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A MESSAGE FROM SETH: SPRING/SUMMER 2025

As spring breathes new life into our rivers and forests across the Blackfoot watershed, I am excited to share a season of renewal not just in nature, but within our organization as well. I am pleased to announce the release of nearly \$4.5 million in previously awarded federal funds after a few months of worry during the federal funding freeze. With these dollars now available, we are moving ahead with dozens of projects and maintaining our mission. However, as our federal agency partners lose employees, have smaller budgets and reduced capacity, we are doing our best to support our agencies, find opportunities to fill gaps, and will continue to foster conservation across public and private lands.

With renewed momentum, we are proud to launch two new programs that reflect our commitment to science and stewardship all within our community-based and collaborative process. Our new Director of Science Dr. Molly McDevitt will help us prioritize conservation delivery through evidence-based monitoring and help detect potential threats to our wildlife populations and fisheries. By expanding our capacity for data collection and analysis, this program will allow us to measure the impacts of our work more effectively, ensuring that our projects produce meaningful, lasting outcomes for ecosystems and rural communities.

Additionally, our newly formed Recreation Committee, led by Coordinator Marley Held-Wilson, takes a holistic approach to fostering responsible recreation across our shared natural spaces. Whether on the river, in the forest, or on the mountain trail, this program aims to co-create solutions with local partners, encouraging safe access, stewardship and respect for the lands and waters that make the Blackfoot unique. Through education and community-led planning, we are building a foundation for sustainable and ethical enjoyment of the outdoors for current and future generations.

Thank you for being part of this journey. With your continued support, we look forward to a season of purpose, progress and partnership. Please read more about our new efforts and all our work that serves the people and communities who love the Blackfoot watershed.

Seth Wilson Executive Director



Executive Director
Seth Wilson

Notes from the Field

Spring/Summer 2025



Photo by Virginia Causey

BIRDS: BLACKFOOT BIRD WORK ENGAGES NEW AUDIENCES IN SCIENCE & STEWARDSHIP

The rural nature of the Blackfoot watershed means the Blackfoot may just be the “last best place”—a refuge of sorts—for many bird species. Over the last year, the Blackfoot Challenge team has built onto our trumpeter swan restoration program with a broader focus on a diversity of bird species. The growing bird program includes engaging volunteer citizen scientists to help monitor trumpeter swans, common loons and long-billed curlews. With continued conifer encroachment treatments, Bird Program Coordinator Elaine Caton has also expanded monitoring of Brewer’s sparrows—a rare grassland bird species gaining habitat from this grassland restoration. Another species benefiting from grassland and rangeland habitat improvements is the sharp-tailed grouse. In partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Challenge has supported community engagement and learning around the recent reintroduction of sharp-tails into the Blackfoot Valley. With this increased focus on bird life, the Challenge is also able to integrate bird habitat priorities into projects spanning several of our programs—from bird-friendly grazing practices to prescribed fire to wetlands habitat protection. From elegant swans floating across a wetland to dancing sharptails on the lek, birds have a way of inspiring us to pause and take in the world around us—making a bird program a natural path toward inviting new people into the Blackfoot stewardship journey.

If you love birds like we do, contact Blackfoot Challenge Bird Program Coordinator Elaine Caton at elaine@blackfootchallenge.org to get involved.



Photo by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Photo by Katie Hickman

WATER: ZOOMING OUT TO TAKE A BIG-PICTURE LOOK AT WATERSHED RESTORATION PLANNING

In 2014, the Blackfoot Challenge coordinated an effort to create a Watershed Restoration Plan (WRP) that outlines steps to improve water resources across the Blackfoot. The WRP aggregated years of community discussions, partnership-based planning, water science and shared priorities into a plan to engage partners and landowners in voluntary, collaborative measures to improve water quantity and water quality throughout the watershed. After more than 10 years of watershed improvement work following the original WRP, it is now time to revisit the plan. This year, the Blackfoot Challenge launched a planning process to update the WRP with a decade’s worth of new information and project outcomes, while reaffirming our restoration priorities moving forward with diverse watershed partners. The planning process will unfold over the next two years, with multiple opportunities for community members and other interested parties to voice their concerns and ideas for improving the Blackfoot’s water resources. The planning process will help identify new project opportunities and ways the Challenge can support private landowners with water stewardship. Together we look forward to crafting a vision to guide the next chapter of watershed restoration objectives and strategies that ensure the continued health and resilience of ecological and human communities in the watershed.

