

## LAND STEWARDSHIP: CHARGING UP SOIL BIOLOGY

If you have driven through the Blackfoot Valley lately, you may have noticed black piles on the fringes of agricultural fields. Those piles comprise phase 2 of our biochar pilot project, with landowners from Potomac to Helmville experimenting with biochar to enhance soils. Over the winter, almost 500 tons of biochar was hauled from Columbia Falls to six ranches. The landowners are mixing the biochar with compost to activate it with microorganisms prior to spreading on their chosen fields.

This project began a year ago, with a partnership among The Nature Conservancy, Blackfoot Challenge, landowners, 42Biochar, Stoltze Lumber Company, Garden City Compost, and area contractors. Phase 1 began with applying biochar produced locally from forestry projects in the Gold Creek area. With additional funding in hand, the partners launched phase 2, acquiring additional biochar made by the Stoltze mill.

Across both project phases, the Challenge continues to conduct soil testing, to assess how the biochar improves soil moisture retention, plant vigor and soil biology. This project aims to support active forest management, reduce forest fuels, improve soil health, enhance drought tolerance, and reduce the need for fertilizers. Although biochar itself does not act as a fertilizer, it has been shown to improve living soils, allowing the soil microbes to naturally work on retaining nutrients.

**If you're curious about biochar in the Blackfoot, contact Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward Brad Weltzien at [brad@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:brad@blackfootchallenge.org).**



*Photo by Brad Weltzien*

## WILDLIFE: PUTTING CONFLICT TOOLS TO WORK ACROSS THE WEST

As wolves recolonized the Blackfoot beginning in 2007, the Blackfoot Challenge and partners worked with ranchers to increase livestock monitoring and identify tools that would minimize conflicts. Our range rider program ramped up monitoring – now across as much as 70,000 acres annually – putting extra eyes on summer grazing areas and staying in touch with producers. From there, the Challenge began testing the use of fladry.

Fladry is a type of temporary electric fencing that deters wolves from livestock pastures. The movement of flagging creates a fear response in wolves and can be effective for up to 60 days at a time. As calving season begins, the wildlife team installs the fladry and ensures it is monitored weekly. The work brings together a valued crew of partners, including USDA Wildlife Services, Defenders of Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

As these tools have reduced livestock losses from wolves, folks from outside Montana have reached out. In recent years, the Challenge has fielded inquiries from Colorado, Oregon, California and Washington. In particular, the Challenge has built a strong partnership with Colorado, where wolves were recently reintroduced. In 2022, the Challenge hosted a three-day field tour for Colorado ranchers and wildlife managers. Since then, the Challenge has continued consulting in that state – building partnerships that also help us learn from other places.

**If you would like to learn more about wildlife coexistence tools, contact Blackfoot Challenge Wildlife Program Coordinator Eric Graham at [eric@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:eric@blackfootchallenge.org).**



## BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA (BCCA): BALANCING FUEL REDUCTION AND WILDLIFE HABITAT GOALS

In the wake of the 2017 Rice Ridge Fire, the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) Council decided to take a proactive approach to reduce the risk of large wildfires. Blackfoot Challenge staff went to work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop the North Ovando Fuel Reduction "Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP)" to conduct forest fuels treatments on the BCCA and nearby private lands stretching between Coopers and Salmon lakes.

For the BCCA portion of the project, the Council ensured that the planned treatments would meet the BCCA's multiple use goals, supporting fuel reduction, wildlife habitat and recreation priorities. Out of these planning conversations, the project was designed to create a resilient uneven-aged, diverse forest with multiple habitat values.

Work took place throughout the winter, focused on retaining western larch, ponderosa pine and aspen trees, but also keeping small clumps of spruce and fir as winter wildlife cover. Grizzly bears, wolves, eagles, swans, moose, deer, elk and livestock will all reap the benefits from improved habitat. The project also generated revenue for the BCCA and provided work for local contractors. At its completion, the BCCA work will enhance 230 acres and provide an important demonstration area for nearby landowners contemplating similar forest treatments.

