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Blackfoot Challenge

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Fiction by
Russell Rowland





Greg Neudecker works for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and is vice chair of the Blackfoot Challenge. "We can't do this without the support of the landowners," he says.

A person wearing a green cap and a dark jacket is seen from the side, looking out over a vast, open landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of dry, yellowish-brown grass. In the middle ground, a large, calm lake stretches across the scene. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Keeping Montana...Montana

A groundbreaking collaborative in the Blackfoot Valley has ranchers, environmentalists and government agencies focusing on shared values to protect an increasingly rare landscape—and way of life

BY JEFF WELSCH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE



Jim Stone, chair of the Blackfoot Foundation, fends off a cow while doctoring one of the new calves at his Rolling Stone Ranch outside Ovando.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1983, Jim Stone came home to the upper Blackfoot River Valley with a load of dirty laundry and a degree from Montana State University. His parents' unexpected graduation gift to him soon after: the deed to their 2,400-acre cattle ranch straddling Highway 200 just west of Ovando.

Stone gulped. It was, he recalls, a blessing. And a curse. Oh, he spent his early years in the lower Clearwater Valley south of Seeley Lake. By age nine he had learned how to harvest hay, mend a fence and shoe a horse while working at the E Bar L guest ranch in the lower Blackfoot. Even so, if he had any cattle-ranching genes they were recessive at best. Great-grandfather Arthur Stone had been a Missoula newspaperman and the first dean of the University of Montana's journalism school. Grandfather George Stone also wrote for the *Missoulian* and later was assistant editor at the *Chicago Daily News*. His mother Jane is from Massachusetts, and Jim actually spent his high school years in Colorado.

Looking back, who knows where Jim—indeed, the entire community collaborative called the Blackfoot

Challenge, now a model for the world—might be today had George not died suddenly from appendicitis in 1926? The tragedy spurred his grieving wife Mildred to return to Montana and acquire part ownership of the E Bar L, near Greenough. Their son John would grow up there, steal his future wife's heart during one of her family's regular summer vacations, become a fine fishing guide and handyman, teach his own two sons how to connect with the land and the people who steward it, and buy the cattle ranch in the 1960s because, as Jim muses, his father "needed something else to do."

Now it was all Jim's. He was 23.

"I was like, 'Oh shit, what am I going to do now?'" he recalls with a sharp belly laugh that fills a room like the echo of a rifle shot.

As he tells the story, he is sitting behind the wheel of a white Chevy pickup. His ground-hugging Corgi, Sasha, rests by his right arm. From a grassy bench, Stone, now 52, surveys a table-flat 400-acre fen where two bald eagles are pursuing a gull in flight. With a dirty-blond crewcut, plaid shirt, and equal parts beefsteak, brawn and a brew or two packed into a taut 5-foot-9 frame, Stone



Headquarters for the Blackfoot Challenge sits in tiny Ovando, Mont., but the organization reaches across the globe. The Challenge brings together landowners and government agencies to do remarkable things that conserve the land and improve the ranchers' lives.

looks every bit the rancher today. Where his dominant bloodlines emerge is in his aw-shucks gift for gab. He is equally at ease chatting up a senator in Washington or kicking tractor tires with a ranch hand. He is, as his email signature asserts, an accomplished Ph.D.—Post Hole Digger.

From his vantagepoint on this blustery day, Stone nods toward the snowy rise of the Garnet Mountains to the south, their forests creased by logging roads and pocked by regenerating clear cuts. To the distant north, across Highway 200, the yawning mouth of Monture Creek offers a peek into the Scapegoat Wilderness, which routinely spills grizzly bears and wolves onto the broad Blackfoot plain.

Between the fen and highway are a modest home and green-painted outbuildings, the heart of Stone's Rolling Stone Ranch. Cattails rising from wetlands sandwich the willow-lined gravel driveway, where American and Montana flags snap in the wind. Encircling a small pasture where Black Angus cows are calving, red strips called fladry flutter on temporary electric fencing. They seem to deter wolves.

But what Stone wants to showcase most is directly below, where a creek thin enough for a coyote to hop meanders toward the Blackfoot River. Hoyt Creek once ran dry because every drop was redirected into an irrigation ditch for hay and cattle. Today, because Stone veered from tradition and dared to trust government agencies and

environmentalists, the two miles of creek on his property run year-round with west-slope cutthroat trout. He and his wife Colleen enjoy a wild-life menagerie outside their windows. Their hay production has quadrupled, without irrigation. Costs are lower, time is saved.

