



# The Key Quarterly

UNLOCKING ACCESS TO MONTANA'S PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS

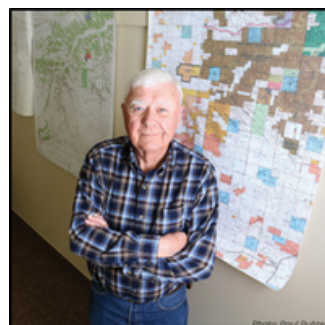
## PLWA Celebrates 40 Years of Defending Public Access!



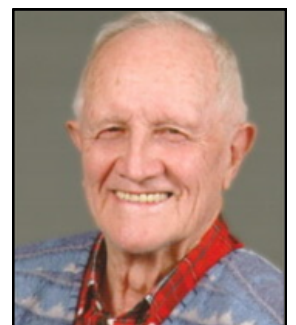
JOHN GIBSON



TONY SCHOONEN



BERNARD LEA



GENE HAWKES



DREWRY HANES



RUSSELL VANCE



CAROL FOX



JACK ATCHESON, SR



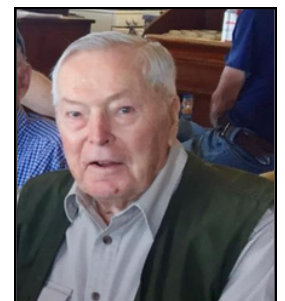
DEVLAN GEDDES



RAY PEARSON



JIM GOETZ



RON STEVENS

Public Land & Water Access Association (PLWA) was formed in 1984 at the Bozeman library by a group of public lands advocates from Three Forks, Bozeman & Livingston. In 2025, we celebrate 40 years as an incorporated organization in Montana. Over PLWA's four decades, the individuals above and *countless* others have contributed time, passion, expertise and funding to maintain & defend access to public lands & waters in Montana. **Thank you!**



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**PLWA**

**Public Land/Water  
Access Association, Inc.**

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PLWA is a MT registered 501(c)(3)

## **PLWA's Staff**

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## **PLWA's Board of Directors**

**Dylan Pipinich (*President*)**

**Katy Ross (*Vice-President*)**

**Annie Burgess (*Secretary*)**

**Brad Peters (*Treasurer*)**

**Bernard Lea**

**Amelia Flanery Staats**

**Brian Conklin**

**Beth Brennan**

**Coby Gierke**

**Check us out on  
social media!**



**Report an access issue to PLWA**



**On our website**



**Or via smartphone**





# 40 Years of PLWA

Alex Leone (Executive Director)

PLWA's 40th anniversary coincides with a critical moment in Montana's history. Our State is in the middle of a rapid development spurt, with associated demographic and economic changes upending longstanding traditions of public and private lands access. As we celebrate 40 years, we are also reminded of PLWA's groundbreaking wins and the conservation giants that came before that helped to build the incredible access landscape we all are fortunate to enjoy in Montana today. There will be challenges ahead but PLWA stands poised and prepared to continue the fight to maintain and defend access to the places we cherish.

As we pass the torch off to a new generation of board leadership and prepare to undergo strategic planning for the first time in our history, we recognize that PLWA needs to evolve to meet the current and future public access challenges. We received 39 access complaints from the recreating public in 2024 and the number of issues we field and investigate grows every year. On top of fresh reports, PLWA continues to remain vigilant and track longstanding access issues, like those on Hughes Creek Road. PLWA's role in the conservation community is crucial and we are fortunate to have a dedicated, passionate and supportive membership base.

## Groundbreaking Wins



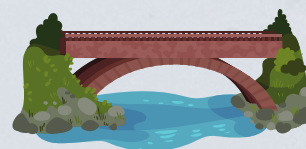
PUBLIC LAND  
WATER ACCESS  
ASSOCIATION INC  
- EST 1985 -

**Stream Access Law (1985)**- The Montana Coalition for Stream Access paved the way for Montana's Stream Access Law. Several of these visionaries helped launch PLWA, recognizing that the State needed a dedicated public access group. PLWA has helped defend multiple legal challenges to the Montana's Stream Access law over the past 40 years. The broad ability to recreate below the high water mark on rivers and streams in Montana is a privilege PLWA will always fight to defend.



