

The logo features the word "Blackfoot" in a large, white, sans-serif font. A white, stylized wave graphic curves under "Blackfoot" and extends to the left. Below "Blackfoot", the word "CHALLENGE" is written in a smaller, white, all-caps, sans-serif font.

Blackfoot CHALLENGE

Better Rural Communities through Collaborative Conservation

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Message from the **Chairman**

From rapid recreation growth to historic drought, the challenges of 2024 tested the foundation of Blackfoot watershed partnerships and ultimately inspired deeper dialogue and creative problem-solving.

Community feedback around the impacts of growing recreation pressure led to the formation of a new program and investment in a staff person to manage recreation stewardship efforts.

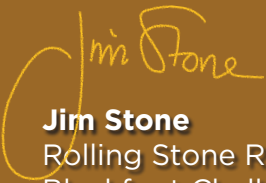
Following an intense summer of drought, the need to improve strategic conservation planning around drought, wildfire, and soil health was met with the hiring of a new science director.

Partnerships with federal and state agencies, other NGOs, and universities nurtured shared successes in prescribed fire, community education, and wildlife conflict mitigation.

Most importantly, people who live in, work in and visit the Blackfoot watershed continued to pool their energy, ideas and resources to strengthen long-term community and landscape resilience.

The 2024 outcomes that follow are all thanks to hundreds of individuals who focus on the common ground they share in perpetuating working landscapes, biologically diverse habitats and sustainable communities.

We are deeply grateful for your partnership & support!


Jim Stone
Rolling Stone Ranch, Ovando
Blackfoot Challenge Board Chair



Blackfoot Birds

Restoring trumpeter swans and monitoring bird species across Blackfoot habitats.
Established 2004.

- Conducted Climate Watch nuthatch survey through Montana Audubon.
- Participated in Cornell Lab's Great Backyard Bird Count.
- Monitored wintering Blackfoot trumpeter swans in the Ruby, Clearwater and Flathead valleys.
- Coordinated citizen science long-billed curlew surveys in conjunction with Montana Audubon.
- Monitored trumpeter swan territories for nest success, cygnet production, and fledging throughout the watershed and adjacent Swan Valley.
- Censused Brewer's sparrows in Helmville-area conifer encroachment project sites.
- Engaged members in community science program monitoring common loons.



Blackfoot Community Conservation Area

A working landscape that balances ecological diversity with local economic sustainability.

Established 2005.

Management

- Facilitated stewardship decisions through six council meetings and six work group meetings.

