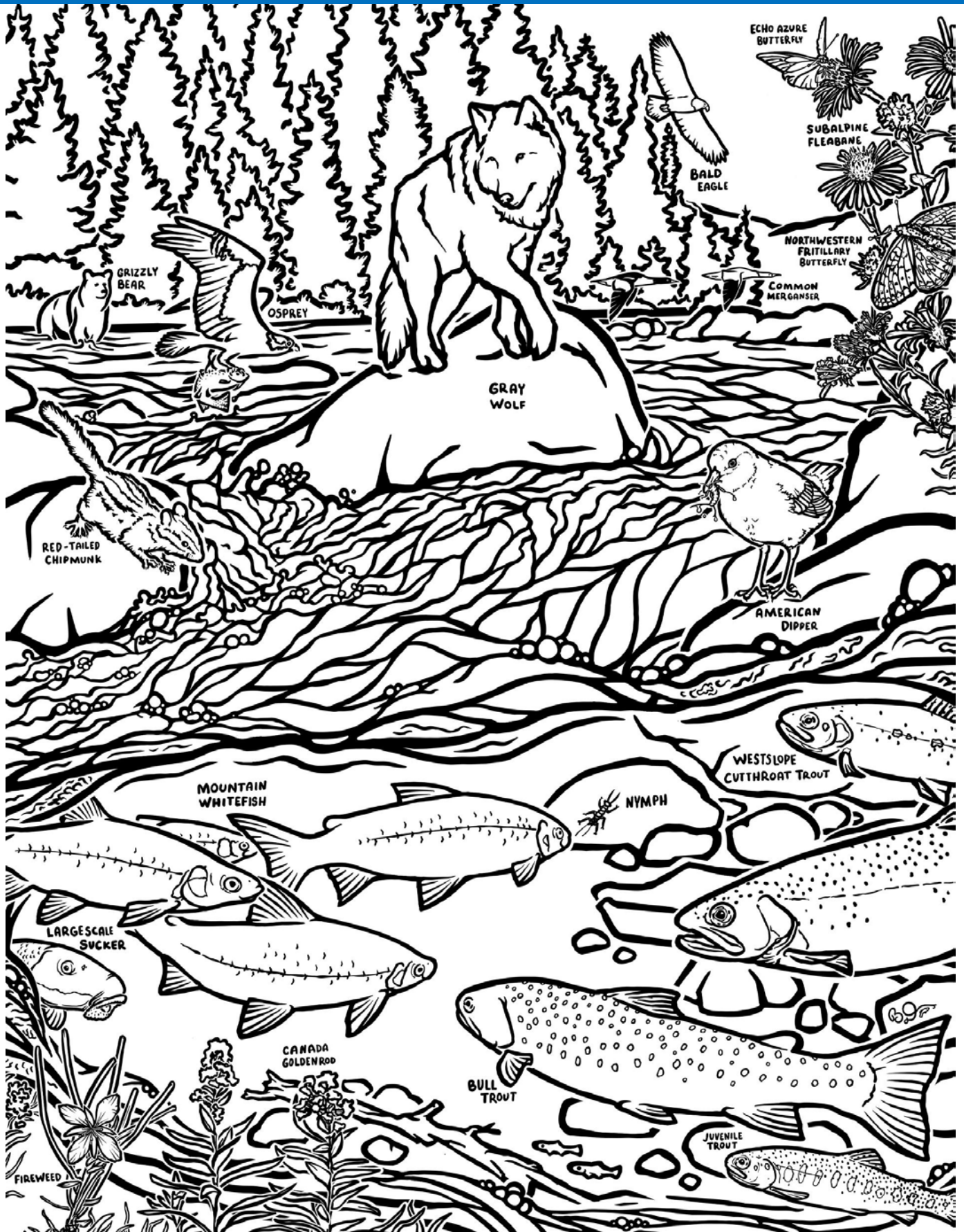


Artists Ogle and Droll painting at the Middle Fork of the Flathead River

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Celebrating 20 Years of Artist Wilderness Connection: A wilderness focused artist-in-residency-cont.





Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation

Clifford Kipp, Executive Director, BMWF

As always, we at the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation (BMWF) want to first convey how grateful we are for the opportunity to work alongside our USFS partners across the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. For nearly 30 years, our partnership has established a legacy of effectiveness through backcountry volunteer stewardship projects, natural resource career pathways and practical learning opportunities that leave a lasting impact not only on this incredible place, but also on the people who partake of our programming.

