

# THE CONFLUENCE

WINTER 2024



— SWAN VALLEY —  
CONNECTIONS

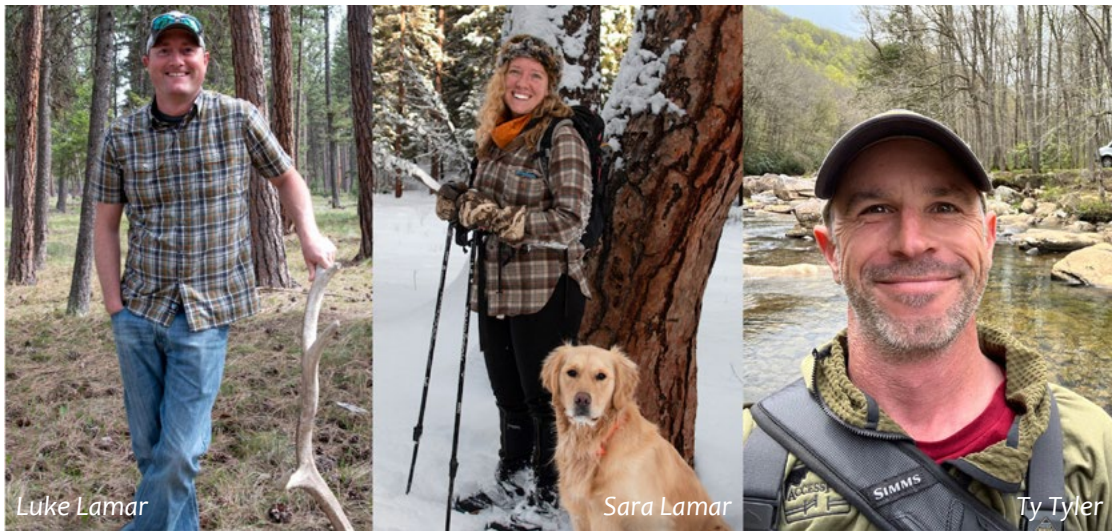


## From the Director

Greetings and happy winter, friends!

I'm thrilled to announce on behalf of the staff and board of directors that with a new year comes new leadership for Swan Valley Connections (SVC). The organization is restructuring to welcome three managing directors to lead the organization into a more sustainable future. All three managing directors will guide the vision of the organization within their area of focus, with all three bearing responsibility for the success of programs, operations, and fundraising. The transition is in progress as of January 1, and will be complete by the end of February 2024. There will be a potluck celebration of outgoing and new leadership on February 24th from 5pm-9pm at the Swan Valley Community Hall.

Luke Lamar, longtime Conservation Director for SVC will focus on conservation and operations. Sara Lamar, who has been the Education Director for SVC for four years and served in numerous roles with the organization prior to her rise to leadership, will focus on educational programming, external connections, and board management. And newcomer William "Ty" Tyler will round out the team with a focus on fundraising and business development. Ty comes from a lifelong career in conservation nonprofits, most recently serving as the National Stewardship Director at the Access Fund.



The board has spent five months researching shared leadership models, a trend sweeping both for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike. Why? Primarily because statistics show that the average lifespan of an executive director in an organization is 3-5 years, with the exception of organization founders. The rate of burnout is extremely high. The expectations of executive directors to be "unicorns," who have a vast myriad of skills and are great as managers, fundraisers, human resources experts, spokespeople, relationship builders, visionaries, guides, and more is proving to not be sustainable. The up-and-coming generation of professional workforce is stepping up and demanding more work/life balance, which is wise. Life is short! Everyone deserves fulfillment in both areas.

Research shows that shared leadership results in more productive organizations, and happier employees overall. This collaborative model allows for flexibility and continuity in times of emergency or vacations. It provides more of a pathway for internal employee growth and advancement, as well as ease of replacing employees when they move on, with the ability to hire for more specific skills. It also creates more employee satisfaction for those leaders by allowing them to focus on using their top skills. Employees are more vested in their work and feel that they have a voice in decision making in a much different way than with a traditional hierarchical model. Additionally, they all share responsibility for the efforts and decisions differently, generally making for a better outcome.

For SVC, the model demonstrates the collaborative nature at the core of our work, by having shared leadership and decision making internally as well as externally. I have been involved professionally and as a volunteer in collaborative conservation efforts and organizations in Montana for over 25 years. The reason that Montana leads our nation in collaboration (though that is not the quick or easy way to do things) is because we've proven time and time again that bringing diverse perspectives together, representing all the voices in a community or around an effort, and working together to find the solutions that benefit the greater good is what is best, and what makes the most lasting sense.

Additionally, as SVC has been striving to expand and deepen our relationships with our Indigenous neighbors, and to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and ways of being

## Swan Valley Connections

6887 MT Highway 83  
Condon, MT 59826  
p: (406) 754-3137  
f: (406) 754-2965  
[info@svconnections.org](mailto:info@svconnections.org)

### Board of Directors

Mary Shaw, Chair  
Jessy Stevenson, Vice-Chair  
Donn Lassila, Treasurer  
Kathryn De Master  
Rachel Feigley  
Zoë Leake  
Casey Ryan  
Dan Stone  
Greg Tollefson  
Aaron Whitten  
Tina Zenzola

### Emeritus

Russ Abolt  
Anne Dahl  
Steve Ellis  
Neil Meyer

### Advisors

Kvande Anderson  
Steve Bell  
Jim Burchfield  
Larry Garlick  
Chris La Tray  
Tim Love  
Alex Metcalf  
Pat O'Herren  
Mark Schiltz  
Mark Vander Meer  
Gary Wolfe

### Staff

Rebecca Ramsey, Outgoing ED  
Luke Lamar, Managing Director  
Sara Lamar, Managing Director  
Ty Tyler, Managing Director  
Andrea DiNino  
Mike Mayernik  
Alex Morrow  
Jackie Pagano  
Uwe Schaefer  
Taylor Tewksbury

*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](http://SwanValleyConnections.org)

Cover Image:  
Winter River Otter  
by Andrea DiNino

into all of our work, we can reflect on Indigenous leadership models. I've learned from my Indigenous colleagues that, traditionally, many tribes were led in council by trusted and respected members and elders of the community—men and women and two-spirits alike—who had earned their positions of leadership through the integrity of their actions. They understood that decisions made for the good of the land and the people were the same thing, and so decisions that impacted the whole community needed to be made collaboratively, in consensus. No one person had the right or the knowledge to make decisions for all. We feel that our shared leadership model will be reflective of this wisdom too.

It has been the greatest honor of my life to lead this organization for the last six and a half years. The incredible legacy of conservation, stewardship, education, and service that was laid out for me by our founding organizations and their executive directors, Anne Dahl of Swan Ecosystem Center and Melanie Parker of Northwest Connections was exquisite. Maria Mantas, who then led the organizations to and through the merger, and was the first Executive Director for SVC, did the hard work of combining businesses that had existed for nearly 20 years; she built a strong foundation for the organization I had the privilege to step into. I felt like I was hired to build on that foundation, grow the organization and culture to be more inclusive and wide-reaching, and set it up for the next 20 years of its existence. Together with the support of all of you, our partners, and our staff and board, we've done that, and it's time to turn the page to the next chapter in SVC's story. I feel like the team of staff and board members in place, with the skills, passion, enthusiasm, and experience they bring, are ready, willing, and able to now write the next volume in the legacy of SVC.

I look forward to seeing you all on the trails, in classes, and at events, as we cheer on our new leaders who will continue to inspire conservation and expand stewardship in the Swan Valley for years to come.

Happy Trails,



Rebecca Ramsey, Outgoing Executive Director



## Get to Know

### TY TYLER

Managing Director- Philanthropy & Development

A northern New Jersey original, Ty (he/him) left the congestion of the East for the great landscapes and ecosystems of the West. Ty's been lucky enough to have lived in Washington, Colorado, Arizona and recently wrapped up seven years of full-time van life exploring the entire US. Ty brings almost 20 years of experience in the conservation non-profit ecosystem, creating new and strategic programs for stewardship, education, and recreation management.