To learn how you can take part in watershed restoration planning, contact our Water Steward Clancy Jandreau at clancy@blackfootchallenge.org.



Photo by Clancy Jandreau



Photo by Blackfoot Challenge staff

LAND STEWARDSHIP: DESIGNING GRAZING PLANS THAT SUSTAIN STEWARDSHIP EFFORTS



Photo by Clancy Jandreau

Well-managed grazing lands provide many valuable ecosystem services, from protecting stream health to supporting bird habitat to storing carbon in the soil. Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward Brad Weltzien works with many landowners each year to design grazing plans that support ranch economic goals while also sustaining natural systems and all the values they offer. Stretching back 15 years, work to restore Nevada Creek is now in phase 8, with all phases supported by grazing management plans. Through a partnership with the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the integration of riparian grazing plans using fencing, livestock rotation and off-stream stock water allows time for stream bank recovery after restoration.

Nearby, the Challenge also helped a Douglas Creek landowner develop a grazing plan that helps with changing livestock management needs after the Challenge installed a new grizzly bear electric fence project on the property. This project benefited from a new winter stock water system as well, to supply an expanded calving area. Along Kleinschmidt Creek—which was restored years ago and remains a conservation focus—a new rest-rotation grazing plan also works in concert with upgrades to livestock fencing and water access. In each case, custom planning balances landowner needs with natural resource protection—ensuring healthier streams, resilient rangelands and sustainable agriculture.

If you're interested in grazing management support, contact Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward Brad Weltzien at brad@blackfootchallenge.org.



Photo by Brad Weltzien

EDUCATION: WORKING WITH TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES TO NURTURE WATERSHED CONNECTIONS

Each year our education team develops programs and educational events to meet the interests of local teachers and community members. While sharing the foundations of ecology and natural resources, presentations incorporate local projects and current issues so audiences can appreciate the bridge between the science and on-the-ground application of conservation. During the 2024-2025 winter months, our lessons focused on snow. We helped students from watershed schools learn how to measure the snow water equivalent (the amount of water in the current snowpack) right in their own schoolyards, so they would understand how and why the water content of the snowpack is measured. Others learned how animals use microclimates to survive in winter habitats. High school students from throughout the watershed were invited to participate in an intro to avalanches class for snowmobilers that took place at the Rich Ranch. In the spring, we turned our attention to bear awareness and stream ecology programs, always weaving in the history of collaboration as the secret sauce in watershed stewardship.



Photo by Elaine Caton



Photo by Elaine Caton

For the broader community, recent education offerings have included a storytelling event about wilderness history told by a local outfitter, a guided birding hike, tours of private lands conservation projects, and more. Among our many annual programs, the Challenge continues to share an array of topics that build curiosity and appreciation for nature.

If you'd like to get involved in Blackfoot Challenge community education offerings, contact Education Program Coordinator Alyssa Daniels at alyssa@blackfootchallenge.org.

