

THE CONFLUENCE

FALL 2022



— SWAN VALLEY —
CONNECTIONS

FROM THE DIRECTOR

The days are getting noticeably shorter, and we're all beginning to prepare for the long, cold season ahead. I can hear pinecones dropping on the roof of my shed and look up to see a red squirrel scurrying around the branches and plucking them off as I do the same to my apple tree. Later I find caches of Douglas fir cones in my stacks of firewood, as I continue to add to them, and it feels good to be moving in sync with nature's clock together.

The summer felt extra short with its late start this year, but also extra sweet- we almost forgot about our typical, late-summer smoky skies, until a day or two of haze reminded us that it was, in fact, still fire season.

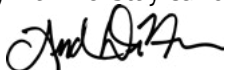
This season was one of celebration. We gathered at Holland Lake Lodge to reconnect with one another in person, enjoy music by Jeffrey Foucault and band, and raise money for the organization and for our educational program scholarship funds. We also joined Missoula County Commissioners in honoring longtime Condon residents for their exemplary private-land stewardship (hint: we were lucky enough to call one of them the chair of our Board of Directors).

And as we continue to work towards our mission of inspiring conservation and expanding stewardship, you'll find information in this newsletter about managing your own forest with the birds, squirrels, and other critters in mind. You'll also notice the launch of a new forest stewardship program. Our tree seedling planting workshop went so well and garnered so much interest, that we decided to offer a tree seedling co-op program, where we'll order seedlings for you this fall, and you can either pick them up in the spring or have us plant them for you on your property. Also included in our fall issue of *The Confluence* is our annual Swan Valley Bear News, brought to you by one of our Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Bear Conflict Management Specialists. She shares what this summer and early fall have been like across northwest Montana, what the biggest challenges have been, and what we can each do to help reduce human-bear conflicts.

Looking ahead, we're excited to celebrate the wildlife that surrounds us, and that make this valley one of the most wild and awe-inspiring places in the lower 48. For the month of November, we'll be sharing educational information, exciting new video footage, and more, all as a part of our annual Wild for Wildlife match campaign, in partnership with The Cinnabar Foundation. Whether you're passionate about human-predator coexistence, gaining more information and scientific data about our lesser-known species, or are looking for the perfect time to donate to the June Ash Memorial Bird Fund (highlighted in this newsletter), we hope you'll consider making a gift during the month of November! You'll double (or triple) your dollars and your impact.

As we transition into winter, we'll also be moving into another rare carnivore monitoring season, as well as offering one-day and weeklong opportunities to strap your snowshoes on and hone your Wildlife Tracks & Sign skills with us. No two days in the field are alike, and we look forward to continuing to learn alongside you, both virtually and in-person.

Stay warm & stay curious,



Andrea DiNino, Creative & Communications Director



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The Confluence is published by Swan Valley Connections, a non-profit organization situated in Montana's scenic Swan Valley. **Our mission is to inspire conservation and expand stewardship in the Swan Valley.** Images by Swan Valley Connections' staff, students, or volunteers unless otherwise noted. All rights reserved to Swan Valley Connections. Change service requested.

SwanValleyConnections.org

Cover Image: Little wood people mushrooms along Glacier Slough Trail

Back Cover: Young bear tracks in the Swan
Photos by Andrea DiNino



WORLD
FOR WILDLIFE
Match Campaign

Throughout the month of November, we're raising money to support our wildlife programs - those we offer to learn and teach about them, to help people coexist with them, and to improve the habitat that makes up our shared home.

Our partners at the Cinnabar Foundation are matching every dollar invested by wildlife lovers up to \$15,000 from November 1-30!

One of our wildlife-passionate donors has also offered to match (and therefore **triple** the impact of) any donation over \$500 made in the month November!

You may donate online at <https://www.swanvalleyconnections.org/give> or mail a check to our office at 6887 MT Highway 83, Condon, MT 59826.