With changes to the Forest Service's workforce last year BMWF adapted plans to be responsive to the changing conditions. Through careful decision making, a spur-of-the-moment fundraising campaign, and lots of communication with our district partners, BMWF launched what became an impactful year of programming.

We recruited, trained, and supported 22 seasonals - professional leaders and trail technicians, Wilderness stewardship interns working across most disciplines, two packer apprentices and a Journeyman packer. We also recruited and deployed 380 citizen volunteers, rallied our roster of 35 volunteer packers, and delivered 72 educational engagements in gateway communities. Perhaps not the reach, nor the professional workforce of the glory days, and not the only partner organization supporting field work in the BMWC, but BMWF proudly represents an adaptable, responsive resource for the agency when it comes to tackling present day challenges. In all honesty, we are grateful to be in a position to help.



Crew members using a traditional tool

(Continued on next page...)

Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation cont.

Some reflections from 2025 Wilderness Stewards:

"It helped me understand conservation on a larger scale, and it was interesting to live and work in designated Wilderness. I definitely learned more on recreation management".

"...it is a lot of hard work but it is unbelievably worth every second. This summer was the best summer I have ever had...It is an amazing internship!!

"I think the biggest takeaway that I got was that I now finally have professional experience with conservation work. This will help me get future jobs and helped me know more about the ins and outs of working in conservation"...

..."I ended up making this internship five credits and that will help me with my major and help me graduate an entire semester early from college"

A volunteer's reflection:

Every time I volunteer, I am moved by the power of a group working together as stewards of the land. From the packers, to the leaders, to the volunteers, BMWF trips create unique experiences to pay it forward to public lands...The "Bob" has a piece of my heart, but so does BMWF. See you on a trail project next year! - Volunteer Leslie

We sincerely appreciate those who gave of their time, expertise, energy, and treasure to help make the 2025 Field Season a reality. Together, we came through for the Bob. The impact will only continue to grow in relevance and value as time goes on. We are glad to count you among our circle.



Crew members clear a path



BMWFW-by the numbers...

TRAIL PROJECTS



2,415 TREES
CLEARED



18 MILES OF
TRAIL BRUSHED



7,410 YARDS OF
TREAD IMPROVED



22 DRAINAGES
MAINTAINED/
CONSTRUCTED



5 HISTORIC BACKCOUNTRY
CABINS/CORRALS RESTORED

448
MILES OF
TRAIL MAINTAINED

WEEDS PROJECTS

ACRES OF
WEEDS TREATED

132



840 LB OF WEEDS
HAND PULLED



67 ACRES OF
WEEDS
SPRAYED



69 ACRES
OF WEEDS
MAPPED



60 ACRES
TREATED WITH
BIO CONTROLS

WILDERNESS EDUCATION

43

EDUCATIONAL
TRAININGS &
EVENTS

11 CLASSROOM VISITS,
FIELDTRIPS & CAMPFIRE CHATS

27 EDUCATIONAL
COMMUNITY EVENTS

4,400 PEOPLE ENGAGED IN
EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES



4
ARTIST
WILDERNESS
RESIDENCIES

in collaboration
with our program
partners

3,224



BMWFW
LICENSE PLATES
ON THE ROAD

CONTRIBUTED

20,216

SERVICE HOURS TO
THE BOB, TOTALING



\$1,143,122

IN WILDERNESS
STEWARDSHIP VALUE

BMWFW-by the numbers-continued

2025 By the Numbers

BMWFW ANNUAL REPORT

48
TOTAL
PROJECTS


ON THE GROUND

380 VOLUNTEERS
gave back to the Bob

14 PARTNERS & AFFINITY GROUPS
joined us in the field

16 WILDERNESS INTERNS
graduated from field-based training programs

2 PACKER APPRENTICES & **1** JOURNEYMAN PACKER
saddled up with Master Packers on the trail

 MALE: 46%
 FEMALE: 54%

RETURNING

NEW

AVERAGE AGE

42

VOLUNTEER STATS

 **83%**
FROM MONTANA

CAMP LIFE


3,612 CUPS OF COFFEE

2,408 NIGHTS UNDER THE STARS




650 MILES HIKED TO BASECAMPS


280 MULE LOADS OF GEAR

340 PACKER APPRENTICE & JOURNEYMAN
MILES IN THE SADDLE

70 ONE-WAY PACK TRIPS

PACK SUPPORT

INCOME  **\$1,229,860**

- 1% Merchandise
- 2% Investments
- 3% License Plates
- 8% Fundraising Events
- 32% Individual Donations
- 54% Grants

EXPENSES  **\$1,023,639**

- 13% Administration
- 13% Fundraising & Outreach
- 74% Boots-on-the-Ground Programs

FINANCIALS



Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation Trivia

Did you know that the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex is composed of 3 National Forest's, it composes 22% of those National Forests, has 3 wilderness areas within it, is a total of 1.6 million acres (2,518 square miles), and falls within 6 of Montana's counties?



