Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front

Not Just Another Pretty Face

Montana's home of diverse wildlife and plant communities

The stunning landscape where the Great Plains fold into the Rocky Mountains in northcentral Montana represents a biological treasure of unparalleled diversity—from charismatic megafauna, such as grizzly bear and bighorn sheep, to Arctic grayling and other disappearing native Montana fish, to rare flowering plants, such as the corralroot orchid and several variety of primrose, to the northern bog lemming. Biologists have recorded more than 700 plant species, as well as 290 species of wildlife on the Front: 72 mammals; 190 birds; seven reptiles; eight amphibians; and 13 fish. The Front has retained nearly all its native plant and animal species over the two centuries since Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery blazed a trail for white settlement through the West. A notable exception is the bison, which has returned to the Front in domesticated herds. But it's not simply the Front's biological diversity that is celebrated, but the *integrity* of its underlying ecosystems. Nowhere in the lower 48 states, for example, do we find large-carnivore communities as intact as those inhabiting the larger Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem—of which the Front is a critical but unprotected piece.[1]

A conservation success story: Biologists agree the Front is a natural jewel, crucial to the future of Montana's wildlife legacy. Large carnivores and big game species thrive here thanks to a century-old Montana-born tradition of stewardship that brought together ranchers, conservationists and sportsmen in a show of the unifying power wildlife holds in American society. This proud heritage is in jeopardy from motorized recreation and proposals to extract energy in this priceless landscape. Here's a sampling of what is at stake.

Big game: Hunters treasure the Front as a place to stalk no less than 10 big game species, including seven prized ungulates: mule deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, pronghorn antelope and white-tail deer. The Front is home to the nation's most significant concentrations of elk outside Yellowstone and the largest herd of bighorn sheep, pegged at 600 to 700 head. Further elevating the historic importance of the Front's conservation legacy was the tapping of the Sun River herd to re-establish wild sheep populations all over Montana. Market hunting had nearly eradicated bighorns and other game animals before the Montana Legislature banned the practice in 1897. In 1913, lawmakers set aside the 200,000-acre Sun River Game Preserve to successfully recover the Front's legendary elk herd, which soon rebounded to about 2,500 animals.

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[1] Sources for this factsheet include a Dec. 13, 2002 letter by Mike Aderhold, a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks regional supervisor, commenting on the Lewis and Clark National Forest travel plan revision; a 1996 inventory of the plant life near Pine Butte Swamp Preserve; "Motorized Access on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front," an April 2003 review of literature by wildlife biologist Barrie Gilbert; and David W. Keller's "The Making of a Masterpiece," a study of the Front's conservation legacy published by the Boone and Crockett Club in 2001.

Native fish: Some of the 13 fish species found on the Front are represented in remnant populations of vanishing native species, such as the once plentiful cutthroat trout and the ever-rare minnow hybrid, the redbelly/fine-scale dace in Pine Butte Swamp Preserve. “Native fish assemblages were never complex,” says Michael Enk, a fisheries biologist with the Lewis and Clark National Forest. “But it’s still rich with its aboriginal species. The grayling might be a notable exception.” State fisheries biologists hope to re-establish the fluvial or river-dwelling variety of grayling in the Sun’s north and south forks. “Relic” populations of westslope cutthroat persist in 27 stream systems on the Front, such as Alice Creek and the tops of the Two Medicine, Teton, Sun and Dearborn river drainages. These isolated groups are at serious risk of inbreeding, but they represent a gene bank from which fisheries officials hope to repopulate Montana waters with the Intermountain West’s signature fish.

Predators: The Front and the larger Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem remain among the last places with intact and viable communities of mammalian carnivores. “The Front supports the largest population of wolverine, lynx and grizzly bear in the lower 48 states,” Mike Aderhold reported to the Forest Service. “It is the only place in the hemisphere where grizzly bears still roam from the mountains to the prairie as they did historically.” Smaller and rare predators, such as the fisher, marten and swift fox are also found here.

Birds: Among the 190 bird species found on the Front are at least 21 species of raptors, including nine species of owl and some of the densest concentrations of golden eagles. Fourteen species of duck and six species of grebe are known to breed here. Sandhill cranes, “a living fossil,” migrate along the front with small numbers staying to breed, Aderhold reported. Vast flocks of snow geese migrate through, including half the 40,000-strong Wrangle Island population. Other uncommon birds found here include trumpeter swans, curlews, white-faced ibis, white-tailed ptarmigan and the threatened piping plover.

Flora: In 1996, The Nature Conservancy set out to document the rich array of plant life on the Front. Botanists David Hanna and Peter Lesica confined their study area bounded by the conservancy’s Pine Butte Swamp Preserve on the east to the 8,580-foot summit of Ear Mountain on the west—comprising a swath of land known in science as a transept. The botanists recorded a staggering 682 plant species from 71 families. Since the release of the study in 1996, Hanna has found another 43 species. “This is about one third of the plants known in the State of Montana and a testimony to the biodiversity that comes with the compression of mountains, foothills and prairie ecotypes,” commented Mike Alderhold in correspondence with the Forest Service. In only six miles, the study area crossed from alpine highlands, through limber pine and Douglas fir forests and grasslands, to the preserve’s unique groundwater-fed wetland habitat, known as a fen. The diversity documented in the study reflects not just the collision of landscapes found on the Front, but also the biological integrity of their ecosystems which has continued to thrive thanks to the Front’s legacy of strong stewardship.

For more information: see **www.savethefront.org**, or contact:

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