Want to talk about a planned gift to create a legacy for wildlife forever?
Thinking about making a tax-free gift from an IRA contribution?
Get in touch with Rebecca at rebecca@svconnections.org or (406) 754-3137.

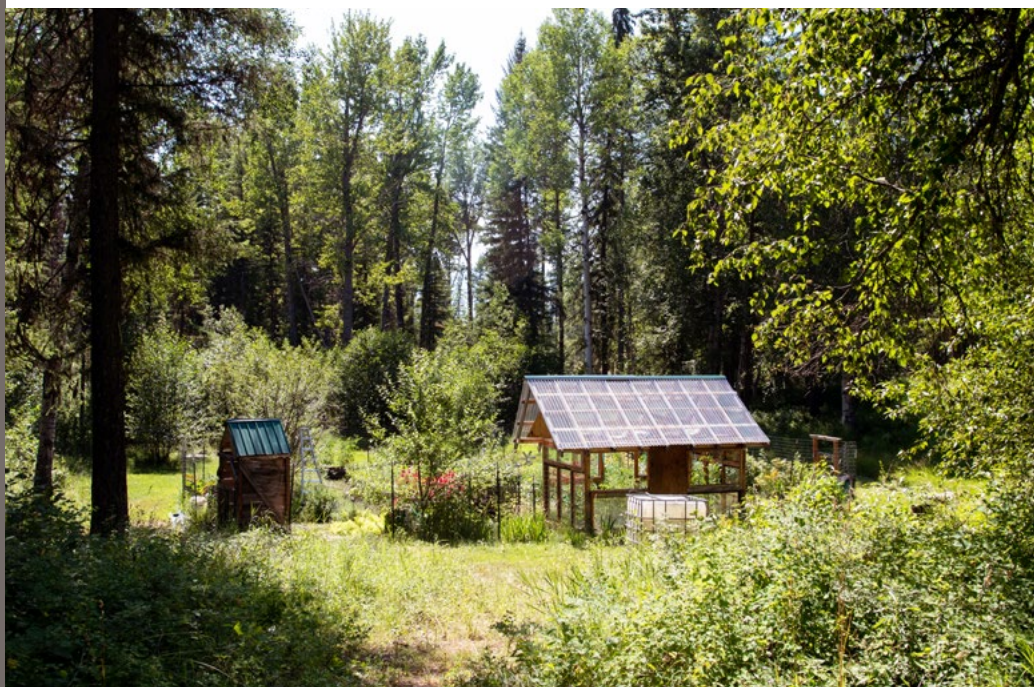
SVC recommends you consult with a qualified tax advisor about your specific circumstances for Qualified RMD Charitable Distributions.



Original homestead cabin

FROM ASPEN GROVES,
TO FENS, TO CEDAR FORESTS,
AND A WELL-USED BEAR BATH,
NOT TO MENTION ONE OF
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
AND BOUNTIFUL GARDENS
YOU'VE EVER SEEN -
THE RAIBLE PROPERTY
OFFERS NO SHORTAGE OF
BIODIVERSITY AND WONDER.

IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN
TRULY WITNESS AND FEEL
PEOPLE LIVING WITH THE LAND.



Cooling off in Buck Creek



HONORING THOSE WHO HONOR THE LAND

2022 MISSOULA COUNTY LAND STEWARDSHIP AWARD

By Mike Mayernik

Swan Valley residents Barb and Joe Raible were awarded the 2022 Missoula County Land Stewardship Award. County Commissioner Juanita Vero (former SVC board member) and members of the Missoula Open Lands Committee presented the award to the Raibles on August 18th at their Buck Creek Road property. The Land Stewardship Award recognizes Missoula County landowners and residents who prioritize stewardship of the land and undertake projects and practices that make a difference for land, water, forests, wildlife, and communities. Barb and Joe are exemplary at on-the-ground conservation and stewardship on their property and are an inspiration to other landowners and students alike.