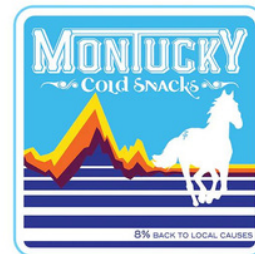
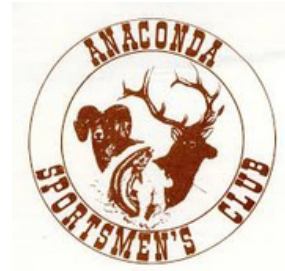
**State Trust Lands Access (1988)**- Prior to 1988 in Montana, permission was needed to recreate on State Trust lands. That year, two PLWA members filed suit against the State of Montana to force them to open up State Trust Lands for the public. Subsequent legislation was passed that opened up about 5 million acres of Trust Land and adjoining Federal Lands for recreation.

**Bridge Access Law (2009)**- PLWA's battle with James Kennedy on the Ruby River provided the impetus for the 2009 Bridge Access Law, passed by the MT Legislature. This law provides for public access to rivers and streams in Montana at public bridges. PLWA supported the passage of the Bridge Access Law and has successfully defended the Law against court challenges.





# PLWA's Club and Business Sponsors



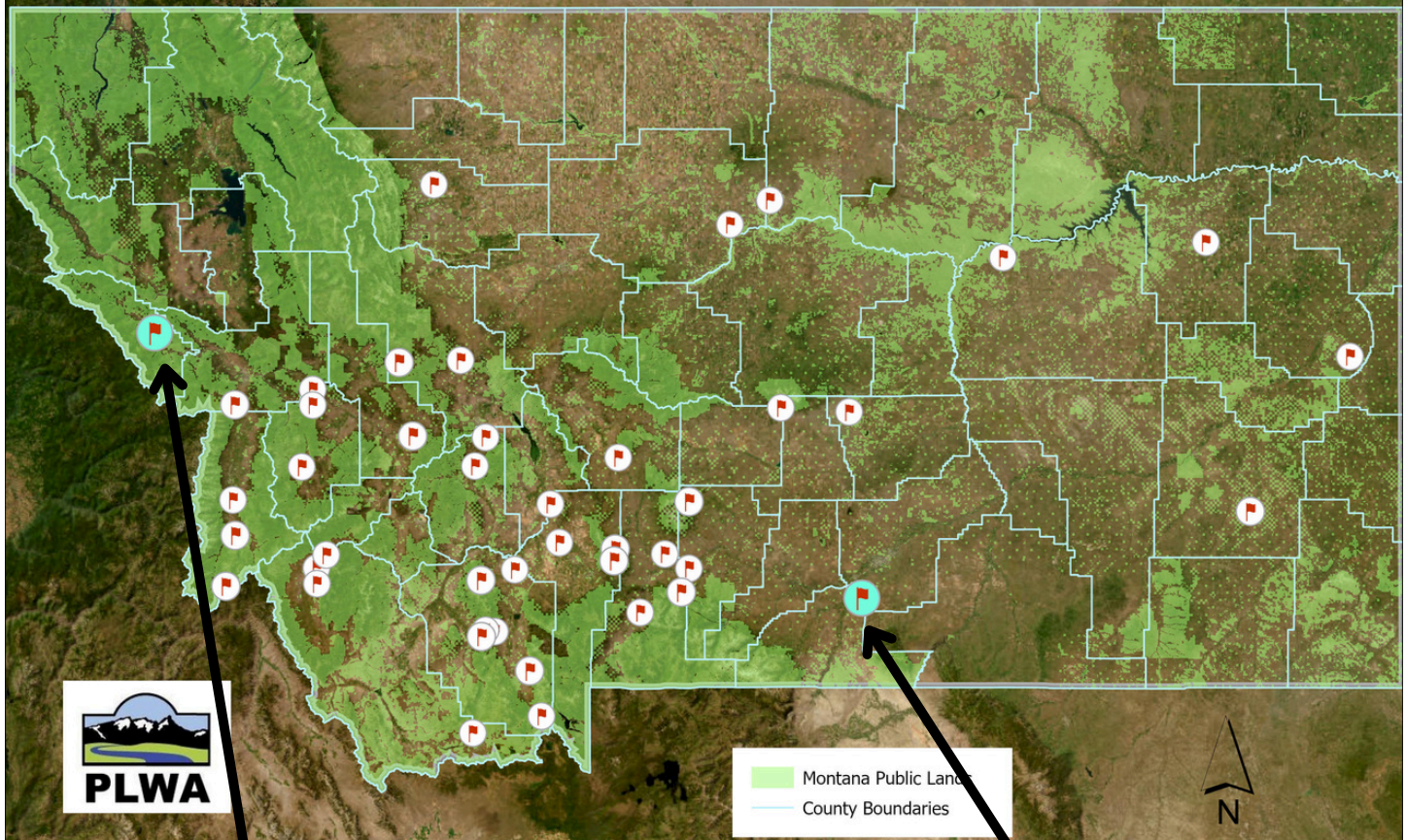
PLWA is proud to partner with businesses and clubs from around the State of Montana that support access to public lands, waters and public trust resources. To sign up your business or club as a PLWA sponsor contact Alex Leone ([alex@plwa.org](mailto:alex@plwa.org)). Club and business sponsors are an integral part of PLWA and we couldn't operate without their contributions. Please consider joining one of the clubs above and show your support for PLWA's business sponsors!



