
SPECIAL REPORT

Land Legacy: The Swan Valley, Making Room for People and Bears

First in a three-part series exploring the future of newly public lands included in the Montana Legacy Project.

By Jason D. B. Kauffman, 8-25-10

In the history of complex land transfers in Montana, the Legacy Project stands alone. From the Swan Valley south of Glacier to Lolo Creek next to the Idaho stateline, much of western Montana was impacted in one way or another by this historic deal involving the Plum Creek timber company, the Trust for Public Land, the Nature Conservancy and state and federal land management agencies. Nearly all of the 310,000 acres of former Plum Creek lands will have shifted into public ownership once the last of the Legacy Project's three phases concludes, which is expected later this year. We asked a few Montanans with close ties to the lands covered by the historic agreement what it will mean for the state's future.

Condon-area resident Tom Parker knows his backyard better than most. And that's saying something, given that his backyard covers tens of thousands of rural acres in the scenic Swan Valley.

Asked about the best wintering habitat in the Swan, the longtime hunting guide can point to the mouths of specific drainages where unique microclimates create shallow snowpacks that draw in deer and elk. Where are the valley's prime spring grizzly bear foraging areas?

You can bet he knows.

Sandwiched between two great wilderness areas just a few hours northeast of Missoula, the Swan is a place unto itself. From jagged mountaintops in the grizzly rich Bob Marshall and Mission Mountains wilderness areas to the east and west, forested mountain slopes and brush-choked avalanche chutes drop steeply to the broad, north-south, glacier-carved valley.

By the Numbers

Covering four counties and nearly 500 square miles, the Montana Legacy Project changed the face of forestland ownership across the western half of the state forever. Its 310,000 acres are found in six distinct areas. They include the Swan and Seeley valleys, the Potomac and Garnet Mountains area, much of Fish Creek and Lolo Creek, the Mill Creek area and mountainous areas to the north and south of Bonner.

Except in a few instances, these Plum Creek timberlands existed in a "checkerboard" fashion alongside public lands managed by the state of Montana and the Lolo and Flathead national forests. Originally purchased by the Trust for Public Land and the Nature Conservancy for \$490 million, the lands have mostly been transferred to the U.S. Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. In so doing, the agencies can now manage the lands in large, contiguous blocks.

Legacy Project supporters say that without the agreement, the lands could have been developed for residential uses in a piecemeal fashion, with just one result being the loss of critical connections between core wildlife ranges. Other benefits of the agreement include guaranteed recreational access for Montanans and out-of-state visitors both now and in the future.

With its diverse mix of forest, wetlands and lush meadow habitats, the Swan contains what is arguably

some of Montana's richest wildlife habitat and most cherished recreational lands.

Early on, those spearheading the Montana Legacy Project keyed in on the Swan Valley. In large part, it came down to the area's significance for grizzly bears. For the opportunistic and wide-ranging omnivores, the Swan provides a much-needed connection between important islands of core habitat as well as a reliable place to forage in lean years.

Conservationists say the importance of ecologically diverse places like the Swan will only grow as the effects of climate change become more apparent, placing an even sharper focus on the need to protect them from development. (Jule: I added a bit more of an explanation of why climate change makes it even more critical that these lands be protected BECAUSE of climate change. Does that make sense?)

A big game hunting guide here since the mid-1970s, Parker has intently watched the habits of the Swan's grizzlies change over the years. From the loss of extensive whitebark pine stands in the high country to years of poor berry crops, the bears have become increasingly reliant on the rich foraging in the lower Swan.

Parker says the changing behavior of local bears has made these lower elevation, Legacy Project lands all the more critical.



Parker points across one of the Swan's many wet, grassy meadows to another former parcel of Plum Creek land that's been transferred to the Flathead National Forest. Photo by Jason D.B. Kauffman.