As a passionate hiker, climber, fly angler, and all-around outdoor enthusiast, Ty is thrilled to dive deep into the Swan Valley ecosystem, its community, and the rest of the surrounding Crown of the Continent. As SVC's Managing Director-Philanthropy & Development, Ty will be responsible for working side by side with the entire team on fundraising efforts that will not only drive programming forward but also ensure the organization's resilience into the future.

You can reach Ty at [ty@svconnections.org](mailto:ty@svconnections.org)

## A Thank-You from the Editor

I just wanted to thank you all, including my SVC team, board members, and SVC supporters, for all of the love and support you've shown to me and Rob over the past few months. Whether you opened your home to us and our family; supported us financially; gave us clothing, a home-cooked meal, or toys for our dogs; or sent words of sympathy and encouragement, it has all meant the world to us. We would not make it through this incredibly heartbreaking and challenging experience without it. And, I would not be sitting here putting together this issue of *The Confluence*.

Thank you not only for supporting our organization, but also for choosing to support its people. We talk a lot about what a special place we live in because of its rare carnivores, incredible alpine lakes and streams, natural beauty, and vast public lands, but we don't talk as much about the human community, which is just as noteworthy. We may hold some different world views or priorities from each other, but no one ever hesitates to show up and help their neighbor in need. And, some of those neighbors dedicate their time to providing Swan Valley Emergency Services, an organization we're incredibly lucky to have. Rob and I lost a lot, but we gained new friends and a new appreciation for this place, its people, and its supporters near and far.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you,  
Andrea DiNino + Rob Millspaugh (and Dylan + Lu, too)





# THE ART OF TRAILING

By Luke Lamar

I bent over to intensely study the clump of grass, a patchwork of some blades protruding higher than others, each bitten off, leaving frayed ends. I followed several small, obscure places where other blades of grass were bent one way, leading me in the direction of the animal I pursued. Then nothing, no discernable clues to follow, just my intuition on the likely pathways the animal would take based on the behavior I had already observed. After 10 yards of wondering if the animal had taken another route, I found several more patches of grass that had been foraged on, confirming the story that I had hypothesized in my mind.

Next to the ragged clumps of grass was a fresh pile of scat, the green grass evident and not broken down very well, as it quickly passed through the animal. Not quite enough scat to fill a ball cap, but close. I poked at it with a stick. No outer crust had formed on the scat from the unfamiliar 85-degree May Montana day, confirming what I had already suspected: this scat was fresh! The scat confirmed what I had already deduced, based on a myriad of signs that I had observed in the grass—irregular, uneven lengths of blades of grass being foraged, a wide straddle, and a large foot—I was following the trail of a bear.

Based on the amount and large diameter of the tubular shaped chunks, I was unsure if I was on the trail of a grizzly or black bear, an important distinction to consider. I followed a slightly meandering trail through the grass, as the bear continued foraging. On high alert for any noises or movement ahead, I continued along the trail, stitching together various clues as I progressed forward. Then, 100 yards ahead of me, there it was! I had attained my goal of finding a bear trail and following it to observe the animal.

The bear was sitting on its haunches, staring in my direction. I froze, not knowing if the bear had seen my movement. The wind was in my favor, carrying my scent in the opposite direction, so I knew it hadn't smelled me. After a moment of looking in my direction, the bear got up and walked out of sight behind a clump of trees. If it continued in that direction, I wouldn't be able to view it again.

From the brief encounter, I was unsure if it was a black bear or grizzly. I thought its ears were short and rounded like a grizzly, but when it turned sideways, I hadn't noticed the large shoulder hump, and the outline appeared more like a black bear. Thunder boomed overhead and lightning clacked in the distance. Did it see me and move away? Or had it just been looking in my direction and casually moved on? Unsure, I patiently waited for several minutes to see if the bear would reappear in the distance.

I replayed the encounter in my head numerous times, convincing myself that it was a black bear. If it was a grizzly, that was a good encounter at a safe distance, and best to not push my luck any further and risk a close, surprise encounter. Mostly confident that it was a black bear, I slowly crept up to where I had last seen it and found its trail and another fresh pile of scat. Having been practicing trailing numerous bears throughout the spring, I had been learning how quickly grass and other foods




could go through a bear. Curious if the bear had moved off naturally, or had been scared away by my presence, I continued on its trail to see if I could piece together the story.

Besides wondering if I'm a little bit nuts, you might be curious why I was practicing trailing bears in the first place. This was all part of preparing myself for CyberTracker North America's trailing specialist certification process. If the name CyberTracker sounds like a nerdy online quiz, it's quite the opposite, and is actually about the tracker's ability to observe and interpret the natural world directly, without any technology.

CyberTracker Conservation was developed by Louis Liebenberg in the early 1990s, as a process to utilize local experts and traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous trackers in Southern Africa in wildlife research and conservation. Many of these trackers were unable to read and write, but were exceptional trackers, able to interpret complex wildlife tracks and sign with incredible accuracy across vast landscapes. To apply this skill set to modern research, Liebenberg developed an icon-based handheld computer system, dubbed "Cyber Tracker," so that trackers could record their observations in the field. Liebenberg went on to develop "Tracking Evaluations," which aimed to identify the decreasing number of individuals with excellent tracking ability, help rebuild a body of tracking knowledge, inspire younger generations, and provide a path for cultural preservation and economic opportunity by reviving tracking as a modern profession. This evaluation process has since grown to become a worldwide standardized system of assessing tracking and trailing skills. The assessment process also provides ample opportunities to ask questions and learn, which rapidly develops the skill sets of trackers.





***“Along this bear’s trail, I had identified subtle evidence, interpreted behavior, and predicted its movement, all while moving silently, keenly aware of wind currents and my surroundings. I hadn’t gone far from where I had last observed the bear when I heard loud noises from up on a timbered ridge ahead.”***

Can you spot the bear trail?  
Photo taken by Luke Lamar during the  
CyberTracker Trailing Specialist evaluation

Tracking and trailing evaluations are separate courses with different methods of assessment. Both are similar in that they are broken into a system for ranking how an individual fairs on the certification process. For ‘Standard’ evaluations, scores are broken into Level I (70-79%), Level II (80-89%), Level III (90-99%), and Professional (100%). Those who have obtained Professional certifications, or are on the cusp, are allowed to take a ‘Specialist’ course, which consists of more complex tracks and sign, or trails. Obtaining a Specialist certification requires a score of 100%. The main goals of the trailing evaluation are to identify an animal’s trail, be able to assess how fresh the trail is, be confident in that assessment enough to follow the animal to observe it, and then back away from the scene without the animal noticing your presence. In standard trailing evaluations, hard-footed animals are typically followed (think elk or deer), but in a specialist eval, a soft-footed animal must be pursued (think bear, wolf, or lion). Oh yeah, and these trailing evaluations are done without the aid of snow, which is the substrate most people probably associate with trailing animals.

If you follow SVC closely, you probably know that we have a bunch of tracking nerds on staff, and that we host a multitude of one-day and weeklong wildlife tracks and sign classes every year, in addition to several CyberTracker certification courses. Like CyberTracker, SVC recognizes the value in learning wildlife tracks and sign. As so eloquently described on the CyberTracker’s Tracker Certification North America website, “wildlife tracking is a field science that facilitates the ability to identify and interpret the signs of animal activity and provides accurate and localized wildlife observations amid a changing world. Moreover, it is a practice

that leaves people feeling a meaningful connection with the landscape in which they live. Whether we are biologists, educators, hunters, or simply people who love and are curious about the natural world, when we become trackers, we see things that we didn’t see before. We collect more accurate data, we approach our quarry with greater skill and respect, and we feel a more meaningful relationship with the living world. Following tracks and interpreting sign, we imagine how an animal was moving, what its behaviors were, and why. The story we tell is our hypothesis, and we constantly revise it as new evidence appears. As we track, we are practicing what is perhaps the original form of scientific reasoning.”

Hence the reason I was practicing trailing bears. I’d never really spent too much time trying to trail bears around without snow as an aid, and on those occasions where I did find fresh trails, it always made common sense to go the opposite direction and backtrack them, rather than try to sneak up on the bruins.