“At the end of the day, what did we do for the value of the ranch? Through the roof,” Stone marvels. “It’s a great story.”

And Hoyt Creek is merely one measurable result of a collective vision that began in this picturesque valley, a vision that has gone global. There are acres and acres of examples of the success of the Blackfoot

Challenge, a 22-year-old effort to preserve a social, economic and environmental fabric rapidly unraveling elsewhere—an effort, explains a poster in the Challenge's small Ovando office beneath a faux western storefront, “To Keep Montana Montana.”

Learning to Trust

THE CHALLENGE'S IMPRINT IS EVERYWHERE in a 1.5-million-acre watershed bisected by the Blackfoot, which flows 132 miles west-southwest from the Continental Divide at Rogers Pass to the Clark Fork River east of Missoula. Look around and you'll see stream and wetland restoration, noxious weed mitigation, coexistence with predators, an 800 percent increase in Blackfoot River native cutthroat and bull trout populations, 110,000 acres in conservation easements, restoration of 89,000 acres of once-private timberlands, improved hunting and fishing access, cost reductions, and sustenance of a uniquely Northern Rockies lifestyle.

Groups that historically distrust each other—landowners, government agency employees, conservationists and business leaders—now routinely break bread to brainstorm ideas for keeping working landscapes intact and solving the valley's current and future challenges.

“We [ranchers] used to get together once or twice a week at the coffee shop and bitch,” said Denny Iverson,

who has ranched and harvested timber near Potomac at the lower end of the valley since 1975. “Now we put our differences aside, let down our guard a little, and actually come up with solutions.”

The formula has been so successful that the Blackfoot Challenge is engaging in what it’s calling “transferability.” In a seven-year-old Partners For Conservation program, Stone and others give tours to share strategies while also bringing home new ideas. In a 2011 speech at Colleen Stone’s Stray Bullet Café in Ovando, former Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar hailed the Challenge as “the birthplace of the conservation concept for the 21st century.”

The roots of this rare success story hearken to the 1960s. As with any movement, imminent threat is a powerful motivator, and so it was then. Folks were nervous over rumblings about federal Wild & Scenic River protections for the Blackfoot. To locals, that meant one thing: government intrusion and regulation.

Another peril arose in 1975, when a tailings dam blew out at the Mike Horse Mine near Rogers Pass, sending toxins into a river where fish already suffered from diminished water quality. Perhaps most ominous was the future of vast Plum Creek Timber Co. lands and its potential for unchecked subdivision into 20-acre ranchettes.

Elsewhere in Montana, similarly picturesque valleys like the Bitterroot above Missoula and Paradise Valley south of Livingston already were fragmented. A way of life was vanishing.

By 1990, it was obvious that business as usual would merely mean the gradual erosion of lifestyle and landscape. Just as obvious: the need for a paradigm shift. But stereotypes run deep, die hard.

“Agency and environmental people have perceptions about ag, and ag has perceptions about agency and environmental people,” said Greg Neudecker, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service who has been “kicking around” the Blackfoot Valley for two decades. Yet through the fog of conflict Neudecker also could see hope in shared values: “Why do people go into wildlife and the environment? They like to get away from people. Why do ranchers do what they do? They like to get away from people.”

Others were having similar epiphanies. Shared values, surmised such landowners as Stone, Iverson, David Mannix, Land Lindbergh and the E Bar L’s Bill Potter, could save the Blackfoot.

Substantive accomplishments already were in place by the first meeting in Ovando in 1991. Montana’s first conservation easement was adopted in the Blackfoot in 1975. Lindbergh had helped avert the Wild & Scenic designation with a locally driven plan that improved public fishing, boating and camping access while enhancing the river’s integrity. Block management for hunting on private lands was born in the Blackfoot.

Yet those efforts were piecemeal. A more cohesive and comprehensive vision was needed for the growing pressures—a ridgetop-to-ridgetop approach. The linchpin question: could they sit down together without, as Neudecker put it, “lobbing rocks at each other?”

To that end, rule No. 1 at that first Ovando meeting is known simply as “80-20.” Come talk about the values everybody shared, about 80 percent. Check the other 20 percent at the door. Rule No. 2: leave identifying John Deere, Trout Unlimited, and Fish & Wildlife Service baseball caps outside, too. Once inside, the 40-plus in attendance were required to introduce themselves to the person on their left. Stone was dismayed to learn he was so immersed in his own busy world that he knew little about the woman next to him, even though she was his neighbor.

Over time, with focus on open spaces, clean water, clean air, healthy landscapes, vibrant economies and preserving the cultural fabric, barriers faded. The most contentious topics, such as predator management, were back-burnered. People listened. People compromised.