**If you want to know more about the North Ovando Fuel Reduction TIP, contact Blackfoot Challenge Land Steward Brad Weltzien at [brad@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:brad@blackfootchallenge.org).**



*Photo by Brad Weltzien*

# Notes from the Field



## BIRDS: TAKING FLIGHT WITH BLACKFOOT BIRD PROGRAM

For the last couple of decades, the feathered star of Blackfoot bird populations has been the trumpeter swan. The Challenge first started supporting trumpeter swan restoration in the watershed back in 2004, and today the population is considered officially recovered. To ensure the long-term viability of swan populations, Challenge staff and volunteers continue to monitor trumpeter swans as they return to their territories and nest each summer.

But the Blackfoot's iconic swans aren't the only birds that get our attention. This year, the Blackfoot Challenge is expanding our focus on the health of diverse bird populations around the watershed. In partnership with Montana Audubon, Challenge staff coordinated citizen science surveys of long-billed curlews in April and May. Also in May, volunteers took part in annual population monitoring for common loons.

For the last couple of years, the Challenge teamed up with partners to help rare grassland bird species by removing encroaching conifers from hundreds of acres of Helmville-area grasslands. This work aims to benefit Brewer's sparrows, and Challenge staff are closely monitoring their response to improved habitat. Recently reintroduced sharp-tailed grouse will reap the benefits of this grassland-rangeland restoration as well.

**If you love birds like we do, contact Blackfoot Challenge Bird Program Coordinator Elaine Caton at [elaine@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:elaine@blackfootchallenge.org) to get involved.**



*Photo by Elaine Caton*



*Photo by Jeremy Roberts*



A MESSAGE FROM SETH

Thanks to all of you, the Blackfoot Challenge is strong.

As landowners, members, donors and partners – your support in all forms gives us the capacity and confidence to take the Blackfoot Challenge mission to new levels.

Taking an organization to the next level hinges on the strength, skills, and cohesion of its team. A hardworking and dynamic team is the cornerstone of innovation and tangible results. Our team is dedicated to our community-based approach, and, together, we continue to deliver conservation impacts. As we meet challenges like growth, changes in climate, and increases in recreation, we have strengthened our team with a full-time water steward to improve watershed resilience and a fund development coordinator to support financial stability. We are hiring a new science director to prioritize stewardship activities. Partners are stepping up to help us hire a new recreation coordinator to address the impacts of recreation growth across the watershed – a priority expressed by you, our supporters and community members.

This investment in our team gives us the confidence to thrive. Every year since 2020, generous donors and partners have helped us meet our funding needs and sustain a balanced budget. We have developed an operating reserve fund, completed a strategic plan, and shared our story through a short film. In 2023, we successfully launched a seven-day field course in conservation leadership with Shattuck-St. Mary’s School. Recently the U.S. Forest Service invited the Challenge to be the first North American nonprofit to join their international network that will connect us to opportunities to learn from global conservation efforts.

Thanks to all of you, these investments in capacity instill confidence and lift us to those places where we do our best work – building relationships with people who care about the Blackfoot watershed. I hope you enjoy reading more about our work in this newsletter and thank you for your support.

*Seth M. Wilson*  
Seth Wilson  
Executive Director



Executive Director  
Seth Wilson



SCAN TO GIVE

WATER: COMMUNITY INPUT ELEVATES RECREATION AS A PRIORITY

Since 2000, the Water Program has brought community members together to address priority water issues – from water quality to drought resiliency. In the past several years, concerns around increasing recreation pressures on the Blackfoot River have floated to the surface. The Blackfoot Challenge seized this opportunity to convene discussions and develop collective responses to recreation impacts.

As interest in outdoor lifestyles increases nationwide, communities and natural resources experience impacts of more and more people on the landscape. The Blackfoot watershed is no exception. As our communities, businesses, agencies and wildlife all grapple with changing conditions, the Challenge aims to create space for respectful conversation. Over the past two years, the Challenge has facilitated dozens of discussions around river recreation and plans to broaden this dialogue over the coming year. Currently, we are gathering more input from communities across the watershed on their concerns and values, documenting recreation data to better inform our discussion, and increasing educational messaging to encourage low-impact behavior from recreators. The Challenge is also exploring a volunteer-based river ambassador program to increase face-to-face user education on recreating responsibly.

We hope to facilitate a common vision that integrates thoughtfully planned recreation within the Blackfoot’s legacy of stewardship, rural livelihoods, and robust ecosystems.

