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# Notes from the Field



## LAND STEWARDSHIP: MANAGING COWS, TREES AND SOIL FOR A HEALTHIER WATERSHED

From tiny soil microbes to large cattle herds, Land Steward Brad Weltzien's work supports holistic management across the Blackfoot landscape. Much of Brad's focus is on the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA)—a living laboratory of stewardship, balancing recreation, public access, biodiversity, economics and more. In recent months, the BCCA has benefited from road system improvements to prevent natural resource damage and provide a better visitor experience. Over the winter, a 70-acre larch thinning project opened up larch stands to improve forest resilience. Projects like this one generate revenue for BCCA management, support local mills and contractors, and enhance resistance to wildfire—a win on many levels



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen



Photo by Brad Weltzien

Beyond the BCCA boundaries, Brad supports the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited on stream restoration projects, including ongoing work along Nevada Creek. His role includes developing grazing management plans that satisfy landowner production goals, while improving riparian areas and stream conditions.

Bringing new innovations to soil health practices, the Challenge has joined The Nature Conservancy, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service to pilot the use of biochar. The Challenge's role is to transfer biochar from where it's produced in local forests onto private land, where it will be mixed with compost and applied to agricultural fields in small demonstration plots, monitoring changes in soil health and biology. This effort is providing landowners with the opportunity to experiment with biochar on a small scale, incurring low risk and cost.

**If you have questions about grazing, soil health or the BCCA, contact Land Steward Brad Weltzien at [brad@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:brad@blackfootchallenge.org).**



## WILDLIFE: EXPANDING THE FOOTPRINT OF CONFLICT REDUCTION TOOLS

Electricity has proven to be one of the most effective tools for reducing conflicts with grizzly bears. In 2022, the Challenge's Wildlife Coordinator Eric Graham supervised the construction of six new permanent electric fences around ranch compounds and calving areas. He also built 16 temporary electric fences to keep bears away from chickens, livestock feed, barns, and garbage. Linked to many of those fences, the Challenge deployed 21 drive-over electric mats that allow landowners to cross in and out of fenced areas, without having to open and close gates. This year, the Wildlife Program plans to install at least five additional electric fences and two new drive-over electric mat systems.

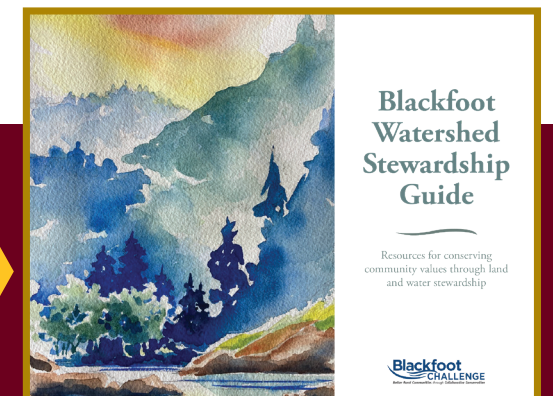


Another crucial piece of the Challenge's wildlife work, the carcass pickup program achieves its 20th anniversary in operation this year. In 2022, we reached the 10,000+ mark for livestock carcasses removed from ranches during calving season, a cumulative success story that began in 2003 to reduce conflicts with grizzly bears and wolves. In addition, last year the Challenge employed two seasonal range riders to help ranchers monitor livestock, wolves and grizzly bears on their summer grazing leases, keeping an eye on nearly 3,000 head of livestock for 13 producers across 60,000 acres. This summer, the Challenge will hire a range rider crew again, aiming to cover 80,000 acres. Thanks to our state, federal and private partners, these programs continue to deliver resources to respond to community needs related to living and ranching alongside wildlife.

**For any questions about living and recreating around bears, wolves and other wildlife, contact Wildlife Program Coordinator Eric Graham at [eric@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:eric@blackfootchallenge.org).**

## Have you seen the Blackfoot Watershed Stewardship Guide yet?

This comprehensive resource to caring for your land and other Blackfoot resources is available in print or online. Contact [office@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:office@blackfootchallenge.org) for a print copy or find it online at [www.blackfootchallenge.org/stewardship-guide](http://www.blackfootchallenge.org/stewardship-guide)



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Cover photos by Jeremy Roberts

## A MESSAGE FROM SETH

### THE NEXT BEND IN THE RIVER

This year marks the Blackfoot Challenge's 30th anniversary, but our roots date back to the 1970s where the vision of pioneering landowners brought communities together. These landowners had an uncanny ability to see around the next bend in the river—to understand that the foundations for a better future would need to be built on trust and relationships that transcend difference. These hallmarks of collaborative conservation brought public and private interests to the table for decades of ensuing work. And at the heart of this work was the recognition that conservation rests upon the support of communities of place and communities of interest—where local and broad public values converge.

This convergence has produced major conservation impacts including: 1.3 million acres of land permanently protected from development; creation of a 5,600-acre community-owned forest; restoration of native trout habitat; a drought response plan to maintain flows in the Blackfoot River; conservation of grizzly bear and wolf populations through conflict reduction; restoration of native trumpeter swans; and improvements to native grasslands and soil health across dozens of working ranches.

These successes cannot be taken for granted. As we look ahead to the next 30 years, we should ask ourselves, what does the next generation of stewards need? What are their dreams and aspirations for their families, their communities, and the land and water? And for those of us who have had the honor to help build the Blackfoot Challenge into a thriving organization, we must ask ourselves, what legacy can we leave for the future?