WILDLIFE: CARCASS PICK-UP PROGRAM SUCCESS BUILT ON DECADES OF PARTNERSHIP

In the early 2000s, the Blackfoot Challenge launched a livestock carcass pick-up program as a proactive way to reduce conflicts with wolves and grizzly bears across dozens of ranches. As landowner trust developed and conflicts diminished, the program took off. Since 2003, the Challenge has removed more than 12,000 carcasses from ranches and delivered them to the Blackfoot composting site, working with more than 120 landowners in the process. The program has been successful enough that it has been adopted by additional communities outside the watershed and across other areas of Montana. Much of that success falls on the shoulders of partners and the carcass removal team. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service donates a truck and diesel fuel each year and ranchers make donations to maintain this important service. Montana Department of Transportation generously provides all composting services at their Blackfoot yard. Calving season driver Dan Massee works closely with ranchers during the busiest time of year for carcass pickup, while off-season drivers remain available on call as needed throughout the rest of the year. Add in other generous funding partners, and this program has become a national model for reducing conflicts with predators. Now each year, dozens of students and partner groups visit the carcass compost facility for first-hand (although quite smelly) lessons in keeping the bears away and livestock and people safe.



Photo by Randy Gazda



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen

If you would like to learn more about wildlife coexistence tools, contact Blackfoot Challenge Wildlife Program Coordinator Eric Graham at eric@blackfootchallenge.org.



SCAN TO GIVE

VEGETATION: BATTLING INVASIVES WHILE RESTORING NATIVE PLANT COMMUNITIES

In recent years, the Blackfoot Challenge Vegetation Program focus has evolved from weed control to a more holistic approach managing for desirable vegetation. Today we offer landowner support by providing biological control insects, an opportunity to purchase reduced cost herbicides, and outreach events that share emerging technology for weed prevention and land restoration. The Vegetation Program is in its second season of a five-year grant through the Bureau of Land Management addressing noxious weed populations along approximately 100 miles of the Blackfoot River. This project is a cooperative effort between public and private landowners across two counties to inventory, treat, map, and monitor non-native, invasive plants along the river's edge to the high-water mark. The landowner-led Nevada Creek Vegetation Management Area cooperative will complete its invasive plants management project with cost-share support, using sheep grazing and herbicide for weed control. This year the Blackfoot will also participate in the Montana Bumblebee Atlas survey in the Ovando area and in promoting plant management for pollinators in cooperation with Big Sky Watershed Corps and Missoula County Department of Ecology and Extension. To top things off, our longstanding volunteer tradition of community weed pulls continues at the Russell Gates Fishing Access Site, helping control invasive weed spread at this popular public recreation site.

If you have vegetation questions, reach out to Blackfoot Challenge Vegetation Coordinator Karen Laitala at karen@blackfootchallenge.org.



Photos by Karen Laitala

None of this great work happens without you. Thank you so much for your generous partnership and support! Learn more at blackfootchallenge.org.

FORESTRY & PRESCRIBED FIRE: BLACKFOOT HOSTS EXPERIENTIAL PRESCRIBED FIRE TRAINING WORKSHOP

Prescribed fire offers one of the best tools for reducing risk of severe wildfire, but, for many local areas, a shortage of trained crews can limit the use of fire as a stewardship tool. This spring, the opportunity to bring the nation's leading model for prescribed fire training to the Blackfoot was an important step in advancing cooperative prescribed burning across Western Montana. For two weeks, the Blackfoot Challenge, The Nature Conservancy, and other partners hosted a first-ever Blackfoot Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TRES) workshop. Participants from around Montana took part in this experiential training to build robust local capacity for fire management. About 40 participants engaged in classroom and field training dedicated to improving their base of prescribed fire knowledge. One of the important tenets of TRES is that everyone goes to learn and everyone goes to teach, so learning extends both ways across individuals who bring different kinds of fire expertise to the table. In advance of the workshop, the planning team set up several burn units to allow for on-the-ground fire implementation. The Blackfoot Valley benefited from new burning projects, while also improving our own area's expertise to manage fire going forward. In addition to The Nature Conservancy and Blackfoot Challenge, participants represented the

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, U.S. Forest Service, University of Montana, National Center for Landscape Fire and Analysis, local fire departments, prescribed fire contractors, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and others. In the future, the Challenge hopes to host a similar training exchange for landowners who wish to do this work on their own lands and with their neighbors.

If you are interested in learning more about prescribed fire, reach out to Blackfoot Challenge Forestry & Prescribed Fire Coordinator Cindy Super at cindy@blackfootchallenge.org.