For more information on the water program including the river recreation discussions, get in touch with our Water Steward Clancy Jandreau at [clancy@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:clancy@blackfootchallenge.org).



Photo by Blackfoot Challenge staff



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen

EDUCATION: INSPIRING KIDS WITH SCIENCE AND NATURE

The Blackfoot watershed has inspired multiple generations of students as an outdoor classroom. Each year, diverse field-based events connect kids with the landscape around them through activities on everything from wildlife to weeds.

Bear awareness remains one of the Challenge’s most requested educational programs. In May, the Challenge provided a full day of learning about bears for Seeley Lake Elementary School as well as a half-day session for Sunset School. Challenge staff and partners presented learning stations on bear biology, personal safety, conflict reduction tools, indigenous knowledge, and more.

Students from four Blackfoot schools and Missoula took part in stream ecology lessons, measuring stream flows and collecting aquatic macroinvertebrates. With the help of a noxious weed specialist from the Montana Department of Agriculture, the Challenge also provided invasive species learning activities to students from several schools this spring.

Connecting with students whose families don’t live in the Blackfoot but often visit helps expand our community of stewards. For many years, the Challenge has worked with students from Helena High School’s natural resource class. The course returned this spring, giving Challenge staff another opportunity to teach Helena teens about collaborative conservation during their three-day stay.

If you’d like to get involved in Blackfoot Challenge community education offerings, contact Education Program Coordinator Elaine Caton at [elaine@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:elaine@blackfootchallenge.org).



Photo by Elaine Caton



Photo 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](https://blackfootchallenge.org).

FORESTRY & PRESCRIBED FIRE: FINDING THE SWEET SPOT FOR SPRING BURNS

The Blackfoot Challenge Forestry and Prescribed Fire Committee worked hard all winter in preparation for the spring 2024 burn season. Many ecosystems rely on periodic fire to support fire-dependent plants. To create resilient forests and grasslands, the Blackfoot Challenge and partners have ramped up the scale of prescribed fire, particularly on private property.

Broadcast burning requires an enormous amount of preparation, including identifying an area, incorporating cross-boundary opportunities, thinning existing trees, identifying containment lines, and writing a plan. All of this can take a year or more, then partners wait for an appropriate “burn window.” A burn window is that space in time where proper conditions for the burn are met. Burn windows can open and close rapidly – dictating how much or how little burning we can accomplish in a season.

In 2023, the Challenge facilitated burns on 169 acres of private land and supported 1,400 acres of burning with public land partners. Challenge staff continues to seek new projects to have ready for future burn windows, combining thinning with burning to plan our project docket over the next few years.

One of the most rewarding successes of this program is the cross-boundary cooperation and diverse partners involved – from state and federal agencies to conservation groups to private landowners.

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](mailto:cindy@blackfootchallenge.org).



Photo by Cindy Super



Photo by Cindy Super

VEGETATION: PULLING TOGETHER TO BATTLE NOXIOUS WEEDS

In the early days, the Blackfoot Challenge developed a weed management program as one of our first community efforts. Since then, the program has grown under the leadership of a partnership committee and a part-time coordinator with the cooperation of many, many landowners.

Still going strong, today’s Blackfoot Vegetation Program has several big projects in the works. Under a five-year agreement with the Bureau of Land Management, the Challenge and many partners are addressing noxious weed management along 96.5 miles of Blackfoot River frontage. The project is bringing together public and private landowners to map, treat and monitor weeds along

the river corridor up to the high-water mark. Goals include prevention of weed seed propagation and spread, reduction of existing weed populations, and public engagement through outreach, education, and weed pull events.

In the Helmsville area, a new cost-share grant from the Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund will support the use of sheep grazing and herbicide to control weeds within the Nevada Creek Vegetation Management Area. And, continuing our volunteer tradition, two community weed-pull events will take place over the summer at the Russell Gates Fishing Access Site. This long-running event helps control invasive weeds that become especially problematic in a busy public recreation site.

If you have vegetation questions, reach out to Blackfoot Challenge Vegetation Coordinator Karen Laitala at [karen@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:karen@blackfootchallenge.org).



Photo by Lindsey Mulcare



Photo by Karen Laitala