“Pretty soon you build some trust and find out that guy’s not so bad, and he finds out I’m not so bad, either,” Iverson said.

By 1993, the Blackfoot Challenge was a full-fledged 501(c)(3) nonprofit group serving as a clearinghouse for ideas and the funding required to tackle major projects. Results already were visible. Working with Neudecker and Ron Pierce of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Stone cut the original Hoyt Creek channel, created a

“Why do people go into wildlife and the environment? They like to get away from people. Why do ranchers do what they do? They like to get away from people.”



Denny Iverson is a rancher in Potomac, about 30 miles east of Ovando. He is also treasurer of the Challenge. “The biggest strength of the Challenge is the network we built,” he says.

wetland, and saw the water table rise with surprising rapidity. Despite persistent drought, he now can sell a portion of his hay crop. The cattle are fatter, and so are his checks.

To the southeast, on a sixth-generation Angus ranch owned by brothers David, Randy and Brent Mannix, Nevada Creek runs clean, clear and cool through a pasture lined with fencing to protect riparian willows. The Mannixes water their antibiotic-free and grass-fattened cattle from tubs instead of degrading the creek. Rotational grazing allows grass regeneration. Sheep driven over the mountains from Sieben by Peruvian herders each summer are winning, organically, a war on noxious spotted knapweed.

The Challenge assisted in all those endeavors, and helped secure funding through The Nature Conservancy

for a conservation easement on the Mannix brothers’ ranch. This ensures a healthy landscape in perpetuity while offering tax deductions and reductions that help the next generation remain on the ranch. The Nature Conservancy and Blackfoot Challenge also partnered in the Blackfoot Community Project, which purchased 89,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber lands to prevent development and give local residents more control over the future of those lands.

“It’s hard for people in our industry to open our gates and share resources, but it’s critical,” David Mannix said. “The Challenge has done a good job of bringing together people of dissenting values. I know more than I used to.”

Adds Traci Bignell, who became the Challenge’s finance and grants administrator after 15 years as a ranch wife: “We were doing the best we could with what we

knew. Our grandfathers did the same. Now we have new tools.”

Living with Predators

PERHAPS BEST REFLECTING THIS “new normal” is coexistence with grizzlies and wolves. Twenty years ago, no wolves roamed the Blackfoot year-round; today, 10 packs frequent the area. The Monture Creek drainage is said to have Montana’s largest population of grizzlies on private land.

Do ranchers wish wolves weren’t on the landscape?

Truthfully, yes. It’s one more headache on a lengthy list. Yet they also appreciate grizzlies and wolves as a symbol of the region’s mystique, and see a bigger-picture connection to their livelihoods.

“Guess who’s eating our beef? People who like wolves,” Stone said.

And so, trusting in Neudecker and other biologists, landowners in the Blackfoot are adopting conflict-avoidance techniques. Quickly removing livestock carcasses eliminates a food attractant. A “range-rider” program puts people between predator and prey, further reducing conflicts.



Stone shows off a 6-foot trailer he's fashioned that carries a gas generator, waist-high red-and-white stakes, and spool of fladry. He can roll out or roll up a mile of electric fencing—grizzlies and wolves are highly sensitive—in less than 60 minutes, and his four to six hours of nightly sleep are restful knowing his livelihood is less at risk. He has yet to have a wolf or grizzly depredation.

“I just don't send my son out to fix fences alone,” he says with a chuckle, referring to 13-year-old Brady and the grizzlies that frequent his pastures. “He might not come home.”

Neudecker says conflicts involving grizzlies are down

96 percent and the bear's presence is routinely accepted, even embraced. Stone, Neudecker and others believe wolves might one day reach that status as well, especially when hunters recognize the predator has not diminished elk numbers. Iverson says elk have increased from about 75 to more than 200 in his part of the valley, and the elk toll on his alfalfa field chagrins him far more than the presence of wolves.

“Attitudes do change,” Neudecker said. “We still have to manage everything—wolves, bears, livestock and people. If we don't manage one of those, we'll have a problem.”

Also gratifying: Stone spent about \$10,000 on temporary fencing. Traditional permanent barbed wire would run him about \$150,000 and requires annual repairs due to elk damage. His days of using barbed wire, long a ranching staple, “are completely over,” he says.

Spreading the Method

FOLKS ELSEWHERE ARE NOTICING. The phone rings constantly in the Challenge's rustic Ovando office, where a small staff knows each call means they'll be spread just that much thinner.