Photo by Montana DNRC



Photo by Montana DNRC

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA (BCCA): THE BLACKFOOT'S LIVING LEARNING OUTDOOR LAB

While the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) has evolved as a working landscape and stewardship model, the property has increasingly become a go-to place for field-based education and community gatherings. Over the last two winters, folks have enjoyed a community cross-country ski and snowshoe event, gathering around a bonfire with hot dogs and marshmallows in between treks along the ski trails. Multiple University of Montana (UM) student groups get actively involved in BCCA stewardship each year. Last fall, a group of incoming UM freshmen pulled several truckloads of noxious weeds on the BCCA. More recently UM Fire Learning Center students designed prescribed burn plans for six units on the BCCA—a hands-on education process that prepares them for future natural resource careers and resulted in a useful tool to facilitate future burns to improve forest health. The local Ovando School students spent a day improving BCCA wetlands as they added onto and maintained beaver dam analogs, which naturally store



Photo by Brad Weltzien



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen

water and sustain stream flows. Amidst all of these organized events, hundreds of folks continue to take advantage of the BCCA for hunting, hiking and other recreation opportunities. To enhance those experiences, the Challenge is designing new interpretive signage and infrastructure to share the BCCA story and build understanding of stewardship—all due to be installed soon as we happily welcome new visitors and groups to enjoy this community forest.

If you want to know more, contact Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward Brad Weltzien at brad@blackfootchallenge.org.

RECREATION: ENVISIONING A FUTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE RECREATION

After a couple years of Board and partner conversations, in late 2024 the Challenge moved forward with forming a Recreation Program. We hired a program coordinator in the fall, who then helped establish and put new energy behind a Blackfoot Recreation Committee. Work commenced quickly, with a series of community meetings in the fall to collect local views on the opportunities and challenges related to Blackfoot recreation. Those meetings laid the foundation for creating a guiding vision and goals for the program. This year's work will begin with a data collection effort at area recreation sites to document areas of crowding, natural resource impacts, and user experience. The Recreation Committee also prioritized outreach to recreationists, which will take shape with a new website presence with recreation resources, tips on responsible recreation and more. In



Photo by Chrissy Oschell



Photo by Blackfoot Challenge staff

the future, the Challenge hopes to expand visitor outreach by creating a recreation ambassador program that will increase face-to-face opportunities for engaging with recreationists. Finally, to help bring cohesion to recreation management, the Challenge is helping convene a Blackfoot recreation managers work group, where partners across state, federal and private entities can share information and ideas for collaboratively addressing recreation-related issues.

For more information about the Challenge's new Recreation Program, contact Recreation Program Coordinator Marley Held-Wilson at marley@blackfootchallenge.org

SCIENCE: WEAVING CONSERVATION PROGRAMS TOGETHER THROUGH SCIENCE

As social and ecological changes impact the Blackfoot watershed, the Blackfoot Challenge launched a bold new effort to build a model for community-based conservation science. We want to lead the way in understanding and addressing the long-term community needs of the Blackfoot Valley—needs that are increasingly shaped by ecological, economic and social pressures. To ensure the future resilience of both ecosystems and communities, the Challenge is developing a long-term, science-based monitoring program. This outcomes-based monitoring effort will focus on key systems and conservation efforts to help better define the connections between climate, drought, soil health, forest health, water quality, wildlife habitat, land use and agriculture. By understanding how these systems interact—and how they respond to change—we can guide smart conservation decisions that benefit the whole watershed. The Blackfoot Challenge is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. With decades of trust-based relationships among private



Photo by Karen Laitala



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen

landowners, agencies, NGOs, and universities, we already have the collaborative framework in place. Under the leadership of our new Science Director, we are deepening our partnerships to expand our capacity and secure long-term funding for this work.

Fascinated by the scientific possibilities? Contact Blackfoot Challenge Science Director Molly McDevitt at molly@blackfootchallenge.org.