

Blackfoot CHALLENGE

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Notes from the Field

Blackfoot CHALLENGE

A MESSAGE FROM SETH

Despite the grip of a global pandemic, several trumpeter swans were released in the Blackfoot watershed on June 11.

This was the 28th release in 15 years. As I looked out over the small group who took part in the release, I saw landowners, staff, board members, donors, students, and agency partners who have worked together to make trumpeter swan recovery a reality. It was a perfect day. And it reminded me that with a little help now and then, nature carries on despite the challenges we face in this time of uncertainty.

A few months later, I headed out to camp with my family on Rainy Lake. Our staff and volunteers had recently reported two adult swans and four cygnets there—a good sign that past efforts had enabled the swan population to spread. Sure enough, the swans were there.

Continued inside...

Photo by Eliza Wiley



A MESSAGE FROM SETH (CONTINUED FROM COVER)

Early one morning I woke to the powerful trumpeting of the swans. What were they saying? I did not know. But perhaps a clarion note to say, “We are here, and this is home.” Again, I was reminded that the work we do at the Blackfoot Challenge is a product of time, trust, and collaboration forged over decades. This has made a difference for trumpeter swans and other wildlife. Renewal and restoration are foundations of hope that inspire us in our conservation work.

After one year as Executive Director, I am honored to be part of this legacy that makes lasting change. And despite these tough times, we will carry on. As you read these accomplishments, I hope you are as proud of them as we are. You are making a difference in the Blackfoot.

I am confident that when people look back in 15 years, we will have continued to generate lasting outcomes for the land, water, wildlife and people who all call this magnificent place home.

Seth Wilson, *Executive Director*

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



“We’re just trying to be more efficient, save water, and maximize what we can do with the ground we have.” —Zeph Schulz, Vannoy Ranch Manager

ENHANCING DROUGHT RESILIENCE IN THE BLACKFOOT: UTILIZING TECHNOLOGIES BOTH NEW AND OLD

Barry Dutton can read the soil moisture level in a field by squeezing a fistful of dirt in his palm. For years, his soil science knowledge has helped irrigators plan for crop water needs and drought. But Barry can’t be everywhere, so this summer the Blackfoot Challenge added a new tool with soil moisture monitoring technology. Installed on three ranches, soil moisture monitors measure moisture at three depths. An above-ground data recorder saves the information week to week and year to year to track trends. The goal is to help irrigators “fill up” the soil when water is plentiful and understand where improved soil health can make a field more drought tolerant.

Beavers may not understand soil health, but they do know how to store water for drier times. The Challenge has been exploring how we get the good that beavers provide while avoiding the bad. We’ve teamed up with partners to offer beaver conflict solutions – like pond levelers and culvert protection – in the hope that the natural water storage beavers create can support healthy streams in drought years. We are also identifying places where the low-cost, low-tech use of human-made beaver dams can improve streams in the absence of beavers.

◀ Ranch manager Zeph Schulz and Barry Dutton configure the newly-installed soil moisture monitor at Vannoy Ranch.

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA: KEEPING THE ORIGINAL VISION ALIVE THROUGH COLLABORATION AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Maintaining a productive working landscape, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, and public participation have all been the focus of the 15-member BCCA Council this year.

The annual field tour has become a hallmark event for the BCCA Council as well as the surrounding community. Luckily by June we knew how to navigate the Covid-19 landscape and were able to host about 30 participants on a socially-distanced tour of recent projects while also discussing future priorities.

As summer went on, the Council refined cattle grazing plans, treated more than 50 acres of weeds along roads and in native parks, oversaw another successful motorized use season, and completed forest health improvements across 170 acres. If weather conditions allow this fall, we hope to conduct two prescribed burns on the BCCA in cooperation with the Challenge's Prescribed Fire Workgroup.

This mix of activities really demonstrates the original vision of the BCCA - to be a working landscape that balances ecological diversity with local economic sustainability for the benefit of the entire watershed community. We appreciate your support in keeping this vision alive.



Photo by Everett Headley, One Montana

A volunteer winds up old barbed wire fence on the BCCA. ▲

ANOTHER GOOD YEAR FOR TRUMPETER SWANS: FEWER NESTS, YET RECOVERY STILL ON THE RISE

This spring, we had many trumpeter swans returning to the watershed and most of our known pairs returning to nesting sites. It looked like we might meet our restoration goal of seven successful nests for two years in a row, since we had eight successful nests in 2019. However, only five pairs ended up nesting this year. It's hard to know for sure why that was, but probably in at least a couple of cases something happened to one of the swans in a pair, and when a swan acquires a new mate they usually don't nest the first year. But the good news is that those nests hatched a total of 20 cygnets, and we've had no known cygnet mortality. So, although our number of nests dropped slightly, cygnet production was still good and we anticipate that trend to continue.