Thinking back to his earliest guiding forays into places like the Big Salmon Creek drainage in the Bob, Parker recalls ancient whitebark stands that populated the area's high divides. Bears used to gorge on the high-fat seeds locked within golf ball-sized pine cones. The late 1970s were particularly significant whitebark foraging years, Parker says.

“There’s a couple of basins in particular on the Big-Little Salmon divide that had incredible whitebark pine stands,” he said. “To this day, the grizzly bear and black bear associations in those stands on those years remain one of the most amazing things I’ve ever witnessed. That’s all changed. The pine beetle infestation over the past decade is the thing that’s really whacked them.”

With the loss of such an important, pre-hibernation food source, grizzlies now must look elsewhere to find the calories they need to pack on the fat reserves ahead of long Montana winters. This means journeying down into the Swan Valley.

SADDLING UP IN THE SWAN

During a recent six-hour horseback ride across a half-dozen square-mile sections of former Plum Creek timberland that dot the Swan, Parker pointed to numerous signs of grizzly activity. They included ripped up logs, yellowjacket nests and “bear trees,” where debarked trunks, oozing sap and telltale scoring told of repeated visits.

Our tour began northwest of Condon at the headquarters of Northwest Connections, a conservation organization started by Parker and his wife, Melanie Parker aimed at educating others about the critical habitats and habitat connections in the Swan Valley. We wound through what was, until just recently, mixed private and Flathead National Forest lands at the base of the Mission Mountains.

Today, the land is all one contiguous block owned by the Flathead thanks to the Legacy Project and the efforts of people like Parker. In all, the forest picked up 70 square miles, or 45,000 acres, of former Plum Creek timberlands scattered across the Swan Valley between the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountains wildernesses.

Just down Montana Highway 83, to the south in the Seeley Valley, the Lolo National Forest picked up 7,592 acres of similarly vital lands. Together, the Lolo acquired 67,000 acres of former Plum Creek property in spots surrounding Missoula.

From the start, some Montanans questioned the wisdom of spending taxpayer money to bring these Plum Creek lands into public ownership. Pointing to the heavy logging and associated roadbuilding there in the past few decades, they wondered if the lands still offered anything of value for wildlife.

Parker doesn’t need any convincing. For him, the many churned-up grizzly foraging areas and clawed-up bear trees he spots anytime he heads out by horseback in the Swan are all he needs to conclude these lands still support wildlife. Beyond grizzly bears, the list of critters occupying the Swan Valley includes moose, elk, mule deer and whitetail deer, lynx, mountain lions and wolves.



Parker: “I think Plum Creek really saw this place as...probably the most marketable land they had in the state of Montana.” Photo by Jason D.B. Kauffman.

No matter where we traveled during our ride, whether it was a square-mile section of former Plum Creek timberland or a square-mile section of the Flathead, grizzly sign was never far off.

Seemingly unperturbed by such a high concentration of grizzlies were the numerous whitetail deer sighted at regular intervals along the way. Combined with obvious signs of elk and other species, the Swan’s importance for wildlife became ever more clear.

Key to this richness are the wetlands. Long-extinct glaciers left a legacy of pothole wetlands scattered across the Swan. From Highway 83—the narrow two-lane stretch of blacktop that runs the length of the valley—most of the wetlands are invisible behind a cloak of trees. But what these wet areas support are many of the highly nutritious plant communities favored by grizzlies.

This diversity of wildlife species and the mixed swaths, generally intact, of wetland, forest and meadow habitats have led some ecologists to call the Swan one of the northern Rockies’ most important landscapes.

Among them is Gary Tabor, a Bozeman-based senior conservation adviser for Freedom to Roam, a conservation organization focused on preserving wildlife corridors and landscape connectivity across North America.

Much of Tabor’s work has focused on protecting biological corridors used by wildlife in private and protected land through the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative. According to him, work in the mid- to late-’90s identified two key linkage zones in northern Montana and southern Canada’s Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. The first is the North Fork of the Flathead, the focus of recent cross-border conservation talks. The other was the Swan.