The Raibles' 120-acre property was homesteaded by Barb's grandparents, Matt and Anna Hill, in 1917. Barb and Joe took over management of the property 50 years ago, in 1972, and raised their children in the two-room homestead cabin. The property is off-grid, using solar power and propane generators as the source of power. The Raibles lived in the Swan from 1972-1990, working seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and doing various jobs to get by. In 1990 they moved to Salem, Oregon to work for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and retired in 2010, moving back to the Swan. A few of the conservation and stewardship activities the Raibles have done over the years include: forest thinning, sustainable logging, fuels reduction, pile burning, weed spraying, tree planting, aspen restoration, developing a conservation easement for the property with Montana Land Reliance, and promoting stream and riparian health by maintaining forest health around the

various water features on the property. All of the structures (cabin, barn, sheds etc.) have been built with wood from the property, including logs or boards cut with a portable sawmill.

In addition to the stewardship and management practices on their own property, the Raibles have been actively involved in the Swan Valley community. Barb was on the SVC Board of Directors from 2016-2021, and she was the Board Chair from 2018-2021. Joe has been a member of the Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department for four years and helps manage their radios. Barb and Joe are also members of the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society, as well as the local American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) group. The Raibles have spent countless hours volunteering for these organizations, as well as SVC, participating in programs such as highway cleanups and community firewood days. Additionally, the Raibles are mentors of young people that live in or pass through the Swan and have hosted several homestay students during SVC's Landscape and Livelihood college program.

Barb and Joe Raible join a group of highly respected conservation and stewardship heroes, with several previous recipients with Swan Valley ties. The Missoula County Stewardship Award was started in 2011, making the Raibles the 12th recipients of the award. A few of the previous Land Stewardship Award winners are Bud Moore, Land Lindbergh, Mark Vander Meer, and Dave and Kay Owen. We thank Barb and Joe for all of their support of SVC over the years and for their continued conservation and stewardship of their property.



Missoula county commissioners, SVC staff and board members, and friends and neighbors all gathered at the Raibles' home to honor them with the award and tour their property, learning about its history and the many projects Barb and Joe have completed over the years.

FOREST MANAGEMENT WITH WILDLIFE IN MIND

By Mike Mayernik

On a daily basis, I get questions from landowners about managing their forests, and about forest stewardship. Typically, one of the most important concerns and values landowners have is wildlife. I am often asked what can I do to promote wildlife and keep what it needs, while at the same time managing other things such as wildfire? In the spirit of our Wild for Wildlife fundraising campaign, we wanted to share some things that you can do while managing your forest to promote a diversity of wildlife, while still managing your fire-adapted Swan Valley forest.

SNAGS

Snags are standing dead trees, either full height or broken off at some point up the tree. Trees can die from things such as insects, diseases, wind breakage, or fire damage, which are all natural processes. As far as wildlife habitat goes, snags are a great thing to promote in your forest. Woodpeckers, including pileated, hairy, downy, three-toed, and northern flickers to name a few, will all utilize snags in some fashion. These birds forage on insects living in the snags, such as bark beetles and wood boring beetles and pileated woodpeckers can excavate even further into a snag to get carpenter ants. Woodpeckers also utilize snags by excavating cavities for nests. In subsequent years, other cavity-nesting bird species, such as blue birds and nuthatches, as well as other species, will utilize those old holes for homes themselves. Small mammals such as squirrels, flying squirrels, and chipmunks will use hollowed out snags for caching cones for winter. Bats will roost under the loose bark of larch and ponderosa pine snags, or in cavities or hollowed out snags. As far as snags go, the bigger the better, and the more the better.

Larch and ponderosa pine, with their deep tap root growth structure, will generally stand longer than shallow-rooted species such as lodgepole or spruce. Trees that are broken off by wind make great snags for wildlife, because they have a tendency to stand longer than full-height snags, since they're no longer as vulnerable to windthrow. I don't recommend having tall snags near structures, as just

like any tree, there is always the possibility of them falling down. But out in the woods, they are just part of a healthy, functioning forest.