Wilderness	Forest	Ranger District	Counties
Great Bear Wilderness (286,989 acres)	Flathead National Forest (286,989 acres)	Hungry Horse Ranger District (150,104 acres)	Flathead County
		Spotted Bear Ranger District (136,885 acres)	Flathead County
Bob Marshall Wilderness (1,064,935 acres)	Flathead National Forest (712,351 acres)	Spotted Bear Ranger District (712,351 acres)	Flathead, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, and Powell Counties
	Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (352,585 acres)	Rocky Mountain Ranger District (352,585 acres)	Lewis and Clark, Pondera, and Teton Counties
Scapegoat Wilderness (260,021 acres)	Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (184,357 acres)	Rocky Mountain Ranger District (100,807)	Lewis and Clark Counties
		Lincoln Ranger District (83,550 acres)	Lewis and Clark, and Powell Counties
		Seeley Lake Ranger District (75,664 acres)	Lewis and Clark, Missoula, and Powell Counties
Complex Total:	1,611,945 Acres		

National Forest	Total Acres	BMWC Acres	% of National Forest that is in the BMWC
Flathead National Forest	2,404,935	999,340	41.5%
Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forest	2,846,606	536,942	18.8%
Lolo National Forest	2,272,000	75,664	3.3%
TOTAL	7,523,541	1,611,945	21.4%

Outfitter and Guides in the Bob

Submitted by Colter Pence

Outfitting on National Forest System lands through a special use permit is authorized generally by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and Term Permit Act of 1915. Under section 4(d)(5) of the Wilderness Act of 1964, authorized officers may authorize commercial services such as outfitting and guiding in wilderness to the extent necessary for activities which are proper for realizing the recreational or other wilderness purposes of the areas. Outfitting and guiding services are necessary to conduct the types of recreational and other activities that relate to the purposes of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex for a variety of reasons including:

-Helping visitors enjoy their wilderness by providing specialized knowledge (like how to recreate safely in bear country), skills (like rafting through whitewater and horse packing), and equipment (like drop camps or drop float services for those who want to recreate on their own but just need a little help getting there).

-Enhancing visitor understanding and appreciation of wilderness character: Guides are expected to provide wilderness awareness education to enrich the visitors experience, and they share information about the special qualities of the BMWC, its history and lore.

-Protect wilderness resources: Permit holders are expected to exhibit best practices for recreating responsibly in the wilderness, and model that for other visitors. Many non-outfitted visitors will observe the methods of well trained and prepared guides and adopt the methods they use to help protect the wilderness resource. And there are always stories shared of an outfitter helping right a stranded or lost party in the wilderness.

Permitted outfitters offer a range of services in the BMWC and many of these operations are run by small family businesses, some are multi-generation Montana families, and they are based in the rural communities which surround the BMWC. 9 are non-profits which excel especially in offering trips centered on education and youth groups in the wilderness. Outfitters and guides who offer services for hunting and fishing must be licensed by the Montana Board of Outfitters, which is an entity within the Montana Department of Labor and Industry.



There are requirements for experience and training of outfitters and guides through this licensing board. Many of the BMWC permit holders are members of the Professional Wilderness Outfitters Association and the Montana Outfitter and Guides Association, organizations that work with the Forest Service to ensure quality outfitted and guided experiences are available to those that seek them.

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Outfitter and Guides in the Bob continued

Permit holders pay fees to the Forest Service, as required by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act which authorizes outfitting and guiding permits. Those fees are returned to the local level and are used to fund trail clearing, road grading, educational programs, and other services which everyone visiting the BMWC benefits from.