Along this bear’s trail, I had identified subtle evidence, interpreted behavior, and predicted its movement, all while moving silently, keenly aware of wind currents and my surroundings. I hadn’t gone far from where I had last observed the bear when I heard loud noises from up on a timbered ridge ahead. It sounded like the bear was ripping up a stump or turning over downed logs for insects. I took this as a sign that I indeed had not scared the bear away when it had first been looking in my direction. I continued following subtle clues, staying with its trail to the base of the steep ridge, where I had heard the bear several minutes prior. A game trail led up the steep embankment, and for the first time, I found partial tracks in the soil to confirm that it was a black bear. I was thinking if I snuck up to the top of the hill, I would have a decent chance of seeing the bear again. Just as I thought that, the top of a lodgepole pine started to sway back and forth, just over the lip at the top of the embankment and trail I was about to go up. Only 20 yards away, I could hear the back-and-forth movement of hide as the bear rubbed and scent marked the tree. If I crept up the trail to the lip of the bank above, I would be about five feet from the bear. If there was ever a moment to count coup and touch a bear, this would have been quite the opportunity. With the wind still in my favor, I decided to back away from the trail, as I had a feeling that the bear might come back down into the draw to forage on more lush, green grass. Sure enough, a minute later, the cinnamon-colored male bear stomped back down the trail into the grass, only 30 yards in front of me.

After the bear moved off, I went up on top of the ridge to find the lodgepole sapling that the bear had been rubbing on. I found that it had actually marked a line of three bear rub trees and had taken a big bite out of one of them. He had also taken a quick dip in a little wetland and left another pile of grass-filled scat. I backtracked him along the top of the ridge to find another bear rub tree that he had taken a bite out of, and tore a large strip of bark from, which I realized, in hindsight, was where the noise came from when I thought I could hear him ripping into a stump (I found no evidence of torn up logs or stumps).

Daylight was fading fast as I quietly left the scene and headed back for my truck, being chased by lightning, a deluge of rain, and a healthy population of mosquitoes, but thankfully, no bears.



# BENEATH THE BARK: TINY CRITTERS WITH BIG IMPACT

By Jackie Pagano



Beetles don't often pop into mind when we think about animals of the Swan Valley, yet these tiny critters play an important role in our forested ecosystem. The mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) and Douglas fir beetle (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae*) are two native species of bark beetle that perform ecosystem functions.

Bark beetles are, as the name suggests, beetles that live beneath the outer bark and feed on the phloem of a tree. These insects can exist hidden to the untrained eye, as most of their life occurs beneath the bark of trees, excluding the emergence of adult beetles when traveling to a new host tree. Bark beetles exist at low levels for decades, attacking stressed or recently dead trees that create healthy patchwork forests with scattered tree death. The effects of these insects do not raise alarm unless a major outbreak in their population occurs, resulting in a mass loss of healthy trees.

Don't let the term "outbreak" villainize these insects to you. When their population levels are within an ecosystem's carrying capacity, the life cycle of these beetles provides a variety of benefits to forested landscapes such as our own. Many ecosystems depend on beetle-caused tree mortality and subsequent fire to promote forest renewal and regeneration. Additionally, tree death caused by bark beetles create snags (dead, standing trees), which provide ample bird and small mammal habitat. The dying surface of a tree promotes growth of lichen, moss, and fungi. Deadfall (scattered limbs and dead trees on the forest floor) provide temporary and permanent shelter for insects, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, as well as the promotion of nutrient cycling and tree regeneration. Furthermore, beetle larvae are a major food source for birds,

particularly woodpeckers, often acting as a much-needed winter resource.

Predation on bark beetle by nematodes, parasitic wasps, flies, other beetles, and the aforementioned woodpeckers aid in population regulation. Irregular swings in temperature, including extended bouts of sub-freezing temperatures, can also impact beetle populations. With a warming climate, researchers have shown increased survival rates and reproduction of certain bark beetle species.

The mountain pine beetle prefers to attack older lodgepole pine and mid-sized ponderosa pine, although these beetles can attack western white pine and whitebark pine as well. The Douglas fir beetle tends to prefer - you guessed it - mature Douglas fir trees. On rare occasions these beetles may attack other tree species found in the valley.

Without the presence of an outbreak, beetles will only target stressed or recently dead trees that do not possess defenses to fight off the attack. In the event of an outbreak (aka an over-abundance of beetle populations) healthy trees will become hosts, as there are no other feeding options for the beetles. If enough beetles colonize a healthy tree, the tree will max out its defenses and die, leaving a ripe environment for further beetle production.

But how do beetles congregate in such high numbers on a single host tree? They send signals by using chemical communication, also known as pheromones.

Female beetles initiate the attack of a tree, and whilst doing so emit an aggregate pheromone. This action signals hundreds of male beetles to flock to the host tree to initiate copulation and reproduction. Once complete, male bark beetles



emit an anti-aggregate pheromone. The male's pheromone sends a message to approaching beetles that the tree is occupied and has reached its capacity for infestation, a regulation that prevents overcrowding to ensure brood survival.

Wildfire suppression actions over the last 100+ years have created forests ripe for large bark beetle outbreaks. Forests that were once open with widely spaced trees created by regular low intensity fires are now crowded with thickets of small trees no longer regulated by fires. Also, removal of fire from the landscape has affected the historic mosaic and patchwork of differing ages and size classes of trees. We now see large swaths of connected forests of similar ages with vulnerability to bark beetles under the right conditions. These forest conditions along with the warming climate contributed to the outbreak of mountain pine beetle across the western US starting in the late 2000s.

So what can we do to ensure our forests withhold their natural resilience to these beetles? One management option is to attach synthesized anti-aggregate pheromone packets, also known as bubble caps, to potential host trees to communicate that the tree is already occupied which signals to approaching beetles the need to move on. Biologists refer to these pheromones as “verbenone” in the mountain pine beetle, and “MCH” (for short) in the Douglas fir beetle. No need to worry about your neighbors’ tree health, as research has shown no indication that the use of pheromones on a tree stand causes an increase in beetle attacks on neighboring stands.

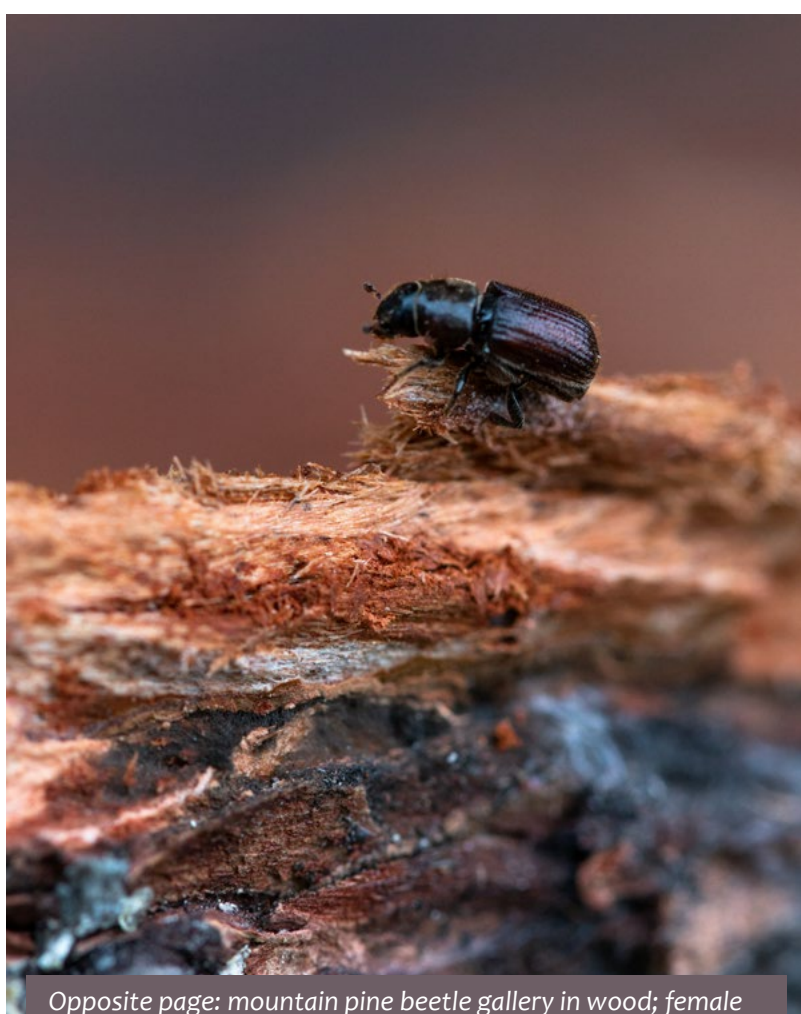
There are several other species of beetle native to the Swan Valley that do not have synthesized anti-aggregate pheromones. A few of these species are spruce beetle, western pine beetle, pine engraver beetle, and fir engraver beetle. If you have questions about which species you may be detecting on your property, feel free to contact SVC for a property consultation.