“The Swan is the ecological equivalent to the Flathead,” Tabor said.

Just consider how the Swan will look in 10, 20, 50 and 100 years from now once restoration activities on the former Plum Creek lands really begin to take hold.

Within those portions of the Legacy Project now controlled by the Forest Service—112,000 acres at last count—the agency’s “management area” focus will translate into a greater emphasis on restoration and the protection of sensitive species like grizzly bears and bull trout. On the ground, it will likely lead to actions that reduce the overall road density and modify harmful culverts in the former Plum Creek lands.

Future wildlife mitigation efforts focusing on the Swan and Highway 83—which takes a major toll on the valley’s wildlife—are needed to ensure grizzlies and other species remain in the Swan, Tabor said. A holistic approach will be needed to best recover these lands, he said. “I think the (logging) roads will be part of that conversation.”

Because of its favorable climate and rich soil types, the Swan is a resilient landscape. All one has to do is look at the rapid regrowth of deciduous and conifer tree species along many of the logging roads that wind through the former Plum Creek lands. Several times during the tour with Parker, impenetrable tangles of underbrush and fast-growing trees prevented the horses from continuing forward.

Backtracking, we’d regroup and find another path through the dense regrowth.

A VALLEY IMPAIRED, BUT NOT DEFEATED

Parker believes the Swan valley came perilously close to a tipping point where the density of residential development would have made the long-term survival of the valley’s grizzlies all but impossible. More and more bears were running into trouble and being killed by wildlife managers.

“There was ample evidence that we had reached the human development threshold,” Parker said. “The implications of the trainwreck were already evident.”

Thankfully, educational efforts by the Swan Ecosystem Center and Northwest Connections have successfully reduced many of the sources of negative interactions—like untended garbage—among bears and local residents. A whole new wave of homebuilding on Plum Creek lands could have forever altered that delicate balance, with the great bears ultimately losing out.

“I think Plum Creek really saw this place as a place that was really, in terms of their land base, probably the most marketable land they had in the state of Montana,” Parker said.

For years, the Swan’s grizzlies have managed to survive in a roaded landscape dedicated to forest-product extraction, said Rod Boothby, a 10-year resident of the Condon area who came along for the horseback ride. Though certainly degraded, the habitat is still there. But the changes that would have come with more new homes—barking dogs, spilled trash and leftover grain—are another matter, Boothby said.

Grizzlies that grow accustomed to raiding homes generally aren’t allowed to continue wandering freely for long.

“What the bears can’t take is more and more homeowners permanently altering their home,” Boothby said. “The foundation is here. Whatever we do with the trees, we can fix. But, boy, you can’t fix a bear that got trained with a .30-06 because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”



The swift, clear waters of the Swan River roll northward. In the distance, summits in the remote Swan Range. Photo by Jason D.B. Kauffman.

It remains to be seen whether the Legacy Project happened soon enough to preserve sufficient habitat to ensure a future for grizzlies in the Swan. Parker, Boothby and many other fans of the place like to think so.

Before the Legacy Project, groups like the Trust for Public Land were painstakingly piecing together a patchwork of protected lands in the Swan one parcel at a time. It was important work, but left many just-as-valuable lands without protection.

Still left in doubt were the vital connections for grizzlies moving back and forth across the lower Swan Valley between their core ranges in the Mission Mountains and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. For the bears to persist there, those connections must be maintained. "They're going to have to be able to swap some DNA," said Chris Bryant, the Nature Conservancy's Western Montana Director of Outreach in Missoula.

In 2008, the Legacy Project changed the storyline entirely. Up on the Swan and elsewhere across four counties in western Montana, the future of nearly a third of a million acres of vital lands immediately became clearer.

“It was like a footrace that turned into a horse race,” said Boothby. “It should have happened 10 years ago. Praise the Lord it happened now.”

Next week: A look at why longtime Potomac ranchers support the Legacy Project

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