Each year, the Forest Service monitors permitted outfitter and guide operations in the BMWC. Operations need to be inspected at least every 3 years, if not more frequently for new permit holders or those needing to improve their performance. Monitoring work ranges from checking on the conditions at trailhead corrals, to how guides are complying with food storage regulations, to reviewing the layout of assigned sites, and other elements that reflect the quality of the operation. When opportunities arise, those doing the inspections also visit with the guided visitors to learn about the quality of the service they have received.

Contact a local Forest Service office around the BMWC to learn more about wilderness outfitter and guides.

South Fork Flathead River Bull Trout Fishery

Leo Rosenthal, Fisheries Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



The Bob Marshall Wilderness is home to one of the strongest populations of bull trout, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). While many other bull trout populations throughout the western United States have declined, the bull trout population in Hungry Horse Reservoir and the interconnected South Fork Flathead River continues to thrive. Bull trout were listed under the ESA in 1998, and at the time only Swan Lake remained open to bull trout angling because of high population numbers. However, in 2004 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) was able to reopen bull trout fishing in Hungry Horse Reservoir and the South Fork Flathead under a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This permit requires FWP to implement the catch card and survey system, closely monitor the bull trout population, and produce semi-annual reports on the status of the bull trout population. This permit provides anglers a catch and release fishery in the South Fork and allows a limited harvest opportunity in Hungry Horse Reservoir.

Photo: Gordon Creek Redd Fish count survey October 2024

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South Fork Flathead River Bull Trout Fishery

The opportunity to pursue these large fish in a remote wilderness setting is a unique experience. Angler participation in the bull trout fishery has increased every year since 2004. The number of catch cards issued in recent years has roughly doubled since the inception of the fishery. In addition to an overall increase in angler participation, angler use between the reservoir, and the river has also shifted. While most of the bull trout fishing was traditionally done in Hungry Horse Reservoir, recent surveys have shown a greater emphasis on the catch and release fishery in the South Fork. This increase in effort in the South Fork has resulted in more bull trout being caught and released than in previous years. Estimated bull trout harvest from Hungry Horse Reservoir has remained relatively low (~50 fish/year), but an estimated combined total of 973 bull trout were caught and released from the South Fork Flathead River and Hungry Horse Reservoir in 2023 (the most recently reported data).

Adult bull trout numbers are monitored by counting redds (depressions left in the stream after bull trout have spawned) in direct tributaries to Hungry Horse Reservoir as well as in wilderness tributaries to the South Fork Flathead River. Because of the time and effort necessary to conduct the backcountry counts, these surveys are conducted every 3-5 years. Wilderness redd counts completed in 2023 revealed some of the lowest numbers on record. Coincidentally, stream flows in 2023 were also the lowest on record. FWP wanted to ensure that 2023 wasn't an anomaly and therefore returned to the backcountry in 2024 to complete the survey again. Unfortunately, the 2024 redd count surveys resulted in the lowest numbers observed in this 30-year data set.

These results are concerning, and the combination of declining bull trout abundance and increase angler pressure led FWP to implement regulation changes. Literature suggests that post-release mortality can be high for large bull trout, and the increased catch in the South Fork could be resulting in greater mortality than observed previously. FWP made a regulation change in 2020 banning the use of treble hooks in the river system as a proactive approach to make it easier for anglers to release their fish unharmed. In fall 2024 FWP then made the decision to reduce the amount of fish being caught and released in the South Fork. These regulation changes for 2025 include shortening the catch and release season to the time period 7/1-7/31, reducing the harvest in Hungry Horse Reservoir from two bull trout annually to one fish annually, and applying seasonal mouth closures to the Gordon Creek and Little Salmon Creek confluence holes. These efforts should reduce the overall number of bull trout being handled in the river and allow migrating bull trout the opportunity to make it to their natal streams unharmed. The bull trout population will be monitored in subsequent years to detect any trends in overall numbers and potential impacts of the recreational fishery. In the meantime, anglers can do their part to help protect this fishery by landing fish quickly and safely, keeping them in the water while releasing and taking any photos, consider pinching down the barbs of flies/lures, and limiting the number of fish they catch.

Mission Mountains Youth Crew

Submitted by Marlee Ostheimer, National Forest Foundation

For the past four years, The Mission Mountains Youth Crew Program (MMYC) has engaged 8 high school-age crew members, and two young adult crew leads from the Salish Kootenai College in projects designed to expose youth to a variety of careers in natural resources. Throughout the nine weeks of the program, the crew works on both sides of the Mission Mountains, teaming up with natural resource professionals with both the Flathead National Forest and the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribe (CSKT) to learn about a variety of careers in natural resources, including recreation, water quality, and heritage.