Bubble caps are used widely by foresters to manage bark beetle infestations, and are recommended as a low-cost, low-labor mitigation option that provide a short term solution to a beetle outbreak. Other management tools can include silviculture practices to increase resilience, such as forest thinning, patch-cutting, and prescribed fire to diversify tree stand species and size class. Thinning overcrowded forests can increase tree health and resilience to bark beetles by reducing competition for resources such as water, nutrients, and sunlight.

## Did you know...

*Different species of bark beetles create different shaped galleries?*

*(And you might be asked to I.D. a gallery in one of the CyberTracker wildlife tracks and sign evaluations!)*

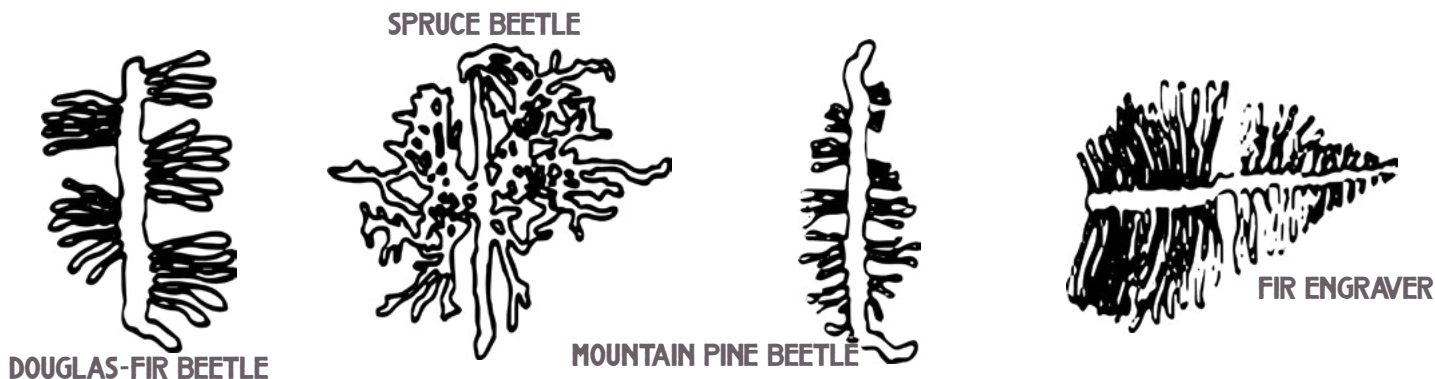


*Opposite page: mountain pine beetle gallery in wood; female beetles and their larvae carve these networks into the tree's phloem, or inner bark.*

*Above: close-up of a mountain pine beetle*

Swan Valley Connections acts as a bubble cap retailer, ordering the pheromone packets in bulk in order to offer them at a reduced cost to the community. Additionally, our trained staff are available for hire for bubble cap installation.

**Bubble cap orders will be open Tuesday, January 23rd through Friday, March 22nd.** Simply call our office at 406-754-3137 or head to our website to place your order! Your bubble caps will be available for pickup from April 8th-13th at our office. Questions? Contact our staff forester, Mike Mayernik, at [mike@svconnections.org](mailto:mike@svconnections.org).



# SWAN LANDS COORDINATING NETWORK 2023 UPDATES

The purpose of the Swan Lands Coordinating Network (SLCN) is to provide agencies, organizations and civic groups working in the Swan Valley a venue for coordinating with one another, and to provide a flow of information with interested members of the community.

*Here's a look at what some of our partners have been up to in the past year.*

## MONTANA DEPARTMENT of NATURAL RESOURCES and CONSERVATION - SWAN UNIT

The 2023 fire season on the Swan Unit was on par with previous years in terms of initial attack responses. Our firefighters were part of the initial attack on the Colt Fire and contributed to suppression efforts throughout the season.

Our timber program laid out, and has put out for bid, the North Soup Canyon timber sale, part of the Lost Napa Multiple Timber Sale Project. This timber sale offers approximately 1.5 MMBF (million board feet) of sawlogs to benefit the Common Schools Trust. Forest improvement work was also completed throughout the state forest, including planting roughly 116,000 seedlings and completing two broadcast burns. Several hundred acres of precommercial thinning are planned to take place within the next couple of years.

We have several new employees at the Swan. Debbie Selhost, a valley resident, is our new office manager, and Dave Marx and Ernie Nace are our new Unit Manager and Fire Management Officer respectively.

The Swan Unit is also a key partner in Firesafe Swan, a new collaborative group with the mission of improving fire preparedness in the Swan Valley. This group is open to anyone; contact Jack White for more information.

**Jack White, Service Forester**  
DNRC Swan River State Forest  
(406) 754-2301, jack.white@mt.gov

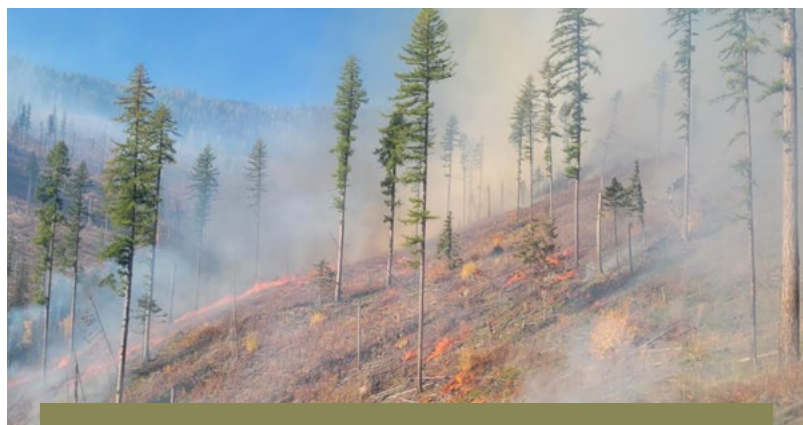


## MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS - FISHERIES

Swan Lake and the Swan River upstream were once the stronghold for bull trout in the state of Montana. All that changed when lake trout were first documented upstream from Swan Lake in 1998. Since that time, lake trout have become the dominant predator in Swan Lake, and our bull trout population has been declining ever since. From 2008-2016, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and the Swan Valley Bull Trout Working Group led a project to determine if gillnetting could be used as a tool to reduce the lake trout population and benefit other fish species like bull trout and kokanee. That project ended after predetermined goals were not being met and funding became limited.

Since then, FWP has increased monitoring lake trout in Swan Lake, and the population continues to increase. Sadly, the bull trout population continues to decline, and numbers of adult bull trout have reached all-time lows for the drainage. FWP and partners have been working collaboratively to develop a new lake trout suppression program to hopefully address these concerns. We plan to take lessons learned from previous efforts and tailor a program that is biologically meaningful, fiscally responsible, and socially acceptable. An environmental assessment for this type of work is being developed, and there will be more information to come. Please contact Leo Rosenthal for any questions related to this issue.

**Leo Rosenthal, Fisheries Biologist**  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1  
(406) 751-4548, lrosenthal@mt.gov



*Fall Prescribed Burn Unit 22-14. The intent of this burn was to clean up slash created by logging and create sites for both natural regeneration and planting. This unit will be planted in the spring of 2024.*



## SOUTHWESTERN CROWN COLLABORATIVE

The Southwestern Crown Collaborative (SWCC) enjoyed an active year in 2023, working closely with the Clearwater Resource Council of Seeley Lake, MT to offer additional opportunities for field trips and public engagement on projects in the SW Crown landscape. The opening up of additional partnerships with other organizations that share the SWCC's commitment to landscape restoration and sustainable forest management will be an ongoing focus in 2024.

