



The Nature Conservancy in Montana

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Jan Portman Chair

Amy Cholnoky Vice-Chair

Melodee Hanes-Baucus

Vice-Chair

Karen Amero

Dale Bosworth

Conni French

Rachel Frost, Ph.D.

Lizanne Galbreath

Nancy Mackinnon

Allen Martinell

Yvonne Martinell

Bil Milton

Steve Running, Ph.D.

Jeffrey Schutz

John Teller, MD

Amy Tykeson

Jeff Welles

Maud Welles

ON THE COVER Red fox © MacNeil Lyons THIS PAGE Amy Croover © Jolynn Messerly

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Policy makes conservation possible

In this report, you'll see some of the many ways your gifts to The Nature Conservancy benefit nature and the people of Montana. Those gifts make a huge difference, and we quite literally could not achieve what we do without them.

Yet it's important to note that we do not rely on private dollars alone to tackle the immense crises we face as the loss of native species forever alters our lands and waters and as climate change upends our weather patterns. We also need significant public investment in conservation and climate action. And to achieve that, you can provide another gift: the gift of your voice in support of policies that support nature and, in turn, let nature support people.

Good policies makes conservation and climate action possible. Government policies, and the funding associated with them, are the foundation for many conservation advances that happen within the corporate sector, Montana's rural and Indigenous communities, academic institutions and many other parts of society. We cannot achieve the change we need for nature without influencing government policy-regardless of who is leading the government entity we are trying to influence.

Conservation is a tried-and-true bipartisan issue in America. When there is gridlock in Washington, DC, there is fertile ground for groups like The Nature Conservancy around conservation issues. Thanks to your support, TNC has successfully leveraged federal dollars for Montana through 2020's Great American Outdoors Act, signed by President Trump, which provided permanent funding at \$900 million per year for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. A significant portion of that fund helps entities like TNC purchase commitments to keep lands wild and working through land protection agreements with willing landowners. TNC also worked behind the scenes to ensure that 2021's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and 2022's Inflation Reduction Act, both signed by President Biden, included significant investment in conservation and climate initiatives that benefit Montanans and Americans as a whole. We achieved success with both presidential administrations because we have a long history of trusted relationships with people across the political spectrum. Instead of focusing on differences, we leverage our commonalities to get things done.

While this year's elections have passed, the opportunity to speak up for nature has not. We hope you'll join us in continuing to advocate for strong policies that stop the loss of native species and address climate change. Nature, and future generations, are depending on us.

Amy Croover, Montana State Director



Banking on grassbanks

In Montana, collaborative grazing benefits ranchers and wildlife

Among the silvery sagebrush and pastures of Montana's grasslands, you can find an array of wildlife. Iconic greater sage-grouse dance in the spring, pronghorn sprint across fields and hawks circle in the skies above. The prairie is also home to other, less wild animals—cows. Cattle ranching has long been the legacy and economic driver of central and eastern Montana, and ranchers across the area know just how important it is to keep the land healthy for both their own livelihoods and the well-being of wildlife.

One way that TNC contributes to preserving grasslands and our ranching heritage is by offering a grassbank on the Matador Ranch.

Consisting of 60,000 acres in central Montana, the Matador Ranch offers a unique opportunity for ranchers in the area—access to rich pastures to graze their cattle in exchange for adopting conservation practices on their own property.

As many as 15 local ranching families use the grassbank each year. One of the first ranchers to get involved with the grassbank was Bud Walsh, a neighbor to the Matador and an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre Tribe on Fort Belknap.

"The important thing about the grassbank as a rancher is that you don't have to have a million dollars or borrow a lot from the bank to come to the Matador," says Walsh. "You just have to pay a small grazing fee and follow some good, common sense conservation rules."

The Matador Ranch offers cattle ranchers access to grass-rich pastures in exchange for adopting conservation practices on their own property.

