

The Blackfoot and Swan: Jewels in the Crown of the Continent

by Jay Kolbe

Many of us will spend a lifetime trying to learn a place. It's only the fortunate few, however, who have the time and inclination necessary to begin to understand even one valley's trails, animals, plants, and people. That said, I doubt one can really know your home valley without also understanding how the broader landscape is tied together by common geography, wildlife populations, weather, and values.

The Blackfoot, Clearwater, and Swan valleys sit at the southern end of one of this North America's largest and most intact ecosystems. This area encompasses the 16,000 square miles of the Rockies spanning from the Blackfoot Valley in the south, through the Bob Marshall wilderness complex, Waterton-Glacier Park, and north to the Elk and Highwood Rivers in southern Canada. When he first came here in 1901 the naturalist George Bird Grinnell dubbed it the "Crown of the Continent" and it is widely recognized today as one of the premier mountain ecoregions in the world.

Many things make the Crown truly unique. Its glacially carved mountains and lakes provide unrivaled scenery and recreational opportunities. It supports more than a thousand species of plants and nearly every animal species that was present when Lewis and Clark first traveled through the country more than 200 years ago. Many of these animals require large tracts of connected wild land to survive and are now found almost nowhere else in the United States.

Humans have been an integral part of this place for more than 10,000 years and people continue to come here to live, work, and play. Living here, it's easy to forget that there are very few places left in this country where people have managed to live in and use a landscape without depleting it. The timber industry and tourism have supported residents of the Seeley/Swan for decades. The Blackfoot Valley and East Front are testaments to the fact that agricultural communities and native wildlife populations can thrive together. If managed wisely, these uses of the land can help sustain us for generations to come without diminishing the natural resources we all value.

More than 60% of the Crown is public property with about 30% managed as wilderness or national park land. One of the greatest threats to its long term viability, however, is losing the connections between these protected areas. The intact whole is greater than the sum of its parts; by preserving relatively small corridors between larger blocks of wilderness or parkland, wildlife and fish populations can remain connected to each other and are much more likely to survive over the long term.

In 1995, the United Nations recognized Waterton-Glacier Park as a World Heritage Site, on par with the Galapagos Islands and the Serengeti Plain. The Bob Marshall Complex is the flagship of the national wilderness system, among the first to be protected by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Open lands managed by federal and state agencies, private timber companies, and ranchers provide world class wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing opportunities.

The Crown of the Continent is one of the last essentially intact ecosystems on the planet. As such, it presents an opportunity to demonstrate that man can continue to live, work, and recreate in a place without unduly disrupting the natural values most of us treasure. It gives us an opportunity to show that we can be a part of the natural landscape, not apart from it.

CRC, the Swan Ecosystem Center, and the Blackfoot Challenge are working hard to keep our watersheds healthy and productive. Over the next months in this column we'll look more closely at how the Swan and Blackfoot valleys are both unique within and critical to a larger landscape; why they are jewels in the Crown of the Continent.

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