One new area of concern that drew the attention of the SWCC in 2023 was the explosion of outdoor recreation visitation to the SW Crown region. It has been clear to many members of the SWCC that the demands of these visitors create new threats to sustaining resource integrity. In early 2023 the SWCC worked with the Seeley Lake Community Council to host two faculty members from the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation at the University of Montana (UM) to share their research findings on the trends in recreation use on Montana's public lands. These experts in recreation demand recognized that post-pandemic visitation has caused multiple pressures on recreation facilities and will continue to challenge agency managers and residents to develop appropriate systems to mitigate impacts, while offering diverse recreation opportunities. The SWCC hopes to continue this relationship with UM faculty members and their students to make sure local interests can be expressed and rational additional recreation infrastructure can be developed.

The SWCC also continued to work directly on a variety of resource management projects in 2023, with a particular focus on the Seeley Lake and Swan Lake Ranger Districts. During two field trips in the summer of 2023, the SWCC was able to observe both emerging and past projects on national forest lands, providing a useful window into the potential effectiveness of forest treatments. With wildfire risk mitigation being an ongoing concern on both ranger districts, projects in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) received special attention. However, the SWCC also observed forest restoration treatments in other forest settings, where prescribed fire has been applied to restore forest composition and structure, which will benefit both watershed health and wildlife habitat quality.

As public recognition of the significance of forest resource issues grows in the coming months and years, the SWCC hopes to continue its work at the forefront of community/agency engagement and deliberation in the SW Crown. New resources and capacities within federal and state agencies offer substantial opportunity to make progress on forest restoration, and the SWCC plans to be even more energetic and active in 2024.

**Jim Burchfield,**  
Southwestern Crown Collaborative  
burchfield.jamesa@gmail.com



*Photo by Alex Kim*

## MISSION MOUNTAINS YOUTH CREW

The Mission Mountains Youth Crew Program (MMYC) is a collaboration between the National Forest Foundation (NFF), Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Natural Resources Department, CSKT Tribal Education, Salish Kootenai College (SKC), the U.S. Forest Service, and Swan Valley Connections (SVC). By employing high school youth from the Flathead Reservation and college students from SKC, the program aims to (1) expose students to careers in cultural and natural resource conservation, (2) teach natural and cultural history and outdoor leadership skills, and (3) engage youth in ongoing cultural and natural resource monitoring and stewardship projects. Working cross-boundary, MMYC crews achieve these goals while participating in various activities on Flathead National Forest and Tribal lands, both on and off the Flathead reservation.

Summer 2023 marked the third season of MMYC, during which eight crew members and two crew leads contributed over 130 hours to cultural and natural resource stewardship projects in the Swan Valley. Crew members participated in camas and whitebark pine restoration, hazardous fuels reduction, and invasive plant removal. Crew members also contributed to several monitoring projects, including native fish, beaver, macroinvertebrate, and water howellia surveys. Throughout the season, MMYC worked alongside crew members and staff from the US Forest Service, Montana Natural Heritage Program, Montana Youth Conservation Corps, and Piikuni Lands Crew. Building off the momentum of the 2023 season, the MMYC planning team is now busy coordinating projects for the 2024 crew.

To learn more about MMYC, visit the program website at <https://www.nationalforests.org/regional-programs/northern-rockies/mission-mountains-youth-crew-program>

**Taylor Tewksbury,** Education Program Coordinator  
Swan Valley Connections  
(406) 754-3137, [taylor@svconnections.org](mailto:taylor@svconnections.org)



## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) welcomes Jacob Hourt as the new Manager of the Northwest Montana District! The Northwest Montana District (District) is the administrative unit comprising the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Cruz Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) as well as Ninepipe, Pablo and Lost Trail NWRs, 14 additional WPAs in the Mission and Flathead Valleys, and two Conservation Areas (CA).

This year marked the first year post-wetland restoration at the Swan River Refuge, and we were pleased to see signs of natural hydrology returning to the refuge in the form of surface water permeating the soils and recharging wetlands. Over the next several years, we will continue to monitor and document the result of this effort on both the hydrology and vegetation at this site. Many thanks to our partners at Swan Valley Connections, River Design Group, and Glacier Excavating for their expertise and dedication to conservation.

The Service is in the process of writing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan to guide our management into the future. There will be opportunities for the public to participate, which will be advertised through local outlets, or you can reach out to Jacob Hourt with questions.

In 2024, the Service is implementing a new habitat monitoring program for documenting vegetative changes on the landscape; we will continue to survey for and manage invasive species, including efforts to detect aquatic invaders and control the invasive black slug; we intend to update the signage on the Swan River Refuge overlook to include information on the restoration and we are interested in collaborating with the Forest Service and other partners to support research efforts in the Swan Valley.

**Jacob Hourt, NW Montana District Manager**  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
[jacob\\_hourt@fws.gov](mailto:jacob_hourt@fws.gov)

## THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION

As grizzlies continue to expand their range, Vital Ground has also been expanding to keep pace with the habitat conservation and conflict-prevention needs across the Northern Rockies. Adding two new full-time staffers to our team this year, our capacity to protect and steward land in perpetuity is increasing. Tanner Williams, our new Conservation Project Manager, will be busy on the ground helping to move these projects forward.

Fostering partnerships to support communities across bear country also contributed to a significant impact for wildlife and people in 2023. As members of the Seeley Lake community came together to tackle attractant issues that were creating food-conditioned, nuisance bear behavior, we supported the newly formed Clearwater Valley Bear Smart Working Group. In addition to containing attractant sites, the group held bear-aware fairs and social events, and provided guidance for both residents and visitors on safely coexisting with grizzlies. Nearby, Vital Ground provided support for Polebridge Bear Smart and their bear-aware trainings for seasonal employees, tourists, and others. This year we helped them develop an educational video, as well as information packets on living and recreating in bear country for short-term rental units. To support local landowners with bear encounters, we funded new trail cameras, scare devices, and volunteer reimbursement for Polebridge Bear Smart.

Continuing our activity in the Swan following last winter's Salmon Prairie conservation easement, we once again supported Swan Valley Bear Resources in their outreach and conflict-prevention work. Looking ahead to 2024, our growing staff and diverse partnerships will continue this momentum across the region. By protecting habitat, building connectivity, and empowering local communities, Vital Ground is committed to making bear country a safe and wonderful place to be for all the seasons to come.

**Brittani Rosas, Land Steward**  
The Vital Ground Foundation  
(406) 214-5749, [brozas@vitalground.org](mailto:brozas@vitalground.org)



Drone imagery of the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge. Left from July 2022; right from May 2023.  
Credit: River Design Group



## CONFEDERATED SALISH & KOOTENAI TRIBES

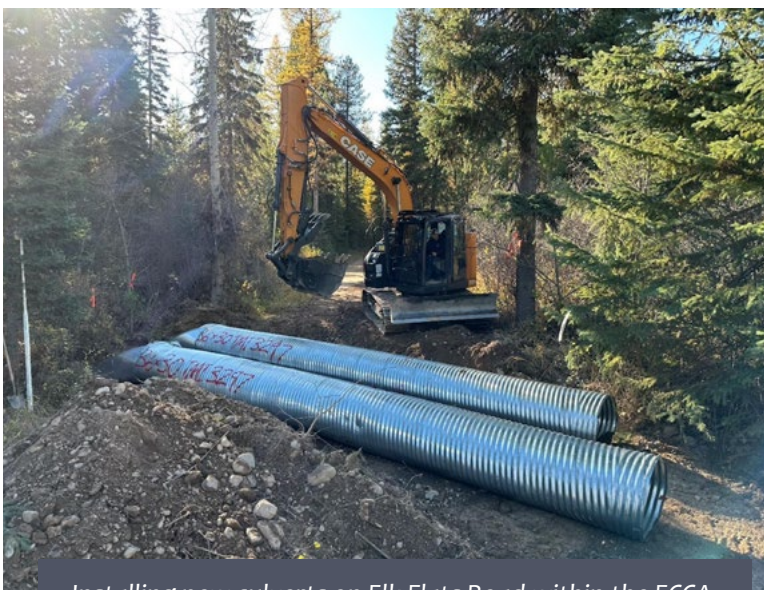
The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) owns the east half of Section 35 west of Condon, containing the confluence of Elk Creek and the Swan River. Since 2007, CSKT and Swan Valley Connections (SVC), who owns the west half of Section 35, have co-managed the section as the Elk Creek Conservation Area (ECCA). Throughout 2023 the CSKT Fisheries Program worked closely with our partners at SVC and in the Elk Flats Road community on projects within the ECCA.