He admits that the journey to build a successful grassbank wasn't easy, but everyone was willing to put in a special effort to make it work. He partially credits the success to the fact that

TNC and the Matador Ranch let the ranchers shape the plan for the cattle. By working together and being able to graze on the Matador, they were able to "bank" grass at their own ranches, which led to more sustainable grazing and habitat throughout the larger area.

"It would be great for more grassbanks to get started," explains Walsh. "They really help keep people together on the land and cooperating."

That is exactly what TNC is working to do. Together with our partners at Ranchers Stewardship Alliance and Winnett ACES, we are working to expand the grassbank concept to other ranching communities in Montana. With a second grassbank on the landscape, we could help preserve more endangered grassland and continue to support Montana's agricultural heritage and local ranchers.

You can help secure another grassbank in Montana. For more information about supporting community-based conservation such as grassbanks, please contact Aaron Brock at 406-443-0303 or aaronbrock@tnc.org.











Protecting the Sagebrush Sea means keeping forests in check

Trees are generally considered a very good thing for nature. But across the West, forests are expanding into the unique sagebrush-dominated landscape known as the Sagebrush Sea. The encroaching trees threaten elk, pronghorn, sage-grouse and other wildlife that depend on sagebrush habitat. At first glance, these expanding forests are puzzling. Why are native trees invading lands where sagebrush and grass have typically reigned? As it turns out, humans are the culprit.

Frequent, low-intensity fires were once common on high-elevation sagebrush lands. These fast-moving fires killed young trees while revitalizing sagebrush, native grasses and wildflowers. Yet more than a century ago, Western settlers began suppressing most fires. That gave Douglas fir and juniper forests an

WATCH

See how controlled burns and tree cutting benefit sagebrush habitat and local ranchers in a three-minute video. opening to extend their reach into the Sagebrush Sea, where they shade out sun-loving sage. "As those trees outcompete the native shrubs and grasses, we lose forage for wildlife and for livestock," explains Sean Claffey, Southwest Montana sagebrush conservation coordinator with The Nature Conservancy. "We also lose suitable habitat for species like greater sage-grouse."

The trees are just one invader in a larger siege on the Sagebrush Sea, which is being lost at an astonishing rate of 1.3 million acres each year. Invasive grasses, such as cheatgrass, are also elbowing out native plants. And as more people move to the region, developers bulldoze sagebrush for subdivisions and roads. These combined pressures have made the Sagebrush Sea among the most vulnerable ecosystems on Farth.

The threat is so severe that no one entity can take it on alone. So TNC joined forces with local landowners, federal and state agencies and other conservation organizations to forge the Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership.

Tackling conifer expansion is one of its many approaches to conserving our rangelands.

First, chainsaw crews cut down young trees outside the forest edges. Next, prescribed fire specialists conduct controlled burns that mimic the low-intensity wildfires that were once common on the land. "When we use prescribed fire in sagebrush, we leave little island pockets of sagebrush that reseed that site," Claffey notes. "And we see at some sites in southwest Montana" that sagebrush returns in as little as five years. What you don't see is the conifer seedlings coming back up through the sagebrush."

TNC and our partners work with landowners to share best practices for controlling conifers. Says Claffey, "When we start realizing how much common ground we have, that's where we start having successes on the ground."

Your support enables TNC to serve as the critical foundation for the Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership, which has become a model of success in collaborative conservation.















CROWN OF THE CONTINENT

Living on the edge

Ancient, unusual and vital for wildlife, limber pines persist in a changing climate

Where mountain meets prairie along northern Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, gnarled trees, some centuries old, are windows into the history of the land.

With their distinctive broad crowns, limber pines have been shaped by forces present on the landscape across centuries. Their trunks have been rubbed clean of lower branches by animals, including by some of the vast herds of buffalo that once roamed free across the plains. Other low branches were burned off by fires set by Indigenous Peoples over their millennia-long stewardship of the land.

Limber pines provide important shelter for grizzlies, elk and mule deer. They also offer food for birds like the Clark's nutcracker. "They're important in so many ways," says Dave Hanna, Crown of the Continent director for The Nature Conservancy in Montana. "They really have an outsized influence on the landscape in this transition zone."