# Access Issue Updates

Haley Sir (Director of Access Investigations)

## PLWA Access Issues: February 2025



**Cyr Mountain Road:** Cyr/Iron Mountain Road (Forest Road 344) remains illegally blocked by a private landowner, restricting public access despite strong opposition from the community. This idyllic road, which runs across the mountains south of the Clark Fork River, is a public thoroughfare, confirmed by records from both Mineral and Missoula counties, as well as the U.S. Forest Service. However, the road has been inaccessible since 2013. In 2023, Mineral County voted unanimously to take legal action to reopen the access route, yet it remains blocked. In mid-January, PLWA submitted a formal letter to Mineral County, and legal support has been enlisted to assist in the fight for its reopening. It's time to take action. We urge you to contact [Mineral County commissioners](#) and demand that they immediately reopen Cyr-Mountain Road for public use. Let's make our voices heard!

**Spring Creek Road:** Spring Creek Road in Yellowstone County has served as a public road for decades—until 2023, when a local landowner illegally gated it, cutting off access. Despite the County's claims, PLWA has uncovered crucial legal documents confirming that Spring Creek Road is indeed a public county road. In 2010, a valid Right of Way (ROW) easement was purchased by the County to ensure public access. This road is protected by state law, and it's clear the County is in violation by restricting access. In mid-January, PLWA submitted a formal letter to Yellowstone County, backed by legal support, urging them to reopen the road immediately. We've received confirmation that the County is addressing the letter with their civil division and PLWA is waiting on a response. PLWA will be counting on our members to support the County Commissioners in demanding they uphold Montana law and restore public access to Spring Creek Road.



# Upcoming Events

*Join us at these events throughout the state!*

## PLWA Pint Nights



**March 19**

**Ten Mile Creek Brewery**

**Helena, MT**

**5-8 pm**

**\$1 for every  
pint sold & Ask  
an Access  
Expert!**

**April 11**

**Gravel Bar**

**Ennis, MT**

**5-8 pm**

**Join us for a true  
community access  
celebration....and  
great pizza!**



**Interested in  
helping organize a  
pint night in your  
town? Contact  
katie@plwa.org.**

## **Save the Date: BHA's 2025 North American Rendevous!**

Join PLWA and thousands of other public lands and outdoor  
enthusiasts at the University of Montana June 13-15.