There are a few techniques for actually creating snags intentionally. Some logging equipment, such as a harvester (in-woods-processor) or feller buncher, have a cutting head on a boom that can be extended to different heights. During a logging or thinning project, equipment operators for certain trees can reach up with the boom as high as they can (for example 30-40' up), and cut the tree off at that point instead of at ground level. This leaves the bottom part of the tree as a standing snag, while the upper part of the tree is still utilized for wood products for the thinning project. Another technique called girdling is simply using a chainsaw or axe to cut around at the base of the tree, just enough to sever the cambium layer (just inside the bark), but leave the tree standing. Doing this will cause the tree to slowly die and become a snag. This technique works well, though sometimes the tree can break



off at the girdled location, as rot will usually form at that point. Regardless of how snags are created, they do provide good quality habitat for a diversity of species. So, the next time a wind event breaks off trees on your property, or you are having a thinning project done, consider leaving some of the broken-off snags for the wildlife.

WILDLIFE PATCHES, HIDING COVER

Many landowners we work with are concerned about wildfire and are planning on wildfire risk reduction thinning or logging projects, or are utilizing our cost-share fuels reduction program. The Swan Valley is a fire-adapted ecosystem. Fire is natural here and historically was much more common than currently due to our management practices. So, thinning and fuels reduction, especially around structures, infrastructure, and access roads, is critical to firefighter safety and improving the likelihood of structures surviving a wildfire. For general thinning the recommendation is a 10-foot-average crown spacing and the removal of small trees (known as ladder fuels) to reduce the risk of crown fire through a forest. Sometimes it's good to leave small patches of un-thinned areas. These patches provide hiding cover for small mammals, such as squirrels and rodents, as well as grouse, song birds, bears, deer, and elk. The recommendation for untreated patches left in a thinning project is that they should be less than 1/10th of an acre in size, have a 20-foot crown spacing around the perimeter of the patch, and be located at least 300 feet from structures. This type of variable tree spacing will help with mitigating fire risk without losing important wildlife hiding cover.

DOWNED WOOD, DEBRIS PILES

Leaving some dead wood, such as large-diameter logs or isolated piles of sticks and branches out in your forest can provide a surprisingly high value habitat for small mammals such as squirrels, mice, voles, shrews, and the like. These animals utilize complex structures of downed logs or brush piles for both nesting and foraging. These rodents are the basis of the food chain, and owls, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, and pine marten often hunt these small mammals and depend on them. In winter I often see pine marten, bobcats, and even lynx checking out logging slash piles or other natural downed woody debris piles as they hunt for their next meal. If I have a large tree snap off in a wind event, as long as I'm not going to use the wood for firewood, I like to burn most of the branches (to reduce the fire risk), but then I leave most of the bole of the tree on the ground to decompose back into the soil; I'll also leave the standing snag. Doing this leaves the downed wood and the snag for wildlife, while removing the majority of the fire risk, which are the needles and branches. With fire risk reduction out in our forests, sometimes leaving some dead logs and small piles of brush and sticks here and there (away from structures) can go a long way in providing habitat for a diversity of wildlife.



Brush piles provide a sanctuary for small mammals trying to escape predation, they offer shelter to a number of animals during extreme weather, and the decaying wood attracts insects and fosters fungal growth, both of which provide snacks for other critters.



This snag snapped off in the January 2021 windstorm. The tree showed some rot and had carpenter ants hollowing out the tree prior to breaking in the wind. This snag will provide habitat for woodpeckers and cavity nesting birds into the future. The downed log will provide habitat for small mammals while the limbs were burned to reduce some wildfire risk.



SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS

A BEAR FOOD CRISIS YEAR

By Justine Vallieres, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Bear Conflict Management Specialist



Since the beginning of April, the southern half of the region (Kalispell, Bigfork, Creston, the Swan, and Ferndale) has had over 800 bear conflict calls. This has been one of the busiest years we have seen in a long time, but it's not just here. All across Montana we are seeing more bear conflicts. There are a lot of factors at play here. With a combination of slow snow melt in the high country this spring (that kept bears in the valley bottom longer), a cold, wet spring, and the natural ebbs and flows of berry crops, it has resulted in a poor berry and natural food year altogether. We are calling this a "bear food crisis year." We also have higher human densities, with a lot of encroachment into bear habitat. All of the above, coupled with stable and healthy bear populations, leads to an increase in conflicts. We often discuss the importance of securing garbage in bear-resistant containers (or within sturdy enclosures such as barns or garages), securing livestock and chickens with properly working electric fencing, removing bird feeders, keeping all livestock feed and pet food inside, and picking fruit trees and/or cutting them down if the fruit is not being utilized. However, we want to take the time to discuss some other reoccurring issues that lead to conflict.

One issue we have seen a lot of over the past couple years is outdoor freezers and refrigerators. This is a major bear attractant, as it is no different than having a cooler full of food left outside. Freezers and refrigerators need to be within the home or in an enclosure. Another issue is people waiting to call us about bear conflicts until the bear's behavior is so bad that we have no choice but to remove it from the population. Please

do not wait to call; the sooner we know of a conflict, the sooner we can respond to and deal with it, whether that's by helping you to secure your attractants or by trapping to potentially relocate the bear.

We are also dealing with a lot of conflicts where people are leaving garbage in their bear-resistant garbage cans along the highway prior to pick-up day. These cans are called 'bear-resistant' for a reason, not 'bear-proof.' They are tested by bears at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center, and if the bears do not break into them within 45 minutes, then they receive an Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee approval rating. The problem is that if a bear gnaws or works on a bear-resistant can long enough, it can sometimes break into the can, which we have seen repeatedly throughout the Upper Swan this year. We encourage people to not leave their cans along the highway with garbage in them throughout the week, to avoid bears being drawn close to the highway and having the opportunity to chew on them all night until they're able to break in. If possible, we encourage folks to bring the garbage and cans to the highway the morning of pickup to help avoid these unnecessary conflicts.

Please also understand that we have so many calls coming in that we have to prioritize them, and we cannot and will not always trap if we do not feel it's necessary. There are four of us here in Region 1 doing bear management, and we have 10 traps total. So, manpower and traps are limited. For example, a bear in a fruit tree will not be priority over a bear that is breaking into someone's garage. The solution there is to pick your fruit or remove the tree altogether. It's important to

help ourselves and each other. If you're doing all the right things to secure your garbage and attractants, but your neighbor isn't, then they are now endangering themselves, you, and the bear. Hold each other accountable and communicate with your neighbors.

We currently have a few collared grizzly bears within the Swan Valley, one of which is an older female we call Finn, who was caught this summer getting into grain. She had no cubs with her, and she had never been caught before. She was moved down to the Spotted Bear area, but she has since made her way back. The important thing to understand about relocation is it is a band-aid solution to bear conflicts. The real solution is people securing attractants to limit and prevent bears from hanging around your properties and getting into trouble. Relocation buys us time to help landowners secure attractants, but bears never stay where you put them, and older bears almost always return to their home range or at least try to, which may result in them getting into further trouble. People often call and want the bear trapped and moved somewhere it will stay out

of trouble, but they don't understand that it is not the reality. Bears can cover a lot of ground, and if you look at a map and see the places where we can actually drive to and access to release them, you are talking about a maybe 30-40- mile (at the most) straight-line distance to the nearest homes or town.

There was also a griz sow named Rummy, who was frequenting the Guest Ranch Road area with her two cubs. She was caught and collared this summer. Currently, that bear family is in the Mission Valley, west of highway 93. There has recently been a sow and three cubs in the Kraft Creek area that have broken into at least one shed to acquire grain. Attempts to capture that family have been unsuccessful. And sadly, a 17-year-old female grizzly bear was hit and killed on Hwy 83 just south of Swan Lake in September. This is the only known mortality in the Swan Valley this year to date.