In recent years, more limber pines appear to be dying. "At this lower treeline, they live right at their ecological limits, and there are many things that could push them over the edge," Hanna explains. Infestations of mountain pine beetle, a native insect, are increasing due to mild winters. Blister rust, a non-native fungus, is also killing some trees.

Drought further stresses the pines, reducing their ability to fight off disease.

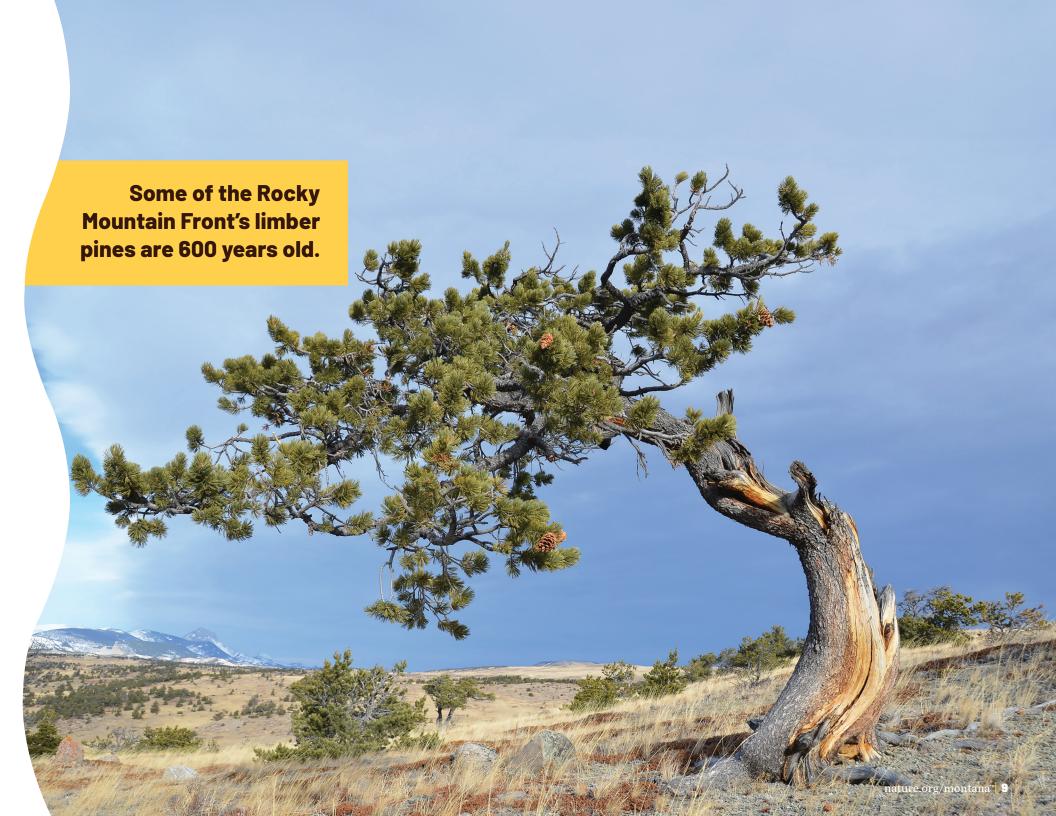
The absence of frequent fires on the Rocky Mountain Front have also created denser stands of young trees, which compete for sunlight and water. Closely packed trees increase the risk of more severe wildfires that can kill the thin-barked pines.

In addition to conducting controlled burns to restore fire to some limber pine stands, we are also working to understand better how limber pine is faring as the climate warms. In 2017, Hanna partnered with USDA Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and many private landowners to establish a long-term monitoring network for limber pine along the Rocky Mountain Front. The team will repeat this monitoring every 10 years to observe changes over time.

This past summer, Hanna and his colleagues revisited a number of the study sites to check the trees' current status and prepare for the full reassessment to come. Over time, the monitoring effort will inform land managers on how to keep these unique limber pine forests healthy and fulfilling their important role in the landscape.