“I ask our board all the time, ‘Should I hang up?’” says Gary Burnett, the Challenge's executive director for six years. Typically the answer is no. “We can't help it,” Burnett adds. “Neighborly, I guess. But we're also part of something bigger. This is a little watershed, but we're part of a bigger world.”

Enter Partners For Conservation. It's a network of private landowners in eight states, launched in 2006 and cohosted by the Blackfoot Challenge and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. PFC began with a \$100,000 Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University.

When giving PFC talks and tours, Stone and other Challenge members realize just how far they've come, and just how unique they are. Attendees often expect a magic



Trout Unlimited's Scott Gordon, left, and rancher Juanita Vero look over Hoyt Creek on the Rolling Stone Ranch near Ovando. Jim Stone says the creek had been lowered up to 12 feet in the past, probably to dry out the fields on either side so that they could support the tractors necessary to harvest hay. Stone says he worked with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to install eight adjustable dams and a new channel for the creek. This work raised the water level so that the fields were sub-irrigated. The adjustable dams allow Stone to dry out the fields just enough to run equipment on them as needed.

bullet. A mirror is quickly turned on the audience.

“When we point to landowners and say, ‘You guys have to do it,’ their eyes get that big deer-in-the-headlights look,” Iverson said.

Blackfoot Challenge skeptics aren’t easy to unearth. Some landowners remain reluctant to trust government and environmentalists, although help in the uphill battle against invasive weeds, for instance, has been unifying. Neudecker estimates that 80 to 90 percent of the watershed’s 200 ranches are engaged in some way.

Michael Garrity, executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies in Helena, a group known for its unrelenting stridency on landscape and wildlife protection, says he could quarrel with some timber sales and wolf intolerance. But all in all, he said, the Challenge is a model to emulate.

“I support their goals,” Garrity said. “I like what they’re trying to do with weeds. I like trying to keep ranchers on the land.”

Meanwhile, the Challenge continues to leave open the door for landowners still nervous about testing uncomfortable waters.

Now on the ground is a new generation of Blackfoot residents who feel the weight of sustaining success. Included is Juanita Vero, 39, a fourth-generation partner at the E Bar L, the secluded dude ranch where Stone’s grandmother was once a partner, and where England’s Prince William found sanctuary in 1991 while escaping the paparazzi glare surrounding the failing marriage of his parents, Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Vero’s grandfather, Bill Potter, who died last year at 96, was an early sustainable forester. She wants to fulfill his dream of seeing the 4,000-acre ranch’s ponderosa pine stands, clear-cut in the 1880s, returned to the condition they were in before the big saws came west.

“I want to take care of the land, water, trees, cowboys—it’s a state of mind that is Montana that makes people want to be here,” Vero said. “It’s not Colorado, it’s not Jackson Hole, it’s not crazy Idaho. It’s Montana. I think it’s an important part of the national psyche.”

The Blackfoot Challenge also takes its programs into the schools. One example: an adopt-a-swan program is helping restore the imperiled trumpeter swan at Jones Lake on the Rolling Stone Ranch. Success would give the Blackfoot its full complement of species for the first time since one Meriwether Lewis explored the river two centuries ago.

Why here? Why has collaboration been possible in the Blackfoot when other areas, even just a valley away, still struggle with distrust and stagnation?



Sara Schmidt, right, and Traci Bignell meet with Elaine Caton at the cafe next door to the Blackfoot Challenge’s offices. “We exist to coordinate, to facilitate,” Schmidt says. “We’re not an advocacy group,” adds Bignell. “It’s more about empowering people.”

Some say sheer dumb luck. Right people, right place, right time. Others note the inspiration of a mesmerizing, still-intact landscape. Mostly, they point to visionary leadership and a willingness to set aside differences, to listen. To compromise.

“The Denny Iversons and Jim Stones are still outnumbered in the region, so we have to put together a pretty savvy approach to deal with issues,” Lindbergh says. “Most want to get along and make it work. There are very few troublemakers out there.”

Surprised?

“I’d say I’m reassured,” says Sara Schmidt, the Challenge’s youthful education and outreach coordinator.

Back at the Rolling Stone Ranch, Stone marvels at the ecological and economic enhancements to his property and the valley. Will the momentum continue? The man locally viewed as the Blackfoot Challenge’s lead visionary nods confidently. The valley, he says, has a bright future so long as landowners can remain economically viable and the next generation steps up.

Indeed, three decades after he was handed the keys to his parents’ ranch, he is still asking himself the question, “What am I going to do now?” Today, he has a laundry list of possibilities and they’re changing landscapes worldwide. 🦿