In late July CSKT staff joined SVC staff and the Mission Mountains Youth Crew to cut firewood on the ECCA at the location of the blow-down event from 2021. CSKT staff hauled approximately two cords of firewood back to the Flathead Reservation, which we donated to a CSKT program that provides firewood assistance to tribal elders.

In early August the CSKT Fisheries Program contributed funding to have noxious weed populations treated with herbicides along Elk Flats Road and other spur roads throughout the ECCA. Also, CSKT and SVC staff met periodically throughout 2023 to discuss plans for constructing an educational kiosk at an existing pull-out area along Elk Flats Road. Installation of this educational area is planned for 2024.

Finally, in mid-October, the CSKT Fisheries Program and the Tribal Forestry Department worked together to install two new culverts on Elk Flats Road immediately to the west of the existing bridge on the ECCA. The placement of these new culverts will assist with the conveyance of flood flows and prevent the movement of fine sediments from the road into Elk Creek.

**Rusty Sydnor**, Restoration Botanist  
Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes  
(406) 250-2113, [rusty.sydnor@cskt.org](mailto:rusty.sydnor@cskt.org)



Installing new culverts on Elk Flats Road within the ECCA.



## SWAN LAKERS

The Swan Lakers are, first and foremost, a volunteer organization devoted to maintaining the water quality of Swan Lake and its watershed. The threat of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) remains stronger than ever, and it is only through the coordinated efforts of the many governmental, tribal, and volunteer organizations like ours that we can keep the threat at bay. Our testing and sampling of the water in Swan Lake continues to indicate a very healthy body of water. That testing and sampling regimen that we carry out four times a year is the most important thing we do to ensure the present and future water quality of Swan Lake.

In addition to those testing efforts, we continue to inspect watercraft seasonally at the Swan Lake boat ramp. We inspected 719 boats and other miscellaneous watercraft intending to launch on Swan Lake in 2023. That is 210 more watercraft than we inspected in 2022. Happily, no AIS were detected. We inspect boats two days a week in July and August. Our hope is to increase our volunteer corps and expand those inspections next year. If you'd like to help out, we'd welcome you with open arms (visit our website at [www.swanlakers.org](http://www.swanlakers.org) for more details). We were excited to learn recently of an AIS boat cleaning station to be installed by the Forest Service at the Swan Lake boat launch ramp for the coming season. Our volunteers will help run that station.

Lastly, we do an annual river cleanup with our volunteers in late summer and two highway cleanups in the Ferndale area. We were also pleased to award Nora Kehoe with our 2023 scholarship for \$2000. Nora, a Bigfork High School graduate, will be attending the U of M Davidson Honor College and studying wildlife biology.

**Chris Moore**, Board President  
Swan Lakers  
[chrisd.moore@mac.com](mailto:chrisd.moore@mac.com)



## US FOREST SERVICE- SWAN LAKE RANGER DISTRICT DISTRICT RANGER

The Swan Lake Ranger District has been very active over the past year. We have had many new staff members join our team; you will see some of the new names in the resource updates below. In 2023 the District continued to plan and implement projects on many different areas of the district and was particularly busy in the Swan Valley from Beaver Creek to Crane Mountain. In total we have seven large vegetation project areas either being implemented or in the planning phase in the Swan Valley.

We are continuing work directed by the Chief of the Forest Service to address the national wildfire crisis. We have two high-risk firesheds identified in the Swan Valley, [www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis](http://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis). Priority work to address the wildfire crisis requires cooperators, partners, and the public to work together towards treating 50 million acres of federal and private lands across the west; the Condon community is in the 95th percentile for wildfire risk compared to communities nationally; visit [wildfirerisk.org](http://wildfirerisk.org) for more information. I challenge you to get involved. Many of our current and future projects help address the community's risk to wildfire.

The Flathead National Forest is requesting approval from the Secretary to use the Emergency Action Determination authority for the Rumbling Owl Fuels Reduction project. The Rumbling Owl Fuels Reduction Project makes progress towards decreasing the risk and severity of future wildland fires, as well as improving fire suppression effectiveness, firefighter/public safety in the wildland-urban interface, and forest health conditions.

**Christopher Dowling**, Swan Lake District Ranger  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
(406) 837-7501, [christopher.dowling@usda.gov](mailto:christopher.dowling@usda.gov)

### AQUATICS

We have seen some changes in the fisheries arena on the Swan Lake Ranger District, as Beth Gardner retired last year. While she is navigating this new chapter in her life, we continue with many of the objectives she initiated during her tenure. The new fisheries biologist will keep up the fight against non-native, invasive species and help support the native trout populations that make the Swan Valley home in a myriad of ways.

Back in 2016, an intentional barrier was installed on Smith Creek to block further invasion by brook trout and preserve the existing cutthroat trout population upstream. We continue to collect brook trout and move them below the barrier, using electrofishing techniques (as seen in the adjacent photo). Following the first few years of brook trout removal, we saw a large drop in their numbers, which has slowed down a bit in the last few years, but that just tells us that we are making a dent in their population. We hope to sustain this effort and continue this process until only cutthroat trout exist upstream of the barrier and can thrive without the extra competition brook trout impose.

Using environmental DNA (eDNA), we collaboratively monitor ten lakes on the Flathead National Forest, including four in the Swan Valley, with the Whitefish Lake Institute.

We focus our efforts on lakes that are popular and accessible to boaters and anglers, and therefore vulnerable to the inadvertent spread of invasive species. We monitor for four invasive species (quagga and zebra mussels as well as Eurasians milfoil and curlyleaf pondweed) that have the closest occurring populations, but luckily do not currently occur on the Forest and are therefore high priority in preventing their further spread. At this time, eDNA is one of the best tools for the early detection of invasive species and is our best chance in preventing new infestations.

The Cold Creek Wetland Restoration of three wetlands (approx. 35 acres) was completed this summer, along with minor amounts of associated road decommissioning. These wetlands were ditched and drained in the 1930s, crippling the proper hydrologic function of these wetlands. In partnership with the National Forest Foundation and Swan Valley Connections, this project has reconnected formerly isolated patches of wetlands, removing unnecessary dams that restricted water movement and restoring native plant communities, while inhibiting weeds to benefit the biodiversity of native species that rely on healthy wetland habitat, including bull trout in nearby Cold Creek.