Your support enables long-term research like this to continue, providing crucial knowledge that can protect Montana's forests in a time of accelerating change.

TOP BOTTOM Limber pine © Dave Hanna/TNC; Measuring pines as part of the long-term monitoring project © Dave Hanna/TNC; Limber pine nuts are an important food for Clark's nutcrackers. © Dennis W. Donohue; OPPOSITE PAGE: A gnarled limber pine on the Rocky Mountain Front © Dave Hanna/TNC





Bryan and Marsha Mussard live on a ranch 20 miles west of Clark Canyon Reservoir in the Horse Prairie Valley of southwest Montana, a place they are passionate about preserving for both agriculture and wildlife.

"Folks are finally coming around to the fact that ranching and conservation go hand in hand," Bryan says. "Our goal is to leave this land the way it is. Without ranching, these big open spaces go away."

Like many other places in Montana, development pressures threaten their community. Given record

land prices and high demand for properties, the Mussards acknowledge that it's getting harder to keep ranching operations alive. One solution they have found is to partner with The Nature Conservancy to place conservation easements on their ranch.

Initially, they were suspicious of easements and what that commitment might mean for their land. But after many discussions with TNC staff about how we would protect their ranch while they maintained full private ownership, they knew it was the right choice for their land and family. "Easements are a way to keep ranching families

on the land," says Marcia. "We're still on our place because of it."

TNC is proud to continue working with the Mussards to keep working and wild lands protected in Montana.

> "Our goal is to leave this land the way it is. Without ranching, these big open spaces go away."

> > ~ Bryan and Marsha Mussard

HIGH DIVIDE HEADWATERS

Driving for sustainable grazing

In southwest Montana's Centennial Valley, TNC has partnered with three cattle ranches to fit virtual fence collars on about 1,700 cows across 12,000 acres. The collars use cellular and GPS technology to allow ranchers to create virtual fence lines to contain livestock. When cows approach fence lines, the collars send sound and shock warnings that keep them within the invisible fence.

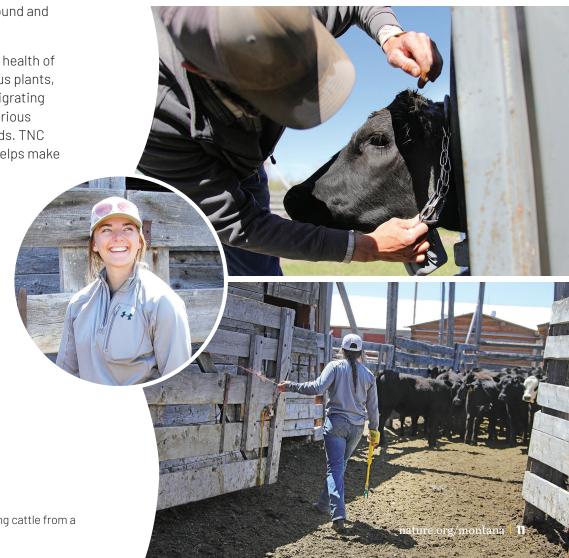
Once optimized, the technology is expected to help ranchers improve the health of rangeland and water on their property, keep livestock away from poisonous plants, reduce conflicts with predators and result in fewer fences that impede migrating wildlife. The collars are part of a larger effort with eight ranches to test various sustainable grazing tools that can benefit the land and ranchers' livelihoods. TNC provides grants to reduce start-up costs for ranchers, and your support helps make those grants possible.

"We are fortunate to have such hardworking and innovative ranch partners who strive for excellence as land stewards," notes Jim Berkey, TNC High Divide Headwaters director in Montana. "By covering the majority of the start-up costs, TNC can support these ranches who are willing to try promising new approaches but simply don't have the financial luxury to do so alone."

When all eight ranches are up and running, the project will encompass a quarter-million acres of rangeland, benefiting elk, pronghorn and other species at risk of fence entanglement.

Donors like you make it possible to provide grants to ranchers to invest in virtual fencing.