Please help us to help you and to help them. Please secure attractants and call as soon as you encounter an issue with a bear on your property. Thank you!



LEFT: TWO DIFFERENT BEAR SCATS CONTAINING GARBAGE, FOUND AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS IN THE SWAN VALLEY IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 2022.

Photo opposite page: A bear broke into a non-bear-resistant garbage container along MT Hwy 83 in the Swan, September 2022.



MONTANA MASTER NATURALIST SUMMER '22 FIELD JOURNAL HIGHLIGHT

by Kelly Stone

REMEMBERING JUNE ASH

By Linda Winnie and Ellen Sullivan, Postscript by Rebecca Ramsey

June Ash was 21 when she first came to Montana in 1952. She came to Libby with her new husband Rod to work the summer as firewatchers at the Big Swede Lookout. June had recently graduated from UC Berkeley in Social Welfare; Rod was finishing his Masters in Anthropology. Driving down the Mission Valley on their way back to California, they spotted a dirt road going east across the mountains to a long valley that looked sparsely populated. "We made a note of that," June has said. They would come back to Montana 10 years later to explore the Swan Valley.

After Rod graduated they moved to northern California where Rod taught high school social studies and June volunteered for local community programs such as youth baseball, Campfire Girls, and community concerts. In later years she worked as a substitute coordinator for local high schools. At home they raised chickens, pigeons, and four kids: Gordon, David, Ellen, and James. She became the Conservation Chair for Cottonwood Garden Club, and was instrumental in developing a town park, receiving several conservation awards. June was "a volunteer extraordinaire" says her daughter Ellen.

In the early 60s June and Rod began bringing the kids to Montana each summer to camp in the Swan. In 1969 they bought 10 acres and a log cabin in the area to use in the summers, and they soon began adding on to it and started a garden. When they retired in 1986 they moved from California to the cabin. With retirement June had even more time for volunteering. She organized the seniors of the Upper Swan into an AARP chapter that got together monthly. She was active in the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society, Alpine Artisans, and Swan Valley Connections. June and Rod were founding members of the Swan Citizens' ad hoc Committee, which developed the Swan Ecosystem Center. And they sought out the nearest Audubon chapter.

June and Rod had been charter members of a new Audubon chapter back in California, and were involved in that chapter's activities. Shortly after they moved to the Swan, they found Flathead Audubon Society (FAS) and volunteered their services. FAS immediately enlisted June and Rod for the Board, put Rod in charge of conservation, and made June Membership Chair. June served on the Board and concurrently as Membership Chair for 12 years.

In 1993 June and Rod also took on management of the FAS annual *Bird Seed Sale*, and served in this capacity until shortly before Rod passed away in 2006. Rod would arrange to have several hundred sacks of black oil sunflower seed brought from eastern Montana. June would figure out how many sacks

should be dropped on "seed day" at each of the pick-up sites scattered from Eureka to Condon, organize the volunteers who handed out the sacks at the sites, and keep track of it all. At that time, the annual seed sale was Flathead Audubon's primary source of income. Not until the early 2000s, after roughly a decade of rapid growth and expansion of the education program, did the chapter need to develop new sources of income. It was June's organizational efforts that funded FAS through that decade of growth.

June and Rod received many awards for their work on conservation, including Volunteer of the Year from the Swan Ecosystem Center, the Flathead National Forest Danny On Award, and Montana Audubon's Lifetime Achievement Award.

After Rod passed, his friend Art Ortenberg funded for five years an annual "Raptor Day in Honor of Rod Ash" at Lone Pine, organized by Flathead Audubon. It included a half-day of talks on raptors and raptor conservation, which June opened with stories about Rod and his conservation work, and a passionate talk on the importance of conservation. FAS continued to hold "Raptor Day" even after the five years. It eventually morphed into the annual "Birds of Prey Festival."