This summer, we released three young swans and put GPS collars on two adults. Stay tuned for updates as we learn more about where our swans are going!



Madeline Swanberg, Ovando resident, and Kevin Ertl, US Fish & Wildlife Service, help GPS-collar and release 2A8.



INCREASING FOREST HEALTH, COMMUNITY SAFETY, AND WILDFIRE RESILIENCE

Cindy Super joined the team in March as our Forestry & Prescribed Fire Coordinator, and she's hit the ground running as much as anyone can run in the middle of a pandemic. One of the benefits of forestry projects, she says, is that they are outdoor activities!

This spring and summer, Cindy has been able to safely meet with landowners, contractors, and public partners in the field to get caught up on existing projects and start new ones, all aimed at increasing forest health, community safety, and wildfire resilience in the Blackfoot watershed.

After spending much of 2019 planning for cross-boundary prescribed fires in the Blackfoot, Covid-19 forced those plans to stay on the shelf this spring.

One private landowner in the lower watershed was still able to pull off a small 6-acre burn this spring, however, and this served as a great learning

opportunity for the many partners involved. The Blackfoot Prescribed Fire Workgroup has their fingers crossed for a favorable fall burning season, and is committed to providing collaborative leadership for carefully reintroducing fire on the landscape.



Volunteers overlook the spring prescribed fire. ▲

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: LAND STEWARDSHIP AS A PLACE- AND PEOPLE-BASED APPROACH

By working with landowners one-on-one, the land stewardship program strives to enhance the health of natural resources while accomplishing a landowner's specific goals. Whether we're looking at 20 acres or 2,000 acres, land stewardship is a tailored approach that relies on partnerships, information, and many coffee-fueled conversations.

So far this year, we have assisted multiple private landowners on grazing management plans that enhance soils, riparian areas, bunchgrass communities, and overall wildlife habitat. We're working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and landowners in the Helmville area to reduce the amount of conifers encroaching on grasslands and sagebrush over roughly 2,000 acres as part of a multi-year approach. And Covid-permitting, we're looking forward to a fall tour with the Soil Health Workgroup to visit and learn about soil health improvement efforts underway across the watershed.

All of the Blackfoot Challenge's programs rely on partnerships to get things done, and land stewardship is no different. Many thanks to our public and private partners for teaming up with us to make these projects a reality.



▲ Challenge, Trout Unlimited and US Fish & Wildlife Service staff meet with private landowners to explore stewardship opportunities on a property near Ovando.



◀ Eric Graham and Vicki Pocha configure their GPS location devices at the annual Range Rider training.

IN A WORKING LANDSCAPE AS WILD AS THE BLACKFOOT, REDUCING WILDLIFE CONFLICTS TAKES A TEAM

By removing the “free meal welcome mat” from area ranches, the Carcass Pickup Program continues to be a key strategy for reducing conflicts in the Blackfoot. Because of your support, more than 800 carcasses were removed from 120 ranches this spring.

Throughout the summer, we worked with landowners to design and install electric fences around calving yards, beehives, orchards, and home sites to deter bears from approaching. It’s hard to believe we’ll soon be wrapping up the 13th season of the Range Rider program. We are lucky to have Vicki, Jordan and Sigrid return to the position for their third, fifth, and sixth years. And with hunting season now underway, our seasonal Elk Hunt Coordinator John Englert is back to help connect interested hunters with opportunities to hunt on private lands in the Blackfoot during the shoulder seasons.

Year after year we are both amazed by and grateful for the many residents, public partners, and members who continue to participate in and support the multi-pronged approach to conflict reduction in the Blackfoot.

“Each season brings new challenges for trying to keep an eye on where we could have conflicts with predators and livestock. We just never know what might happen. What we do know is that it is beneficial to have experienced local folks returning to the range rider program each season. They have gained the trust of all parties involved and are the glue that holds this program together.” —Eric Graham, Wildlife Coordinator

Community members scout for birds on the “Birds & Wildflowers Walk” this June.



EDUCATION DURING COVID:

GOING ONLINE AND GETTING OUTDOORS

Shortly after Covid-19 hit Montana, our education program went largely online to accommodate remote learning. Lessons about trumpeter swans were modified and, along with videos sharing the story of swan recovery in the Blackfoot, were put on our website for teachers to download. These lessons, as well as others on additional watershed topics, are designed so teachers can use them in-class or offer them remotely.

In June, a dozen members participated in a delightful, socially-distanced bird walk at Lake Upsata, led by naturalists Erick and Anne Greene through our Pure Montana Tales program.

Youth Field Day is one of our flagship youth education programs and usually 150 middle school students attend. Our Teacher Steering Council suggested Garnet Ghost Town for this year’s event, and we are developing a modified version of the event for those schools able to participate.

Finally, we are working hard to produce a landowner resource packet with information on various land management issues Blackfoot residents encounter. Stay tuned for this resource to be up on our website soon!