**Daphne Kampinga**, Aquatics Specialist  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
[daphne.kampinga@usda.gov](mailto:daphne.kampinga@usda.gov)

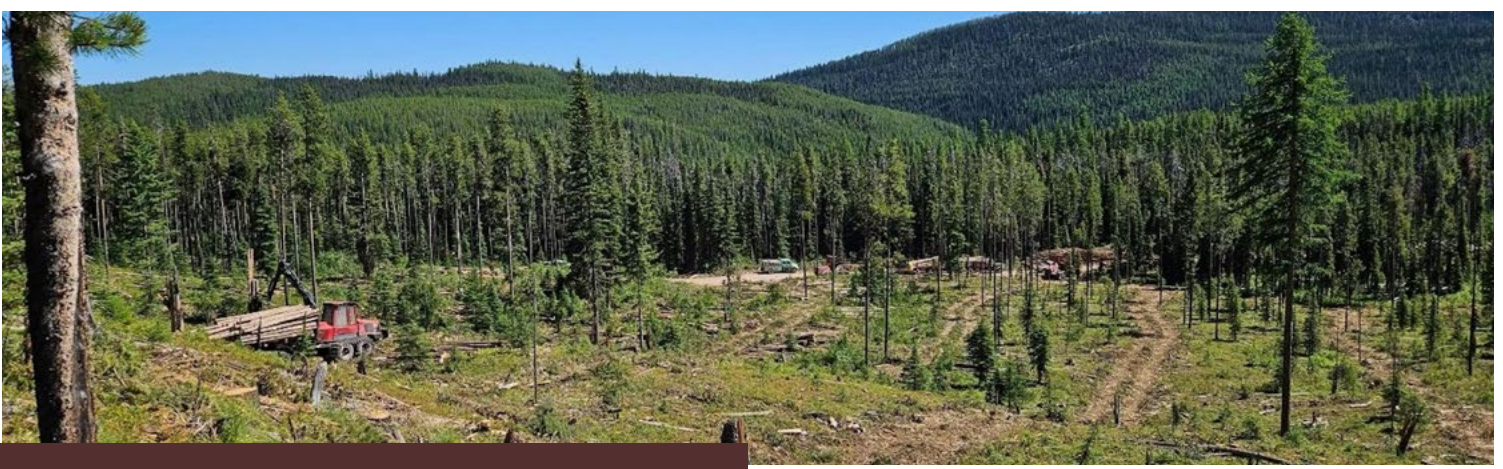


### FIRE AND FUELS

In the fire program we like to say that this was the “busiest slow year” we can remember. There were seven fire starts this summer on the District, all from Ferndale and south; our yearly average is 16. District fire personnel spent time in many areas of the country this year, taking assignments to Kentucky, South Carolina, Florida, Michigan, Arizona, California, Oregon, and Idaho, and even assisted Canada early in the summer. In Montana’s fire season we had personnel assigned to the Colt, Ridge, Tin Soldier Complex, River Road East, and East Fork Fires. Individual firefighters averaged 50-60 days away from home and over 600 hours of overtime.

The Colt Fire started on the Lolo National Forest, but it did eventually burn onto the Swan Lake Ranger District. The District fire crew assisted with the initial attack, and we kept an engine with crew on the fire for over 30 days, assisting with the suppression effort. Additionally, numerous District staff were engaged in incident decisions and support throughout the duration of the incident.





Log forwarder working on Beaver Stew, with fire engine in background during Colt Fire.

The prescribed fire season did not quite match last year's 1600-acre Lindy Ridge Prescribed Fire west of Lindbergh Lake, but we were able to accomplish 20 acres of ponderosa pine maintenance burning and 20 acres of slash clean up in the valley. The pile burn season was busy, with over 700 acres accomplished. We still have over 1,000 acres of maintenance burning planned over the next several years and hope to provide a live public showcase of prescribed fire implementation in cooperation with SVC this coming spring of 2024.

**Andre Du Lac**, Fire Management Specialist  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
(406) 837-7547, [andre.dulac@usda.gov](mailto:andre.dulac@usda.gov)

## RECREATION

The forest permitted a new campground concessionaire, Big Sky Recreation Company, this summer to manage the Holland, Lindbergh, and Swan Lake Campgrounds for the next 5-10 year permit term. The campgrounds received several improvements this year, including hazard tree reduction/management, plumbing repairs, new picnic table boards, and other misc. items.

This summer, through the Great American Outdoor Act (GAOA) funding, we painted the interior on all the vault toilets at recreation sites and installed a new cedar shingle roof on the Old Condon Ranger Station. GAOA funded several road improvement projects that access recreation sites throughout the district. Other GAOA-funded trail projects included increased maintenance through our partners, including Swan Valley Connections, and focused deferred maintenance work on the Hemlock Lake trails and Elk Ridge/Mollman Lakes trail.

Our trail crews and partners enjoyed a relatively light blowdown season, which allowed us to maintain 317 of 353 miles (90%) of system trails on the District to standard. This includes approximately 270 miles maintained and 48 miles improved. We also worked with Foys to Blacktail Trails to contract new construction of approximately five miles of trail on Emmons Ridge near Blacktail Mountain.

**Anthony Butterfield**, Recreation Assistant  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
[anthony.butterfield@usda.gov](mailto:anthony.butterfield@usda.gov)

## TIMBER

This last year has been a very active year in the timber program. Over the course of the year, treatments occurred across the district from Cramer Creek on Blacktail Mountain to Beaver Creek, at the southern end of the district in the Swan Valley. Completed treatments encompassed approximately 225 acres on Beaver Stew Stewardship, 42 acres on Swan Flats Stewardship, 360 acres on Cold Jim, 60 acres on Lunar Kraft Stewardship, 125 acres on Rocky Cedar, and 50 acres on Wyman Stones. There is also currently road work in Yew Rock, in preparation for harvest. This year we have also sold an additional timber sale that is still awaiting harvest: the Wild Saddle Timber Sale on Blacktail, which will treat another 447 acres.

This has also been a great year working with our State Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) partners. GNA Weed Lake South completed operations this year, treating a total of 281 acres. Also, GNA Kertail is currently out on the market and will treat 525 acres on Blacktail Mountain.

We also had many past projects come to an end this year, as timber sale contracts expired and work was completed. Louie, How Now, Lunar Kraft Stewardship, and Six Mile Blowdown were all officially completed this year, totaling over 1,800 acres of treatments throughout the life of the contracts.

**Marc Eaton**, Timber Management Assistant  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
[marc.eaton@usda.gov](mailto:marc.eaton@usda.gov)

## WILDLIFE

The Swan Lake Ranger District wildlife program has two new wildlife biologists. We continue to be guided in our new positions and program by Mark Ruby, the Forest Wildlife Biologist for Flathead National Forest. The wildlife staff are excited to continue to support and collaborate with SVC on wildlife resource objectives in the Swan Valley.

In the summer of 2023, wildlife technicians did an excellent job being self-sufficient as permanent staff were being hired. Some of their work included wetland surveys in the Swan Valley; the data collected contributes to the Montana Natural Heritage Program and is used to inform staff on habitat conditions and assess areas where habitat management objectives can focus on wildlife and fisheries.

The wildlife crew also conducted annual loon surveys throughout the Swan Valley, in coordination with the Montana



Loon Society and Montana Loon Working Group. A successful breeding pair at Holland Lake was noted as a season highlight, as the lake had no nesting attempts between 2004-2018. Since 2019 the lake began seeing nesting attempts, with documented success in 2023. To reduce disturbance and maintain a successful breeding population, floating buoy signs are deployed in several lakes, including Holland Lake, to notify the public on avoidance of these nesting areas during the breeding season. The adult male loon at Holland Lake received identification leg bands during the Montana Loon Society banding effort in 2023, led by Jami Belt and other team members. The Swan Lake wildlife staff and Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) also constructed and deployed a new loon nesting platform at Pierce Lake to replace the old platform. For further information about the Montana Loon Society and reporting, visit [montanaloons.org/](http://montanaloons.org/)

**Roy Morris and Dakota Miller**, *Wildlife Biologists*  
USFS Flathead National Forest  
[roy.morris@usda.gov](mailto:roy.morris@usda.gov), [dakota.miller@usda.gov](mailto:dakota.miller@usda.gov)

## SVC - FOREST STEWARDSHIP

In 2023 SVC completed 10 wildfire risk reduction projects on private land, with 12 projects active and under contract going into the new year. These projects reduced fuels on 181.5 acres, improving defensible space around structures, improving firefighter access routes to properties, and improving forest health and forest preparedness for wildfire. SVC assisted landowners with cost-share grant funds to help pay for the projects through Western States Wildland Urban Interface (WSF) and Hazardous Fuels (HZF) grant funds, sub-awarded by the U.S. Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (MT DNRC).

SVC assisted private landowners with forest management questions and helped direct landowners to resources that might help them meet their forest stewardship goals. We also hosted a public tour, pile burning workshop, and tree planting workshop on the SVC-owned Swan Legacy Forest (SLF) and the Elk Creek Conservation Area (ECCA).