June decided to continue living in the Condon cabin after Rod's passing, but it was not easy. She had polio when she was 16.

It remitted under her mother's care, but gradually returned in her later years. By the 1990s she was confined to a wheel-chair. She was determined to make it work, and continued living alone in the Swan for 10 more years with the help of her Condon friends and neighbors. She then had to move to a nursing home.

In 2019 June turned 90. Three FAS "old timers" visited her in her nursing home to bring birthday congratulations from the chapter. For over an hour she entertained us with funny stories and tales from her time in the Swan, talked about birds, and about politics (she was up on all the latest developments), and about life in general. Near the end of our visit she told us: "I'm doing fine here. Remember that life is as good as you make it."

June Ash made a good life for herself and for all those around her. Through her volunteer efforts she helped build organizations that continue to make many lives better. Flathead Audubon was fortunate to have her on our team, and many in FAS have been fortunate to know her as a friend. In June's own words, she enjoyed a very good life, she not only gave but also received as well. She felt blessed.



June and Rod, among their many endeavors in the Swan Valley, were also instrumental in helping to found the Grounded Eagle Foundation, which was a raptor rehabilitation center operated by Ken and Jody Wolff. Jody led the numerous bird count and education efforts in the valley with assistance from June, Rod, and other bird enthusiasts. When the Grounded Eagle Foundation sunsetted after Ken's passing, money was gifted to Swan Valley Connections to continue doing the bird counts, education programs around birds, and projects to improve bird habitat. Those funds have nearly expired, so in order to continue that good work, a special June Ash Memorial Bird Fund has been established at Swan Valley Connections.

You may make a tax-deductible donation by visiting our giving page at <https://www.swanvalleyconnections.org/give> and designating your donation to the "June Ash Memorial Bird Fund" or by mailing a check to 6887 MT Highway 83, Condon, MT 59826.

Photos- Opposite: June Ash, Right: Barn owl by Andy Chilton



Introducing OUR NEW TREE SEEDLING CO-OP PROGRAM

SVC will place a bulk order of tree seedlings, including ponderosa pine Western larch, and Douglas fir • **Cost: \$2.50/tree**

- o Sold in packs of 10 seedling/species (\$25/pack)
- o Minimum order: 10 seedlings/species (1 pack)
- o Maximum order: 250 tree seedlings (1 box)

Inquire with SVC for planting pricing (based on location & amount)

- o **Order and payment deadline: November 30, 2022**
 - o Trees will be cooler packed (frozen) when picked up from nursery
 - o Landowners can pick up tree seedlings from SVC, approx. April 26-May 5
 - o We recommend that customers pick up and plant seedlings as soon as possible once seedlings have thawed after being picked up from nursery.
- SVC will not be held responsible for tree seedlings that are not picked up within the April 26-May 5 timeframe, or seedlings that do not grow once planted**

place your order at [WWW.SWANVALLEYCONNECTIONS.ORG/TREE-SEEDLING-COOP-PROGRAM](https://www.SWANVALLEYCONNECTIONS.ORG/TREE-SEEDLING-COOP-PROGRAM)

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

UPCOMING EVENTS

Please check our website or call (406) 754-3137 for the most up-to-date information.

NOVEMBER 2

Rare Carnivore Monitoring Update
Zoom Presentation with Luke Lamar and Mike Mayernik

DECEMBER 3

Wildlife Tracks & Sign Class

DECEMBER 7

Alumni Research Summit
Zoom Presentations

DECEMBER 10

Wildlife Tracks & Sign Class

DECEMBER 14

Audubon Christmas Bird Count

DECEMBER 17

Wildlife Tracks & Sign Class

JANUARY 4

In-person presentation/potluck! (Topic TBD)
Swan Valley Community Hall

JANUARY 7-15

Wildlife Tracks & Sign Course
College Credit & Certification

JANUARY 28

Wildlife Tracks & Sign Class

FEBRUARY 4-5

Weekend Warrior Master Naturalist Begins