Forestry/Prescribed Fire

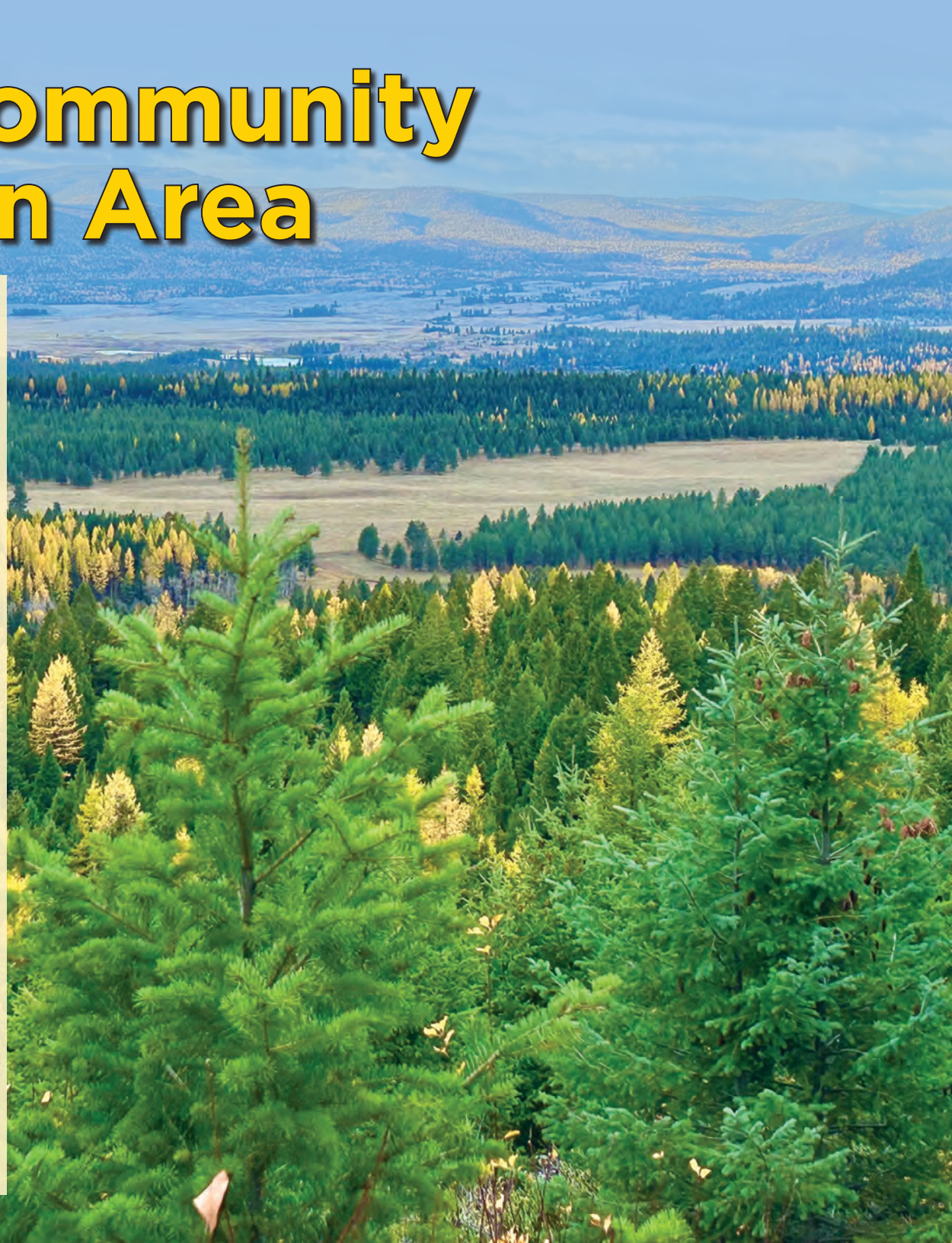
- Implemented 240 acres of mechanical treatments to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, enhance wildlife habitat, and improve forest resilience.
- Worked with Blackfoot Challenge Forestry & Prescribed Fire coordinator and University of Montana to initiate prescribed burn plans for five management units.

Noxious Weed Control

- Controlled invasive weeds on road systems, forest treatment areas, and native prairies through integrated approaches across 100 acres including biological controls, chemical application, and hand-pulling.

Service Projects and Education

- Hosted multiple events with university and volunteer groups to pull noxious weeds, remove old fence wire, and maintain beaver dam analogs.
- Provided educational programs for school, university and visiting partner groups, reaching hundreds of individuals.



Access/Recreation

- Provided year-round public access on 5,600 acres, including hiking trails, eight-week motorized use season, and hunting via Block Management Program.
- Maintained the new seasonal, cross-boundary motorized loop in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Conservation Programs

- Implemented the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program, completing multiple conservation enhancements, including wildlife-friendly fencing, forest treatments, noxious weed control, and vegetation monitoring.

Wetland/Riparian Enhancements

- Maintained two beaver dam analogs (BDAs) as a demonstration to enhance wetland habitat, reconnect flood plain, and improve late-season stock water.
- Assessed the potential expansion of BDAs.
- Installed additional off-stream stock tank to reduce pressure on riparian area and support the rotational grazing system.