SVC is continuing to work with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MT FWP) to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk on MT FWP Horseshoe Lake and Swan River Fishing Access Sites near Ferndale. This year we also helped organize and participate in a number of wildfire-related groups including: Firesafe Swan, Swan Fuels Group, Seeley-Swan Fuels Task Force, and Fire Adapted Montana Learning Network. SVC will be receiving additional grant funds in 2024 for cost-share private fuels reduction projects. If you're interested in completing a wildfire risk reduction project in the Swan Valley, please reach out to Mike Mayernik.

**Mike Mayernik**, *Conservation & Stewardship Associate*  
Swan Valley Connections  
(406) 754-3137, [mike@svconnections.org](mailto:mike@svconnections.org)

## SVC - WETLANDS

SVC partners with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and private landowners to implement wetland, stream, and riparian restoration projects, as well as grizzly bear conflict mitigation efforts, such as electric fencing. Projects in the Swan Valley are targeting the recovery of several focal species: bull trout, trumpeter swans, and grizzly bears. This program has helped restore 13 streams and wetlands on over 150 acres of private property since its inception. In 2023, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and SVC installed two new culverts on Elk Flats Road to help reduce road erosion and fine sediment delivery into Elk Creek during peak runoff events, which will benefit bull trout habitat and Elk Flats Road neighbors. Elk Creek is one of the Swan's most productive bull trout spawning streams.

With help from habitat improvements from previous wetland restoration projects, trumpeter swans are slowly re-colonizing the Swan Valley. There were two pairs of trumpeter swans that established territories on Swan Valley wetlands in 2023, both of which successfully reared three cygnets. There were also several other adult pairs that have set up territories and may nest next year. A pair of trumpeter swans was observed multiple times in the spring localized on the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge, utilizing restored habitat from the 2022 wetland restoration project, the largest in Montana's history, but it is unknown if that pair nested.

The U.S. Forest Service and National Forest Foundation, in partnership with SVC, implemented the Cold Ponds Wetland Restoration Project in 2022 that restored the hydrology of approximately 30 acres of ditched and drained wetlands in the Cold Creek area on USFS lands. There was an incredible diversity of waterfowl observed utilizing that wetland complex in 2023, including wood ducks, mallards, buffleheads, barrow's goldeneyes, hooded mergansers, and northern shovelers.

*See article about the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge wetland restoration project and SVC involvement for more information on that 600+ acre project in SVC's 2023 Winter edition of The Confluence.*



*Participants watch as Mike Mayernik checks a pile that appeared to be done burning, but was still hot just beneath the surface.*



# SWAN VALLEY BEAR RESOURCES

SVBR's Bear-Resistant Garbage Container Loaner Program allows community members to check out bear-resistant garbage cans for free and on an indefinite basis, with a suggested donation. In 2023, SVBR distributed 35 bear-resistant garbage containers to local residents. Currently, 440 containers and 30 dumpsters have been distributed to community members or businesses throughout the Swan Valley.

Since 2009 SVBR has assisted 45 private landowners with the construction of permanent electric bear exclusion fences. SVBR assists with the entire electric fence building process, including site identification, fence design, technical specifications, help to secure funding sources, purchase of materials, and final hands-on fence construction. In 2023 SVBR assisted three residents with construction of fences. All of these property owners were eager to take proactive, preventative measures to secure chickens, sheep, livestock grain, and/or orchard trees. SVBR has also worked with two additional landowners on fence projects and has secured funding for the 2024 construction of those fences. Finally, SVBR offered advice to two other landowners, who then built their own fences to the proper specifications.

Every year SVBR partners with various agencies, organizations, and businesses to provide educational events aimed at promoting human-bear coexistence. In 2023 we hosted the following events:

- **April-** Annual Spring Bear Wake-Up Social in Condon, featuring an educational presentation by FWP Bear Management Specialist Erik Wenum.

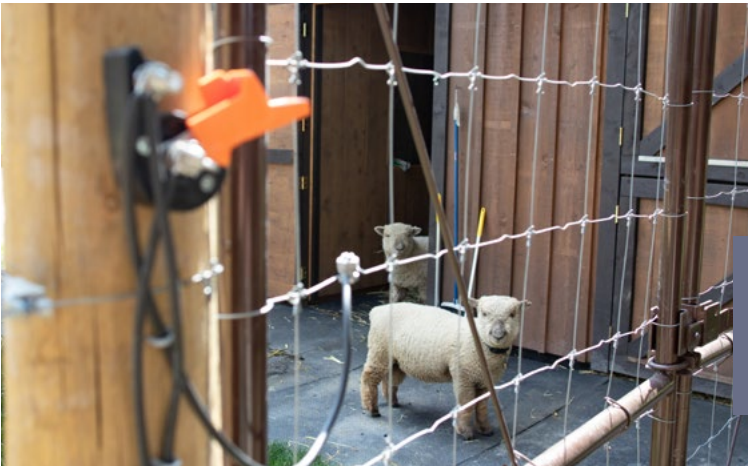
- **June-** bear awareness event at the Bigfork VFW that featured a presentation by FWP Stewardship Outreach Specialist Sabrina Bradford. Following the presentation, participants were able to practice using inert cans of pepper spray on a charging remote-controlled bear.
- **June-** Landowner Stewardship Fair at the Swan Valley Community Hall. The event included a presentation by SVC Conservation Director Luke Lamar about living in bear country, and SVBR's services and resources for landowners.
- **August-** Bear Fair at the Swan Lake Community Hall, the first-ever Bear Fair in the community of Swan Lake. Presentations were given by FWP Bear Management Specialist Erik Wenum and FWP Research Biologist Cecily Costello. In addition, representatives from SVBR, Vital Ground Foundation, Be Bear Aware, People & Carnivores, Wildlife Services, Bear Aware Bigfork, and Montana Land Reliance were also present, offering informative displays and educational materials.

The Swan Valley Bear Ranger works to deliver educational messaging to recreationists at numerous developed and dispersed campsites throughout the valley. The ranger educates visitors about the importance of keeping a clean camp, containing bear attractants, and USFS food storage orders, and picks up and hauls away trash that is left behind at campsites. The bear ranger is employed by the Living with Wildlife Foundation, in partnership with the USFS Swan Lake Ranger District, who provide a vehicle and fuel for the position.

To view the full 2023 SVBR annual report, please visit [swanvalleyconnections.org/swan-valley-bear-resources](https://swanvalleyconnections.org/swan-valley-bear-resources)

For Wetlands or SVBR assistance, please contact:

Luke Lamar, *Managing Director*  
Swan Valley Connections  
(406) 754-3137, [luke@svconnections.org](mailto:luke@svconnections.org)



Guiseppe (Seppe) and Valentino (Tino), two English babydoll sheep in Ferndale whose enclosure is now protected by an electric fence. (And, yes, they're as sweet as they look.)

## UPCOMING EVENETS

Always check our website for more details and the most up-to-date information

JANUARY 23-MARCH 22  
Bubble Cap Orders Open

FEBRUARY 3  
Wildlife Tracks & Sign

FEBRUARY 15  
Firesafe Swan Meeting (Open to public!)  
Swan Valley Community Hall

FEBRUARY 24  
Wildlife Tracks & Sign

FEBRUARY 24  
Outgoing/Incoming Leadership Celebration  
Swan Valley Community Hall

MARCH 16-24  
Weeklong Wildlife Tracks & Sign Course  
+CyberTracker Certification

APRIL 3  
Spring Bear Wake-Up Social/Potluck  
Swan Valley Community Hall

APRIL 8-13  
Bubble Cap Order Pickup

APRIL 25-26  
Wildlife Trailing Workshop

APRIL 27-28  
Wildlife Trailing Certification (FULL)  
with David Moskowitz

Stay tuned for a springtime tree seedling  
planting workshop with the DNRC and a USFS  
Live Prescribed Burn Demo - dates TBD

Photo: mountain lion track  
in a human track; the most  
energy-efficient way to  
travel through snow is  
walking in another's foot-  
steps





— SWAN VALLEY —  
**CONNECTIONS**

6887 MT Hwy 83  
Condon, MT 59826-9005

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-profit Org.  
US Postage  
PAID  
Permit No. 151  
Great Falls, MT