Supporting Blackfeet Nation conservation leadership

The Nature Conservancy is proud to provide financial and technical support for some of the many conservation efforts the Blackfeet Nation and community members are leading in Montana.

In the last year, we have provided more than \$200,000 in grants to partners within the Blackfeet Nation. This funding has enabled Tribal government to retain two Guardian positions supporting buffalo rematriation and the Chief Mountain Initiative, the Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Office and Blackfeet Nation Fish and Wildlife Department. Similarly,

TNC funded a portion of a Shield Keeper

Guardian position with Blackfeet Eco
Knowledge, a nonprofit focused on
restoring traditional ecological
knowledge and culture. Another
grant, to the Montana Conservation
Corps Piikani Land Crew, supported
restoration work on the Heart Butte
Partnership Project and rangeland
monitoring on our Heart Butte Property.

Grants to the Blackfeet Indian Land Trust and Piikani Lodge Health Institute provided funds to support adding and expanding staff capacity.

The Blackfeet Indian Land Trust plans to hire its first staff position. The funding to Piikani Lodge Health Institute will support their community-driven conservation work and a contract attorney to perform legal research for the Nation's conservation policy development efforts.

Expanding our ability to bring resources to Blackfeet partners directly and investing in their capacity to grow their work is not only important to honor our partnership," says Dylan DesRosier, Blackfeet Program manager for The Nature Conservancy. "It's also essential to advance our partners' efforts in caring for the health of the land and community.

To support conservation partnerships like our work with Blackfeet Nation, please contact Aaron Brock at 406-443-0303 or aaronbrock@tnc.org.

TNC provided more than \$200K in grants to Blackfeet Nation partners in the last year.

LEFT TO RIGHT Blackfeet Nation lands; INSET Left to right: Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Office Cultural Guardian Ryan Running Crane, Blackfeet Program Manager Dylan DesRosier, Blackfoot Confederacy IPLC Coordinator Elliot Fox, Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife Guardian Ryan Running Wolf and Blackfeet Eco Knowledge Shield Keeper Darrell Hall © Dylan DesRosier/TNC





NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

Home on the range

Across the short spring grass of the Matador Ranch, bird ecologist David Gordon spots a welcome sight: a robin-sized owl nodding as if in greeting at the entrance of a dusty hole. Called "howdy birds" by cowboys because of their head-bobbing habit, burrowing owls were once common on Montana's grasslands. Now, their numbers have plummeted. Yet here on the Matador, Gordon is heartened. "We have seen things are really looking good for burrowing owls in this area—more so than in other portions of the range," Gordon says.

Gordon is studying the Matador's population of burrowing owls, which are endangered, threatened or labeled a species of concern across virtually their entire North American range. While the adults venture out of their burrows—usually former prairie dog holes—to hunt for food, the chicks, snuggled in their underground nests, are harder to count. Thankfully, Gordon has just the tool for the job.

He carefully snakes a special camera scope into the burrow. Once he locates the nest, jostling balls of fluff come into view on the monitor. Today, David counts five chicks in this burrow. It's a healthy number for one nest and, with his search of other burrows, brings the total number of fledgling owls counted at the Matador this year to 464.

"The point of doing this work is all wildlife are a litmus of what's going on in the environment," explains Gordon. "Knowing the population of a particular wildlife species gives us an indication of how healthy the ecosystem is."

The owl counts also reveal how black-tailed prairie dogs, rodents whose burrows they rely on for shelter, are faring. Ranchers have long killed prairie dogs to reduce the risk of cattle catching hooves in entrance holes and because prairie dogs compete with cattle for grass. Disease has further devastated the rodents. By the 1990s, their numbers were down by more than 95% across North America.

But in healthy grasslands like those at the Matador, prairie dogs are making a comeback. In turn, they provide food for a wide range of predators, including foxes, badgers and hawks.

The Matador Ranch is showing that it is possible to sustain our ranching heritage while making wildlife—like the "howdy bird"—welcome on grasslands once more.



WATCH

Travel with Dave Gordon and Jason Hanlon to scope out a burrowing owl nest and see the chicks.