Education

Nurturing watershed awareness and stewardship through place-based education. *Established 1993.*

- Led two field trips with Seeley Lake Elementary School Outdoor Program to learn about and observe trumpeter swans and common loons.
- Provided hands-on lessons on aquatic macroinvertebrates for students from two schools at Montana Outdoor Science Academy.
- Led field trips on stream ecology for students from Helmville and Lincoln schools.
- Delivered radio telemetry lessons to Ovando School students.
- Presented on collaborative conservation and wildlife conflict reduction methods to Helena High School class.
- Along with several partners, offered an all-day event on bear awareness for students and teachers from Seeley Lake Elementary. Also provided bear aware education presentations at Sunset and Bonner schools.
- Offered noxious weed education to students at Helmville and Sunset schools.
- Implemented a full day of education activities about water and fire for more than 120 students, teachers, and parents from six watershed schools at the DNRC Clearwater Unit for the annual Youth Field Day.
- Hosted a week-long field course for five students and two teachers from Shattuck St. Mary's School, including field-based learning about the watershed and collaborative conservation.



Forestry

Restoring forest health and reducing wildfire risk in and around local communities. *Established 2008.*

- Facilitated 600+ acres of prescribed burning on state and private lands and supported federal partner burns across another 600+ acres.
- Completed 589 acres of forest thinning to improve forest health and reduce fire risk.
- Conducted 14 outreach and education tours or events throughout the Blackfoot to showcase prescribed fire effects and efforts.
- Helped form and served on the new Montana Prescribed Fire Council (hosted by Montana DNRC).
- Participated in a two-week Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX) workshop in Nebraska.
- Began planning a Blackfoot Valley TREX for spring of 2025 to offer prescribed fire field training and experience to multiple partners and organizations.



Land Stewardship

Supporting landowners through stewardship assistance to enhance watershed-wide resilience. Established 2016.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Partnership

- Conducted multiple property assessments associated with NRCS stewardship programs and supported landowners with ongoing stewardship work.
- North Ovando Fuel Reduction: Completed over 500 acres of forest treatments on multiple properties to mitigate catastrophic wildfires and increase forest resiliency.
- Together with NRCS and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), completed 400 acres of conifer encroachment removal projects near Helmville to conserve grassland habitat and rangeland, benefiting rare native bird species. Also added on a 530-acre project with USFWS on the Blackfoot and Kleinschmidt Waterfowl Production Areas to conserve sagebrush/bunchgrass prairie.

Grazing Management

- Implemented the first year of holistic grazing management plan following infrastructure improvements to protect riparian resources along Kleinschmidt Creek.
- Nevada Creek Project (Phase 7): Coordinated with Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, USFWS, and landowners on developing a grazing management plan to support the stream restoration project. Coordinated installation of 3 miles of riparian fencing and stock water.

- Nevada Creek Project (Phase 6): Installed 2 miles of riparian fencing and livestock water gap to support stream restoration and grazing management plan.
- Nevada Creek Project (Phase 5): Worked to extend two pipelines and add two stock water tanks to supply riparian pastures.
- Douglas Creek Project: Completed grazing management plan to accompany a bear fence project to conserve riparian values within the bear fence. Implemented a winter stock water system to support an expanded calving lot.

Soil Health

- Together with The Nature Conservancy completed the Biochar Demonstration Project, including the transfer of over 500 tons of biochar from Stoltze Lumber Company to six ranches in the Blackfoot. Monitored crop and soil benefits.
- Coordinated Blackfoot Soil Health Work Group to share knowledge on bale grazing, cover crops, no-till seeding, biochar demos, and high stock density/ short duration grazing.



Vegetation

Integrated, locally led approaches to invasive plant management across fence lines. Established 1995.

- Supported integrated noxious weed management for landowners, including providing native and exotic plant identification, herbicide application protocols, and biological control insect releases.
- Hosted two weed pulls at the Russell Gates Fishing Access Site for the 26th year.
- Received a second Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program grant to revisit previously treated areas and treat new areas on the BCCA.
- Worked on nearly 100 miles of the Blackfoot River corridor in Powell and Missoula counties, inventorying and treating 65 acres of noxious weeds utilizing newly secured Bureau of Land Management funding.
- Received a Noxious Weed Trust Fund cost-share grant for the Nevada Creek Vegetation Management Area and initiated treatments.
- Conducted pre- and post-treatment monitoring for vegetation management practices along the Blackfoot River corridor and in the Nevada Creek Vegetation Management Area.
- Held two noxious weed management informational programs in Helmville and Ovando, providing continuing education credits for licensed pesticide applicators.



Water

Voluntary water stewardship grounded in shared knowledge and shared commitment. Established 2000.