I ask you to ponder these questions and let them guide you in conversations as we celebrate our 30th anniversary and contemplate what is around the next bend in our beautiful Blackfoot River.

Seth Wilson  
Executive Director



Executive Director  
Seth Wilson

### WATER: PUTTING SCIENCE TO WORK FOR THE WATERSHED

During the summer of 2022, an important partnership collaborated to produce the first ever comprehensive snapshot of how water flows through the Blackfoot River drainage. The partnership consisted of hydrologists from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, with coordination support from the Blackfoot Challenge.

While there are details yet to fill in, this picture of how water moves both above and below ground is an important first step towards developing a water budget for the Blackfoot River. A water budget is a way to understand where water comes from and where it ends up within a watershed. A water budget can help water managers understand complex ground to surface water interactions, feedbacks between irrigation withdrawals and return flows, and where conservation efforts may be most effective. As we repeat and expand water data collection in 2023 and beyond, we will continue to add crucial pieces to the puzzle of our understanding. With this understanding, we will have a better idea of what tools to use where in order to build drought resilience at the watershed scale.



Photo by Jennifer Schoonen

**If you are interested in learning more about how you can improve drought resilience on your property, get in touch with our Water Steward Clancy Jandreau at [clancy@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:clancy@blackfootchallenge.org).**

### FORESTS AND FIRE: PIONEERING NEW PRACTICES IN THE BLACKFOOT

Across the West, prescribed fire is burning a path toward increased favor as a tool to improve forest health and avoid catastrophic wildfire. To ensure we're well prepared to grow the Blackfoot prescribed fire program, in October 2022 Blackfoot Challenge Forestry Coordinator Cindy Super attended a prescribed fire workshop in Orleans, Calif., where she worked on a burn with the Mid-Klamath Watershed Council, the Karuk Tribe, and folks from all over the country. The experience provided such valuable training that Cindy now plans to bring a similar event to the Blackfoot to train our local fire departments, agencies and landowners.

In March 2023, the Blackfoot Challenge received notice that we were awarded a \$1.6 million Community Wildfire Defense Grant to prepare for wildfire using a combination of thinning and burning. The goal is to create communities of "fire refugia," where fire can pass without destroying homes or infrastructure. This exciting news means there is funding available for anyone in the Missoula County and Lewis and Clark County portions of the Blackfoot to treat up to 1,500 acres. Folks in Powell County who wish to receive funding may be eligible for other grant opportunities. For any forestry work, the Challenge encourages neighbors to coordinate and apply for funding together, maximizing your improved safety against wildfire.



Photo by Cindy Super

**To have your property assessed for a forestry or prescribed fire project, contact Forestry Coordinator Cindy Super at [cindy@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:cindy@blackfootchallenge.org).**



Photo by Jeremy Roberts

### EDUCATION: MAKING THE OUTDOORS OUR CLASSROOM

From Lincoln to Bonner, students connect with their watershed through programs organized by the Blackfoot Challenge. In June 2022, we hosted the entire Seeley-Swan High School on the BCCA for their annual Outdoor Education Day, where students learned about everything from grazing and forest management to bears and beavers. Our longest-running education event, Youth Field Day, took place in September with a forestry theme for 125 middle school students from five schools. Partners from the U.S. Forest Service and Swan Valley Connections as well as several Challenge staff provided learning stations on forest ecology and management.

Other school programs included a full afternoon of bear awareness education for most of the students in the Lincoln School, with partners from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and a local rancher. We also provided bird education to students in Helmville and Potomac, and snowpack science to Lincoln, Helmville, and Ovando students.



While our education focus is often on youth, we engage people of all ages through our Pure Montana Tales events, which recently included Zoom presentations by the Mannix Ranch family on regenerative ranching, and by Swan Valley Connections staff on our joint rare carnivore monitoring program. No matter your age, the Blackfoot can be an inspiring classroom!

**If you're interested in citizen science or community education programs, contact Education Coordinator Elaine Caton at [elaine@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:elaine@blackfootchallenge.org).**



Photos by Elaine Caton



### VEGETATION MANAGEMENT: TACKLING WEEDS ON THE BCCA

During the 2017 Montana legislative session, the Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act passed into law. The act made federal Pittman-Robertson wildlife restoration funds available to restore key habitats by managing noxious weeds. Priorities for funding include landscape-scale projects on lands that are open to public hunting and involve noxious weeds that directly impact habitat functions, partnerships involving multiple landowners, and projects that restore native plant communities.

The Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) encompassing 41,000 acres of mixed ownership in the heart of the Blackfoot watershed, and the 5,600-acre BCCA Core, owned by the Blackfoot Challenge, checked all the funding criteria boxes. During the first round of funding in 2018, the project was awarded just over \$30,000. The grant supported more than 300 acres of spot treatment herbicide application to control six noxious weed species sparsely dispersed across



Photo by Karen Laitala

an 866-acre project area. In addition, 27 biological control insect releases to control yellow toadflax and spotted knapweed treated approximately 135 acres at about 5 acres per release. Completed in 2022, the project directly benefited critical wildlife habitat through the successful reduction of several noxious weed species and a notable increase in the abundance of native plant communities utilized by diverse wildlife.

**For more information on identifying and addressing noxious weeds, contact Vegetation Program Coordinator Karen Laitala at [karen@blackfootchallenge.org](mailto:karen@blackfootchallenge.org).**



Photo by Karen Laitala