**Stay tuned for more details on  
PLWA's upcoming 40th annual  
meeting, set for September 2025!**



**Do you have a club meeting or  
event you'd like PLWA to attend  
or present at?**

**Please reach out to  
katie@plwa.org with the details  
or call us at 406-690-0960 .**

## **Did you know.....PLWA has a license plate!!**

One of the best ways to show support  
public lands and make your car or truck  
look great is to sign up for PLWA's sponsor  
plate at the DMV. It's the only Montana  
license plate with PUBLIC LANDS  
emblazoned at the bottom and we've been  
told the dark hunter green color palette is  
pleasing to the eye. Support and defend  
access to your public lands and waters  
and head down to your local County  
Treasurer's office to sign up for a PLWA  
license plate today!





## 2025 Montana Legislative Session



The 2025 Montana Legislature is in session and PLWA is busy tracking bills with a potential to impact access to Montana's public lands and waters. PLWA's legislative focus is narrow but we stand ready to oppose legislation that restricts access and support legislation that promotes access. With over 600 members and 2,000 constituents, PLWA is also ready to mobilize our support base when needed. A huge thank you to Montana Backcountry Hunters & Anglers and the Montana Wildlife Federation for inviting PLWA to tune into their legislative update and strategy sessions. We are fortunate to have such amazing and collaborative partners!

### Rally for Public Lands @ the Capital February 19th

It's back! The Montana Legislature is in session which also means the Montana conservation community is hard at work defending Montana's public lands and waters. A semi-annual tradition, the Montana Rally for Public Lands will take place on **February 19th** at the **Capital Rotunda in Helena** from **noon-1pm**. PLWA is proud to help sponsor this year's event. Buses are available from Missoula and Bozeman with carpools being organized in other parts of the State. For more information check out the Rally for Public Lands website (<https://rallyforpubliclands.com/>).



### Public Lands in Montana






- **30 million acres+ of public land**  
- **Over 6.5 million acres enrolled in BMA**  
- **3 million acres under conservation easement** **#1 in US!**





# MEMBERSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

Katie Reams (Director of Member Services)

Total Members	 600
Growth in 2024	 29%
New Members (last 90 Days)	 46
# of Returned Envelopes	 170+
Most Common Donation Value	 \$50

PLWA has experienced notable membership growth recently. Currently, the organization boasts 600 members. In 2024, membership increased by an impressive 29%, indicating a strong upward trend in engagement and interest. Additionally, within the last 90 days alone, PLWA welcomed 46 new members, largely due to a very successful targeted end-of-year campaign. Over 170 envelopes were returned to PLWA with donations of varying sizes. Notably, the most common donation amount was \$50, highlighting the grassroots commitment and engagement of PLWA's members. This campaign underscores the power of collective small contributions in achieving significant support. The overall growth highlights PLWA's successful efforts in attracting and retaining members through a targeted end of year campaign, social media, and events throughout the year.

None of this recent success would be possible without all of our members and constituents. Thanks to all of you for supporting PLWA and telling your friends and family about the organization!



# PLWA Thanks Jim Olson

**Bernard Lea, PLWA Board of Directors and past President**

Public Land/Water Access Association (PLWA) would like to take this opportunity to express our *sincere gratitude* to Jim Olson for his continued involvement and perseverance in maintaining access to public lands and waters in Montana.



JIM OLSON AT  
HUGHES CREEK ROAD

Jim has been involved in our ongoing efforts to keep the Ravalli County Road, Hughes Creek, open to the public. Jim has been involved by continuously monitoring the actions concerning this road. The landowners have consistently closed the road by installing a gate or building a dirt mound (tank trap) that blocks the road to the public. Jim has made numerous trips to check on the situation and reports his findings to PLWA, the County Commissioners and our Attorney. He has made many trips to the area at his own expense and is always above board with all of the parties involved.