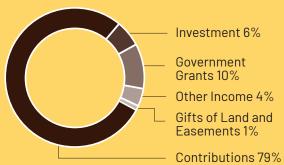


INANCIALS

We carry out our work with a deep commitment to accountability and transparency.

SUPPORT & REVENUE

FY 2024 Total Support & Revenue \$21,491,071



Total



TNC IN MONTANA STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION At June 30, 2024 At June 30, 2023 **Assets** Cash and Investments \$42,379,489 \$35,630,582 **Endowment Investment** \$16,924,025 \$16,453,024 Conservation Lands \$6,561,794 \$6,561,794 Conservation Fasements \$195,179,853 \$195,034,853 Conservation Preserves \$17,126,777 \$17,126,777 Property & Equipment- Net \$1,149,630 \$1,101,066 of Depreciation Other Assets \$6,822,050 \$1,331,521 **Total Assets** \$273,239,617 \$286,143,618 Liabilities \$1,872,600 \$1,867,017 \$284,271,018 \$271,372,600 **Net Assets**

MUNIANA ACRES IN PERMANENT CONSERVATION		
	Added in FY 2024	Total
Conservation Easements	_	512,752
Conservation Buyer Properties	-	103,626
Cooperative Conservation Project	s –	655,953
Preserves	-	54,480
Total	-	1,326,812

MONTANA ACDES IN DEDMANENT CONSEDVATION

\$286,143,618

\$273,239,617

These financial results are unaudited, program-specific and rounded to the nearest dollar and acre. Please check nature.org for TNC-wide audited financials that are GAAP compliant.

LEFT TO RIGHT High Divide Headwaters © Jeremy Roberts; Matador Ranch Manager Cat Kelly @ Brett Kuxhausen

With Gratitude

We sincerely thank everyone who has made a gift to The Nature Conservancy. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the specific gifts below that honor individuals and families.

IN HONOR OF:

Heidi Anderson—Marian Anderson

Marc Barnett—Marsha Barnett

Aaron Brock—Elaine Brock

Chris Bryant—Andrea and Michael **Banks Nature Fund**

Amy and John Cholnoky

- —Dorothy Cholnoky
- —Amy Croover
- —Margaret and Rudolph Warren

Lizanne Galbreath—Nicholas Houfek

Nancy MacKinnon—Ishiyama Foundation Dan Imming—Susan Imming

Brian Martin—Andrea and Michael **Banks Nature Fund**

Joan Miller—Gail Miller

Kelsey Molloy

- —Andrea and Michael Banks Nature Fund —Gloria and Marlan Karbo
- —Ron Joseph

Gail Norton—Marcey Anderson

Julie and Keith Parker—Dorothy Anders

Jan Portman—Andrea and Michael **Banks Nature Fund**

Primm Meadow—Elaine Brock

James Rundle—Marcia Rundle

Amy Sheppard—William Clark

Dr. Tresa Smith—Diane Huber

Robert and Elaine Suss—Martha Haxby

Bill West—Glenda Barnes

Robert and Mary Beth Wharen

-Andrea and Michael Banks Nature Fund Georgia Welles—Tim and Deborah McKenna

IN MEMORY OF:

John Allen

- —Dr. Kathryn Allen
- —Mike and Gail Hannon

Alison Brett—Ann Marie Hettinger

Betsy Carpenter—Kristina Matthes

Richard Ellis—Jim and Kerry Vincent

William Gould—Carl Nystuen

Lou Grimes—Keenan Grimes

James and Bonney Hadar—Ann Marie Hettinger

Bruce May—Elaine Snyder

Stanley Meyer

- —Randy and Nora Gray
- —Jeff and Debbie Hagener
- —Richard Hopkins
- —Tom and Katie Kotynski
- —Bruce and Elsa Meyer
- —Marlys Meyer
- -Margaret Palo