In 2024, the crew teamed up with the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation to spend a week hiking and completing trail maintenance in the Great Bear Wilderness. As part of the ancestral lands of the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille, the Great Bear also provides a real-world opportunity to teach about cultural and heritage ties to the land. The crew was joined by CSKT Tribal Member and Salish Kootenai College instructor, Tim Ryan, who taught about traditional travel routes and ways of life while the crew was camped out along the Middle Fork of the Flathead River.

Crossing the river each morning before and after each workday, the crew cleared 37 trees from Long Creek through to Bersicker Creek and 3 from the Spruce Park Trail. The crew focused primarily on reestablishing degraded tread along Long Creek and reclaiming the trail from overgrown brush through 2.4 miles of the corridor.

During the brutally hot week of July 22nd, the crew geared up for the longest hike that most had ever participated in. The long day was made easier with frequent stops for huckleberries and water refills, and the crew eagerly discovered a swimming hole on arriving at their campsite.

While during the days the crew worked diligently on Long Creek Trail, evenings consisted of finding respite from horseflies, swimming, and learning traditional skills or playing stick games. On the last night of the trip, the crew stayed up late playing stick games. A huge thunder and windstorm rolled over camp, chasing the crew to their tents. Several crew members said the storm was the highlight of the entire trip! The next day the crew made sure to clear the trees that had fallen on the trail during the night (not to mention the two that had fallen a few steps from camp!) and were thanked by the outfitters they passed on the hike out.

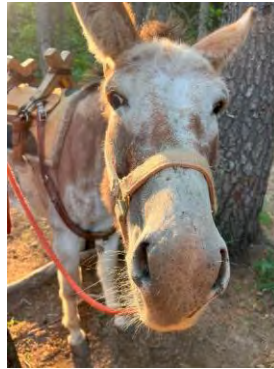


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Mission Mountains Youth Crew-cont.

It is stories like these that make MMYC such a special experience, for crew members and trip leaders alike. Not only making a memorable experience for the crew, this trip was a first backpacking trip for two of the crew. One of these crew members, when asked, reported that it would not be their last!

MMYC is a summer job program that exposes high school-age youth living on the Flathead Reservation in Western Montana to career pathways in natural resources. MMYC is carried out through a partnership with CSKT, the Flathead National Forest, the National Forest Foundation, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation, and Swan Valley Connections.



Trail Crews From the BMWC Come Together For Disaster Recovery On The Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests

Submitted by Colter Pence

On July 24, 2024, a major windstorm battered a large section of the Bitterroot Mountains. One of the worst impacted areas of the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests were the popular trails and campgrounds in the Lochsa River Corridor and in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. While no injuries were reported, downed and hazard trees closed campgrounds, damaged property, and impacted roadways. Crucially, talented crosscut saw teams were needed, because much of the work would take place in the wilderness, where chainsaws are not allowed to be used.

Responding from the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex were two teams from the Flathead National Forest that worked on the Elk Summit and Colt Killed Creek Drainage, and a team from the Lolo National Forest that worked on the Warm Springs drainage. The crews that responded were eager to chop through the diverse green downfall and were excited to work with diverse tree species that they don't usually see in their home forests. Additionally, crew members were able to challenge themselves to work in new to them new conditions and learn lessons they then brought

Reflecting on the experience, Geoff Fast, the local Recreation Specialist who helped coordinate the crews work, recognized that: "It's wonderful that our neighboring forests and wilderness areas have come together to help us out in our time of need. It's really encouraging to see supervisors be so generous to share their crews to help. This was an experience that allowed individual crews to be part of a major effort. When duty called, program managers answered, giving their employees a unique experience to see something new, re-engage with their work, meet new people, see a new wilderness and be part of a bigger effort."

Youth Forest Monitoring Program and the Bob: A Spotlight in Wilderness Stewardship

Submitted by **Elle Fitzpatrick and Liz Burke**

The Youth Forest Monitoring Program (YFMP), a collaboration between Montana Discovery Foundation and the Helena-Lewis & Clark National Forest, is a seven-week internship program for high school students. Participants have the chance to explore hands-on forest ecology, supplement forest health analyses, engage in stewardship projects, and experience a variety of natural resource careers. YFMP has also fostered a decade-long connection to the Scapegoat Wilderness.