- Working with the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee, managed drought response with more than 80 participants during the worst drought conditions that the watershed has endured since the Drought Plan was created in 2000.
- Completed the 15th year of our irrigation scheduling program, providing weekly irrigation information, drought strategies, and soil health tips to over 100 irrigators throughout the watershed.
- Continued in our 5th year of a soil moisture monitoring program, adding one additional location to bring our total to 18 locations where irrigators track daily soil moisture information, manage their irrigation applications, and test different irrigation or cropping strategies.



- Coordinated and supported partner efforts to collect the third year of data on a hydrologic study aiming to understand the Blackfoot River's water budget at the watershed scale. Results are informing strategic water conservation efforts by building understanding of how water moves through the watershed.



- Worked with multiple partners and landowners to collect a second year of stream flow data on three tributaries to inform restoration designs that benefit fisheries, improve drought resiliency, and increase wetland habitats.
- Expanded efforts to build shared understanding, vision, and capacity to address growing recreation pressures by creating a new Recreation Program within the Blackfoot Challenge. A program coordinator was hired in October.
- Hosted eight community meetings throughout the watershed, facilitated by a team from the University of Montana's Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Department, to collect local knowledge and concerns around recreation from watershed residents.



Wildlife

Reducing human-wildlife conflicts through proactive and preventative strategies *Established 2002.*

- Employed an Elk Hunt Coordinator to work with hunters on elk hunting opportunities on participating ranches during shoulder seasons.
- Conducted winter track surveys in the Southwest Crown of the Continent for lynx, wolverines, wolves, mountain lions, marten, and bobcats.
- Launched a pilot project on one ranch using virtual fencing to manage livestock grazing on public lands pastures, facilitating better management of livestock locations, reducing the need for hard fencing across wildlife habitats, and keeping livestock away from areas of potential conflicts with predators.
- Installed seven new high priority electric fences and 12 new electric drive-over mats to deter grizzly bears from home sites and calving yards and prevent conflicts. Provided fencing to protect bee yards, chicken pens, and sheep pens.



- Removed 263 livestock carcasses from Blackfoot-area ranches and 338 livestock carcasses from ranches outside the Blackfoot to reduce attractants for bears and wolves.
- Visited and advised Colorado wildlife managers and landowners as they consider conflict management tools for reintroduced wolves.
- Employed four seasonal range riders to monitor livestock and carnivore activity across 72,000 acres.
- Provided 25 bear-resistant garbage cans to watershed residents; and placed eight additional bear-resistant garbage cans and three garbage dumpster enclosures throughout five communities to continue to support bear-smart efforts.
- Set up and maintained turbo fladry at two ranches during calving season to prevent conflicts with wolves.
- Handed out more than 100 cans of free bear spray and provided more than 50 cans of training (inert) bear spray to watershed residents, recreationists, and hunters.

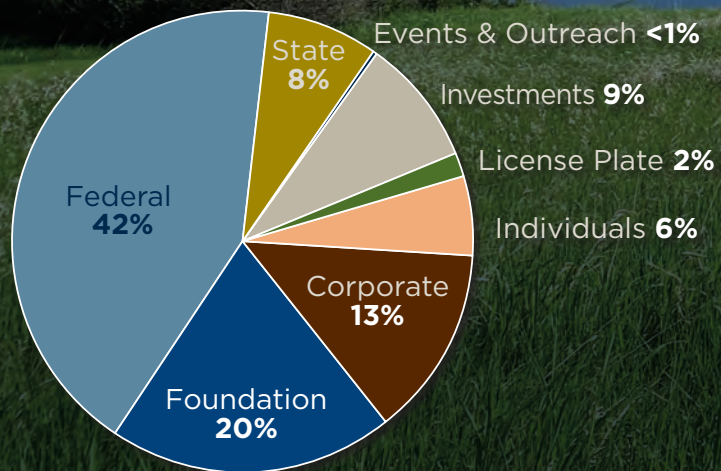


FINANCIALS

JANUARY - DECEMBER 2024

SOURCE OF FUNDS

\$3,681,256



USE OF FUNDS

\$2,846,382