Charles Oliver—Diane and Tom Sanders

Karen Sacrison

- —Susan Case and Alfred De Maria
- —Judith-Anne Leach and Cynthia Eksuzian

Benjamin Smith—Sarah and Donald Olson

Joan Stadler—William and Diane Stadler

James Swartchild, Jr.—Lee Freeman

Courtney Tait

- —Rick and Anita Harman
- —Margaret Stallkamp

Joseph Wikler—Judy and Noah Sensibar

Ron Winfrey—Monroe Cameron and Tricia Freeman

The Nature Conservancy in Montana Staff

Amy Croover, MT State Director-Bozeman

CONSERVATION

Heidi Anderson, SW MT Riparian Project Manager-Dillon, MT

Jim Berkey, High Divide Headwaters Director-Missoula

Nathan Birkeland, Rocky Mtn Front Land Steward-Choteau

Chris Bryant, MT Conservation Director-Missoula

Sean Claffey, SW MT Sagebrush Conservation Coordinator-Dillon

Dylan DesRosier, Blackfeet Program Manager-Blackfeet Stewardship Office

Joe Fitzpatrick, Matador Ranch Hand-Matador Ranch

Jason Hanlon, Northern Great Plains

Land Steward-Bozeman

Dave Hanna, Crown of the Continent Director-Choteau

Cat Kelly, Matador Ranch Manager-Matador Ranch

Steve Kloetzel, Western MT Land Steward-Ovando-Blackfoot River Valley

Cassandra Kohler, High Divide Headwaters Restoration Practitioner-Dillon, MT

Greg Lambert, Montana Land Protection Specialist-Missoula

Sarah McIntire, Grasslands Research Coordinator-Malta

Kelsey Molloy, Northern Great Plains Director-Malta

Erica Nunlist, High Divide Stewardship Assistant - Centennial Sandhills Preserve

Amy Pearson, MT GIS Manager-Helena

Alex Romanko, Western MT Forestry & Stewardship Asst-Missoula

Mike Schaedel, Forest Restoration & Partnership Manager-Missoula

Rebecca Snider, Conservation Information Manager-Helena

Drew Sovilla, MT Land Steward-Helena

Evan Suhr, Matador Ranch Assistant Manager-Matador Ranch

Dave Thomas, Rocky Mountain Front Stewardship Assistant-Choteau

James Waxe, High Divide Land Steward & Science Mgr-Centennial Sandhills Preserve

DEVELOPMENT

Aaron Brock, MT Development Director-Missoula

Jennie Corley, Trustee Liaison/Event Manager/Development Coordinator-Helena

Alison James, Associate Development Director-Missoula

Andrew Kimsey, Associate Development Director-Bozeman

Katie Raclette, Development Writer-Anaconda

Amy Sheppard, Development Program Manager-Bozeman

Teri Wright, Development Coordinator-Helena

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

Paige Cohn, Senior Communications Manager, MT & WY-Helena

Jennifer Shoemaker, Marketing & Communications Director, MT & WY-Bozeman

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Mark Aagenes, MT External Affairs Director-Helena

FINANCE & OPERATIONS

Julie Boehm, Executive Assistant/Operations Coordinator-Helena

Whitney Daniel, MT Director of Finance & Operations-Helena

Marissa Lytle, People & Operations Manager-Helena

GRANTS

Kim Doherty, Senior Grants Specialist, MT & UT-Schenectady, NY

Jennifer Gibbons, Grant Specialist-Arnold, MD



The Nature Conservancy in Montana 32 South Ewing Street Helena, MT 59601

nature.org/montana

Nonprofit Org **US** Postage **PAID** Tucson, AZ Permit #2216

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Email: montana@tnc.org f Facebook: nature.montana Instagram: @tnc_montana



Kelsey Molloy, Northern Great Plains Director for TNC in Montana © Brett Kuxhausen



Hello, Neighbor.

For more than 40 years, The Nature Conservancy has worked right here in Montana to protect wild and working lands for people and nature. Our people live and work in communities across the state, listening to the needs and interests of locals and building partnerships that create large-scale, lasting benefits for water, wildlife and land. We love our home and know you do, too. Let's work together for its future.



FIND OUT HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED AT: nature.org/montana