Since 2013, YFMP participants have taken annual backpack trips into Webb Lake to collect forest health data and address noxious weeds in the area. What started as an opportunity to incorporate wilderness education into the program turned into a long-term study of vegetation health in the backcountry. During their trips, students spend three days collecting data at permanent monitoring sites around the lake; when they come out of the woods, they compare their observations to previous teams' work and make recommendations to wilderness managers and Forest leadership based on their findings.



(Above) YFMP participants mechanically removed a dozen bags of Oxeye daisy heads in 2015. By 2019, they were down to only four bags.



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Youth Forest Monitoring Program and the Bob: A Spotlight in Wilderness Stewardship-continued

Much of the students' monitoring has focused on the meadow located just west of the Forest Service administrative site at Webb Lake, which is commonly known as the "Oxeye Meadow" to just about anyone who has frequented the area in the last 15 years. Students started recording small populations of Oxeye daisy near a popular campsite during their first trip into Webb. At that point, they had learned how to map noxious weeds using online applications, such as EddMapS, and researched best practices in keep these populations in check. At the end of that season, they recommended the use of a backpack sprayer in early summer to knock down the weeds. Treatment with herbicide would be followed up by YFMP students to mechanically remove the flower heads of any remaining plants. By mapping and collecting data, students were able to see a reduction in Oxeye daisy plant density, from bagging up a dozen bags of flower heads in 2013, to only four bags in 2024.

Other partners integral in YFMP's success include the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Lewis and Clark County, the Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund, and Helena College.



Students map Oxeye Daisy populations using the app EddMapS and conduct density surveys at permanent plots.

In Case You Missed It...

2025 National Wilderness Award

The 2025 National Forest Service Wilderness Awards were held virtually on January 28th, 2026. The Line Officer Wilderness Leadership Award is presented to the person who demonstrates leadership and commitment to Wilderness stewardship and is essential to the well-being of the National Wilderness Preservation system. The emcee, Gordon Blum, Acting Associate Deputy Chief, announced the 2025 winner, Rocky Mountain Ranger District's Mike Munoz.

From the nomination, Blum shared, "Mike has provided decades of exceptional wilderness leadership serving multiple terms as a lead Ranger for the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, while simultaneously leading the Rocky Mountain Ranger District for [nearly] 30 years. As lead Ranger, he has guided the managers and line officers responsible for stewarding the Bob Marshall, Great Bear and Scapegoat Wildernesses [which span] three national forests. His leadership has strengthened wilderness, fire management, outfitter and guide permit administration, grizzly bear recovery efforts, and partnerships with key organizations such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation... his steady leadership over multiple terms has inspired wilderness managers across the region and the nation. Reflecting his own belief that the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex is a legacy to be protected and passed on to future generations, Mike's long-standing dedication has kept that vision vibrant and alive throughout the complex. We are proud to celebrate Mike and his outstanding contributions to wilderness."

In his acceptance of the award, Mike said that "stewardship of the complex relies on a myriad of contributions from multiple dedicated employees," and that "the protected area status of wilderness requires active management of human activities while still providing experiences of unhindered access... wilderness designation allows us to pass on the early and living heritage of the Forest Service and the use of traditional skills, including horsemanship, manta and slinging loads on pack animals, as well as the use of primitive tools like cross cuts and axes and the maintenance of administrative log cabins and suspension bridges. Such skills and knowledge remain vital with today's continued advancement in technology."



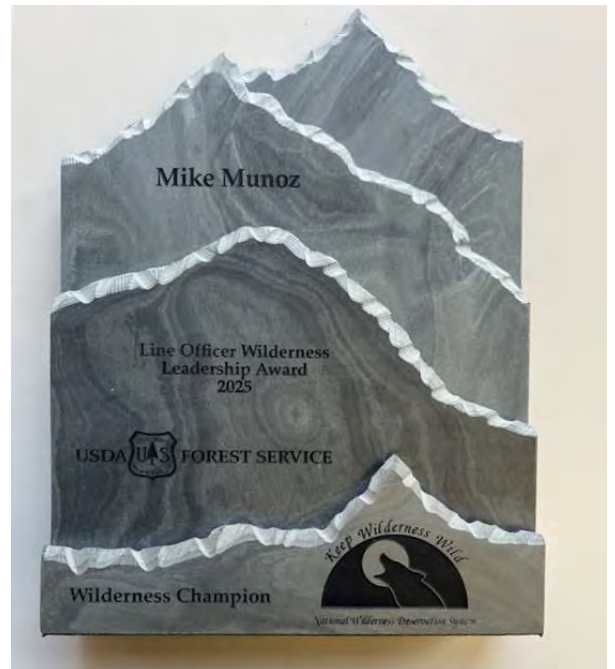
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More on Wilderness Awards

