



MONTANA MATTERS

Montana is a state of bigness; a land mass of 145,557 square miles, 92 million acres of land and 1,492 square miles of water, 40,000 lakes or ponds, and 98,000 miles of named streams and rivers. Montana is the fourth largest state in the nation. High mountain meadows, native short grass prairies, jagged, snow covered peaks, glacier fed streams, pristine mountain lakes, prairie pot holes, big forests, big rivers and pastoral sweeping arid breaks; Montana landscapes are diverse. A rich land with an abundance and variety of wildlife difficult to imagine.

Once Tyrannosaurus Rex and Triceratops thrived here, now it is home to the largest population of silvertip grizzly in the lower 48 states. The prehistoric pallid sturgeon and paddlefish still survive here from the time of dinosaurs. It is a state where big game species alone outnumber people, 1.4 elk, 1.4 pronghorn, 3.3 deer on average per square mile. Fish are abundant too; roughly 896 fish occupy each square mile.

Pulitzer Prize novelist A.B. Guthrie, Jr. wrote with experience about the wildness, the vast frontier, wild animals, a big land with big blue skies. His book *The Big Sky* published in 1947 branded Montana – *The Big Sky State*. More recently Montana is most frequently referred to as “The Last Best Place”. For Guthrie, who lived most of life near Choteau along the Rocky Mountain Front, Montana was his special, soulful place, his “point of outlook on the universe”.

In 1959, “one of Montana’s greatest storytellers” K. Ross Toole wrote, “The land itself is at once mountainous and flat, hot and cold, beautiful and terrible, and benign and malevolent. And the land has profoundly influenced events. There is little or nothing moderate about the story of Montana. It has ricocheted violently down the corridor of possibilities.” *Montana, an Uncommon Land* (1959).

Within Montana’s boundaries exist some of the most exceptional, productive and prolific ecosystems’ in North America. A total of 637 vertebrate species are known to exist in Montana’s diverse landscapes; more than 80 species may be pursued by hunter and fisher, a larger majority, 678 are considered non-game species.

Montana is known to have some of the largest migratory elk herds in the nation. The state boasts the largest breeding population of common loons in the western United States, of breeding trumpeter swans in the lower 48, of native Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, and mountain goat in the U.S. Native predator species recorded by the Corps of Discovery still exist in Montana; the martin, black bear, mountain lion, Canadian lynx, bobcat, wolverine, fisher, grey wolf and more. There are plenty of big, impressive wildlife relate numbers that are tributes to not only the size of the state but also to the values of good stewardship and progressive conservation; imagine 300,000 snow geese, 10,000 white pelicans, and 5,000 moose. When it comes to wildlife in Montana, the fact is that with around 1,000 species it has a greater variety of wildlife than any other state in the continental United States.

Geographically, Montana also has many sizable and unique features. The Beartooth Plateau near Red Lodge is the largest continuous land mass over 10,000 feet (3,000 m) in the lower 48 states. Native Americans call the Continental Divide the “backbone of the world” as it juts up, dividing the North American continent and Montana like a jagged spine from Canada to Mexico. As a result, Montana rivers and streams provide water for two oceans and three of the North American continent’s major river basins. Montana is known as a headwater state because much of the water that flows to the rest of the nation comes from the mountains of Montana. The Kootenai, Clark Fork, Blackfoot, Bitterroot and Flathead Rivers join the Columbia River, which flows into the Pacific Ocean. The “Mighty Mo” with headwaters at Three Forks, empties into the Mississippi flowing to the Gulf of Mexico.

And then there are Flathead Lake south of Kalispell and Fort Peck Reservoir on the eastern prairies near Glasgow, Montana. Flathead Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, contains more than 200 square miles of water and 185 miles of shoreline. Fort Peck Reservoir, on the Missouri river, is contained by the largest earth-filled dam in the world and supports more than 50 species of fish. The lake is 134 miles in length with more than 1,520 miles of shoreline, longer than the California coast.

Arctic grayling, rainbow trout, cutthroat, brook, brown and bull trout can all be found in Montana as well as Chinook salmon, walleye, northern pike, sturgeon and other warm water species. Of 90 species of fish that exist in Montana, 57 are native and 30 are classified as game fish.

