

Wilderness Areas and Their Linkages: Gems of the Clearwater Valley

by Jonathan Haufler

In the past several months, The Clearwater Resource Council has presented information on various natural resource gems that make the Clearwater Valley a unique and special place. In the last contribution from the CRC, Jay Kolbe discussed the Blackfoot Clearwater Game Range that anchors conservation values in the southern end of the Valley. Equally important are the two wilderness areas that border much of the east and northwest sides of the Valley, the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and the Mission Mountain Wilderness. These two areas help define the wild and scenic nature of our Valley, provide wilderness recreational opportunities, support wildlife populations including species that occur in few other areas of the lower 48 states, and lift the spirits of many who may not ever venture into these wild lands but who cherish knowing that they are there. An additional gem related to these wilderness areas are the linkage zones between them that cross our Valley and further contribute to our diversity of wildlife.

The Bob Marshall Wilderness was designated by Congress in 1964 and presently totals a little more than 1 million acres. To the north, its area is enhanced by the Great Bear Wilderness and to the south by the Scapegoat Wilderness. Together this wilderness complex contains more than 1.5 million acres, and when linked with Glacier National Park to the north, presents a wild landscape rivaled in the lower 48 states by only the Yellowstone region and the Frank Church wilderness complex in Idaho. The Bob Marshall wilderness, named after one of the early champions for wilderness, has according to Wilderness.net “one of the most completely preserved mountain ecosystems in the world, the kind of wilderness most people can only imagine: rugged peaks, alpine lakes, cascading waterfalls, grassy meadows embellished with shimmering streams, a towering coniferous forest, and big river valleys.” It has over 1000 miles of trails and is one of the premier wilderness recreation areas in the country. It supports some 55 outfitters including many in our Valley, and is a destination for many tourists that contribute to our economy. In fact, “the Bob” as it is frequently referred to, was used as early as the 1920’s by outfitters leading pack trips of celebrities and well-to-do’s into the wilderness in search of adventure and a respite from the pressures of city life. It is prime country for horse trips with its wide valleys, and generally gentle terrain. It can appear daunting to backpackers on foot, although those with enough time can find nearly unlimited potential for routes in and through its vast area. One of the most striking geological features of the Bob is the 1000 foot high Chinese Wall that extends for some 20 miles within the wilderness, but that requires a considerable trek to admire.

The Bob supports a full diversity of the wildlife native to the northern Rocky Mountains. It is one of the few areas supporting sustainable populations of grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and wolverine. It also supports mountain lion, wolf, black bear, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, elk, mule deer, and a long additional list of species. It is what people envision when they think of wilderness.

The Mission Mountains Wilderness was established by Congress in 1975, and is a much smaller wilderness than the nearby Bob Marshall, totaling only about 74,000 acres. Yet it packs a lot of punch into this acreage with the spectacular Mission Mountains, numerous lakes, and rugged hiking trails. It is described by Wilderness.net as “a land of ragged peaks with snow on them most of the year, small active glaciers, alpine lakes, meadows, clear streams that run icy cold, slablike boulders, vertical cliff faces, and talus slopes.” It is a contrast to the Bob, lacking in vastness but making up for this with a ruggedness that quickly convinces the visitor that it is very much a wild place. It is much less horse-

friendly than the Bob and only has about 45 miles of maintained trails. Consequently, it receives much less recreational use. However, it is a great asset to our Valley in maintaining wild lands to our west and north, spectacular scenery, additional recreational opportunities, and additional habitat for wildlife species.

These wilderness areas are largely responsible for the great diversity of wildlife that still inhabit our Valley, especially the various carnivores including grizzlies, Canada lynx, and wolverines that are sensitive or incompatible with substantial human development. However, it is also the amount of undeveloped land in our Valley that contributes to the presence of these species both because of the important seasonal habitat conditions provided in the Valley and the linkage zones that allow populations of these species in the wilderness areas to remain connected and healthy. Wildlife linkage zones have been increasingly recognized in recent years for their critical role in maintaining wildlife populations, yet are one of the most difficult needs of wildlife to quantify. Particularly for species whose populations are relatively restricted, such as grizzlies, wolverines, and lynx, linkage zones are critical to maintain their populations. When populations of a species occur primarily in small, unlinked patches or groupings, such as species occurring in wilderness areas, their persistence can be in jeopardy when population decline or experience genetic problems.

For example, small populations may experience several tough years due to weather, food availability, or other factors, causing their already small numbers to shrink even smaller. At some point, the population can become too small to recover, and will die out in that area unless it is supplemented with additional individuals moving in from other population patches. This population support is one critical purpose of wildlife linkage zones.

If small populations persist in an area but are totally cut off from other populations, the limited genetic diversity of the population may lead to genetic problems. For example, lack of genetic diversity can reduce reproductive success and cause a population to crash due to loss of overall fitness or other factors. Linkage zones help to protect against both of these problems by allowing for new genetic diversity to be incorporated into a population.

The Clearwater Valley supports habitat for most wilderness-associated species. But perhaps equally or even more importantly, it provides linkage zones allowing for the safe movements of a number of at-risk species so that potentially isolated populations in the Missions and other areas further south or west can remain linked to the larger populations in the Bob Marshall wilderness complex.

In these ways, our wilderness areas and their linkages contribute to our economy, our recreational opportunities, and the quality of our environment. These features of our Valley are gems, maintaining a wildness to the area that stirs the souls of many of us, and is a reason we are so passionate about this place we consider our home.

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