2025 National Wilderness Award

Mike shared that when President Lyndon Johnson first signed into law the 1964 Wilderness Act, he said, "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them something more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them with a glimpse of how things were in the beginning, not just after we got through with it." Ranger Muñoz said, "To that end, the Bob Marshall Wilderness managers have continued to deliver on the Forest Service mission of sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forest and grasslands for the present and future generations... I look forward to continuing stewardship, active stewardship with my co-workers across the complex who are committed to this place, "a legacy from the past, which has been given to us as a gift in the present to be passed on as a treasure to future generations." That's what I call Caring for the Land and Serving People. And I'm fortunate to have experienced it right here in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex."

We're glad he has, too.



This piece was taken primarily from the recording of the Wilderness Awards session on Teams.

New Faces on the Forest

Ben Johnson-Supervisor-Lolo National Forest



Ben and family enjoy a winter outing.

Ben Johnson has been the Lolo National Forest Supervisor since June 2025. Before joining the Forest Service Ben worked as a climbing/backcountry guide in North Carolina, Texas, Minnesota and Utah. Ben received a Master of Science in Natural Resources and the Environment and Master of Public Policy from the University of Michigan and a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies and Spanish Language and Composition from Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. Ben, his wife Lindsey and their two sons are enjoying getting to know Missoula and the Lolo! In their spare time you can usually find them on a bike or skis.

Prior Forest Service roles include, National Assistant Director for Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources National Recreation Special Uses Program Manager, Acting Special Assistant to the Southwestern Regional Forester focusing on implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, Acting National Assistant Director of Recreation, Organization Development Specialist and Strategic Recreation Planner with the Forest Service's Enterprise Program, Acting District Public Affairs staff on the Boulder Ranger District, Community Liaison with the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests' flood response team and community engagement specialist on the Coronado National Forest. He is also a graduate of the Agency's Senior Leader Program.



New Faces on the Forest

Kevin Doherty-Seeley Lake District Ranger



Seeley Lake's new District Ranger, Kevin Doherty enjoys working with people and has a strong background in building and leading teams. Kevin grew up in a military family, and values duty, honor, hard work, attitude, and laughter. For the past nine years, he has been a liaison officer for the Rocky Mountain Critical Incident Management Team 2 (Blue Team), building trust and coordination with local authorities during wildfires.

Kevin comes to Seeley with a lot of management experience. He managed the regional refuge program in which he oversaw monitoring, planning, and controlling invasive species for the 8 state USFWS Mountain Prairie Region. He also served as an acting Refuge Manager for the 8.6-million-acre Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge near Fairbanks Alaska. In that role, Kevin gained hands-on experience in managing various programs, including law enforcement, aviation, and fire. Additionally, he worked to build positive relationships with the Gwich'in Athabascans, a Native Alaskan community living in the Yukon Flats.

When Kevin is not working, he enjoys spending time with his wife, their three children, and their two dogs. All his kids participate in high school sports, and Kevin and his wife travel around Montana to cheer for them. Kevin is an avid public landowner, user and DIY hunter. He enjoys bird hunting, big game hunting, fishing, rafting, mountain biking, gravel biking, snowboarding, cross-country skiing, and exploring new gravel roads and trails with his truck. He feels grateful to collaborate with the community in managing our shared land and is really looking forward to meeting more of the community and understanding how the forest is important to them.



Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex

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Deputy Forest Supervisor:
Molly Ryan

Flathead NF

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Forest Supervisor:
Anthony Botello
Deputy Forest Supervisor:
Tami Mackenzie

Lolo NF

Missoula MT
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Forest Supervisor:
Ben Johnson
Deputy Forest Supervisor:
Jeremy Casterson

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District Ranger:
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Seeley Lake RD

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District Ranger:
Kevin Doherty
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Lincoln RD

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District Ranger:
Jim Yarbrough
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Spotted Bear RD

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(406) 387-3800 (winter)
District Ranger:
Adam LaDell
adam.ladell@usda.gov

Website

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/flathead>



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