Wildlife related recreation is big in Montana too, it is an integral part of the Montana culture, our lifestyles and traditions and a major attraction for tourism. More than 200,000 people hold a hunting license in any year, the highest number per capita of any state. More than 380,000 buy a fishing license and combined, hunters and anglers generate more than \$1 billion annually.

Hunters along the Rocky Mountain Front alone provide approximately \$9.8 million dollars annually to the local communities. Hunting and fishing is big business in Montana; sportsmen and sportswomen outspend the cash receipts from wheat, the state's largest agricultural crop.

Montana's wildlife abundance and our hunting and angling opportunities have not been realized by accident. One hundred years ago a hunter attempting to feed his family could wander the prairies and hills for a week or more without seeing a deer. From this darkness and realizing the values of healthy ecosystems, sportsmen and sportswomen were awakened. Conservation minded hunters and anglers, landowners, and policy makers across the nation came together to successfully implement one of the greatest wildlife restoration and conservation programs on earth. Montanans were instrumental in its success and today, all mankind continues to benefit from this initiative, energy, passion and dedication.

For all its bigness, Montana is the sixth least populated state in the nation and this has perhaps been a "saving grace" for our landscapes and wildlife. There are nearly three times as people living in Metro-Denver than all of Montana and closer to four times as many people in the Seattle metro area. There are nearly twice as many people in the city of Phoenix as in all of Montana. Montana's bigness, its vastness and its magnificent wildlife are at a turning point, a crossroads.

The integrity of world renowned rivers, the Madison, the Gallatin, the Yellowstone, the longest free-flowing, un-dammed, un-tethered river on our continent, the Clark Fork, Big Hole, and Flathead, are being challenged. Who would have ever imagined that the incredibly pure, pristine, fish-rich Wild and Scenic North Fork of the Flathead River would ever be identified by American Rivers, as the case this month, as the 5th most threatened river south of the Canadian border due to proposed mining and coal development in British Columbia.

For all of our successes through attempts at restoration and habitat protection, more species are identified today as "species of concern" than ever before. Increasingly, critical wildlife habitat is under pressure from habitat fragmentation, urban and suburban development, and our need to satisfy a thirst for energy. More and more, one traditional forms of public recreation, hunting and fishing, are being marginalized and commercialized. Attempts to diminish our public estate, our public lands are also on the rise.

Energy exploration and development, housing demands, dewatering, fertilizer run-off, wildlife commercialization and privatization are all chipping away at Montana's bigness, our wildlife managed in the 'public trust', public recreation opportunities, our Montana heritage.

What will become of the Bitterroot Mountains, one of the longest continuous ranges in the entire Rocky Mountain chain that extend from Alaska to Mexico? Will the Rocky Mountain Front, the largest, most intact wild country in the 48 contiguous states with two hundred and ninety species of wildlife and identified as among the top one percent of wildlife habitats in North America, survive demands for oil and gas? What about the Snowies, the Cabinet Mountains, the Missions, the Bridgers, the Beartooths, the Garnet, Sapphire, and Pintlar ranges? Will the Missouri Breaks, eastern badlands, and native prairies support herds of pronghorn and elk and be capable of sustaining populations of Greater sage-grouse? And what about the critically important corridors that provide passage for wildlife between seasonal habitats and sensitive "island" ranges? Will development and amenity homes sever these crucial, life supporting passageways?

Conservation minded hunters and anglers, outdoor and wildlife enthusiasts understand that the condition, the state-of Montana matters. They also understood that balanced approaches work. Our wildlife resources, our wild lands, our free flowing and life sustaining streams and rivers demand conservation collaboration. Montanan's have repeatedly led the nation in establishing programs that recognize the value and need to sustain wild and healthy environments. Montanan's have a proud history of standing up for what we maintain as valuable to our lives. Montanan's have led the nation in reviving once depleted wildlife to abundant herds of elk, deer, bighorn sheep, antelope, mountain goat and a great diversity of non-game species.

More than ever before, the involvement of conservation-minded individuals and organizations in decisions of great consequence will determine how we move forward and how we define the "bigness of Montana".

To MWF and our constituents - the bigness of Montana Matters!