

The Blackfoot - Clearwater Wildlife Management Area

By Jay Kolbe

When the Clearwater Resource Council met this summer to identify some of the “jewels of the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem” to explore in a series of Pathfinder articles over the next year, one place made nearly everyone’s short list: The Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area, or simply “Game Range” to those who prefer the area’s traditional name.

At roughly 67,000 acres it’s the largest wildlife management area controlled by FWP in the state. It’s also one of the oldest. In 1948, the newly established Montana Fish and Game Department purchased the 11,000 acre Boyd family ranch and the lease of an additional 44,000 acres of upland forest adjacent to it. The family ran 1,400 cattle and nearly 6,000 sheep on the ranch for many years which is a testament to the productivity of the Game Range’s fescue grasslands and productive wetland bottoms.

At the time, game populations were just beginning to recover from their historic low levels during the early 1900’s. Lloyd McDowell (then leader of the aptly named Wildlife Restoration Division) noted in a 1950 report that intensive grazing of the Boyd and adjacent ranches had left the roughly 200 elk wintering in the middle Blackfoot few places where they could go to avoid conflict with ranching operations.

These first managers rebuilt the Blackfoot Clearwater herds in three ways. First, they set about intensively inventorying and restoring native range vegetation. Second, they encouraged elk to return to their historic wintering grounds by establishing bait trails (using hay and feed pellets) from neighboring ranches to the Game Range proper. Third, they closed the Game Range’s core to public access during the critical winter months. As the elk learned that the Game Range provided ample native winter forage and habitat security, the baiting was discontinued and the herd began to recover.

Because its been such an integral part of the Valley’s landscape for so long it’s easy to forget just how unique and valuable the Game Range is both within the Crown Ecosystem and nationally. The Clearwater and Blackfoot rivers, rich Cottonwood Cr. riparian corridor, eutrophic lakes and fen meadows, abundant undeveloped springs, glaciated potholes, fescue grasslands, and diverse upland forests support an incredible diversity of plants and animals: FWP has documented at least 200 species using the Game Range in any given year.

Today, as many as 1400 elk, 1000 mule deer, and 800 whitetail deer winter there and many use the grasslands and low elevation forests year round. Grizzly and black bears have resumed using the Game Range’s abundant glacier lilies, spring beauty, horsetail, and riparian grasses during the spring and the fall huckleberry, hawthorn, and chokecherry crops. Predators including, bears, wolves, lions, coyotes, fox, bobcat, weasels, Canada lynx, and wolverine prey on and scavenge elk, deer, and small mammals.

As many of you know, the Game Range is a birder’s paradise hosting dozens of species of songbirds, raptors, and owls; trout and char are thriving in the rivers and creek; and many of the elk and deer that winter there migrate to their summer and fall ranges in the Clearwater Valley and Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness areas. The Game Range is one of the “engines” driving the adjacent front and back country ecosystems. The deer and elk that it supports during winter provide prey for carnivores and recreation for people over a nearly 2000 square mile area during summer and fall.

Today, the Game Range functions as one of the critical habitat keystones in the southern Crown ecosystem, a fact not lost on the many organizations that have worked hard to conserve and improve it over the last half century. These groups have facilitated more than 60 significant real estate transactions over the years with the goal of consolidating ownership and management of the area. I strongly encourage everyone to support the ongoing work of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, land trusts, the Blackfoot Challenge, and State and Federal agencies; the coordinated efforts of these groups and untold hundreds of concerned citizens has made the Blackfoot Clearwater what it is today and their work is ongoing.

Take some time this summer to get out and explore this local treasure. Even in the Blackfoot, where pristine landscapes and world class wildlife viewing are a way of life, I don't suspect you'll go away disappointed.

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