I first met Jim when I transferred to the Bitterroot National Forest in 1974. My first conversation with him was over the phone when he called and said, “your dog just chewed a hole in my fiberglass garage door and is trying to breed my female who is in heat”. Not a good way to meet your new neighbors. As it turned out we both got an excellent Golden Retriever hunting dog out of the encounter.

Jim was involved with the Mitchell Slough court case as a member of the Ravalli County Wildlife Association in that major effort in defense of stream access. He also served as a member of the Montana Fish and Game Commission. Jim’s commitment to preserving public land, waters and access is a testimonial of his willingness to serve. Not only for the people of Montana but the entire recreating public. Thanks Jim!

## Montana's oldest conservation club

**PLWA  
PARTNER:  
Ravalli  
County  
Wildlife**



The Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association (RCFWA) has a rich and legendary history of advocating for wildlife conservation and public access in Ravalli County, the Bitterroot Valley and beyond. With roots tracing back over 100 years, RCFWA has played a crucial role in developing Montana’s conservation and access ethos. The Ravalli County Wildlife Association has worked with PLWA on numerous issues over the years. We recently partnered with RCFWA and several other groups to protest an attempt by landowners on Mitchell Slough to install floating islands and prohibit access at the site of one of Montana’s most infamous stream access battles. PLWA has also worked with RCFWA for close to a decade to remove illegal obstructions on the Hughes Creek Road. If you live in the Bitterroot or just love wildlife please consider joining the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association!



# A Word From PLWA President Dylan Pipinich

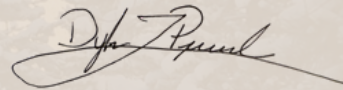
As I write my first *Prez Says*, I want to express how honored I am to serve as the President of PLWA. This organization has a long and proud history of defending public land and water access in Montana, and I take that responsibility seriously. I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of this work—to stand alongside so many dedicated advocates who believe in the fundamental right to access the lands and waters that belong to all of us. I step into this role following the leadership of individuals like John Gibson and Bernie Lea, who poured their energy into protecting public access. It's a legacy I don't take lightly, and I plan to carry it forward with the same determination.

Right now, Montana's legislative session is in full swing, and it's a critical time for public land and water access. Legislative sessions are where the rules of the game are written, and history has shown that access rights can be expanded or restricted with the stroke of a pen. PLWA is watching closely, ready to defend against any attempt to weaken public access and to support measures that strengthen it. But we can't do it alone. We need you—our members—to stay

engaged, make your voices heard, and help ensure that Montana remains a place where public access is protected for future generations.

One of the most powerful ways you can contribute is by reporting access issues. If you encounter a locked gate where there shouldn't be one, a "No Trespassing" sign blocking public land, or a questionable road closure, let us know. Your reports give us the information we need to take action. Beyond that, I encourage you to contact your legislators, attend hearings, and speak up about why public access matters. Every email, phone call, and conversation makes a difference.

I'm incredibly excited for the work ahead and grateful for the dedication of our members, board, and staff. The fight for public land and water access is never over, but together, we can ensure that Montana remains a place where everyone has the right to enjoy the land, hunt, fish, and explore. Thank you for being part of this mission—I look forward to working with you all.



**As Teddy Roosevelt once said, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." That's exactly what PLWA has done for nearly 40 years—fighting for access, case by case, issue by issue, standing up when it matters most.**

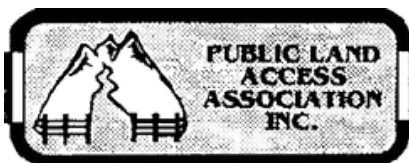
## Strategic Planning Survey in the Works

As PLWA continues to grow, our work and mission are more critical now than ever before. In 2025 we will be undergoing strategic planning to take a hard look at what we are doing and how we operate. A lot has changed in Montana over the last 40 years and so has PLWA as an organization. We will be sending out a short but consequential planning survey to all of our members and constituents in the next month and look forward to hearing from you. Your feedback is KEY!



### Public Land/Water Access Association, Inc.

**PLWA's mission is to maintain, restore, and perpetuate public access to the boundaries of all Montana's public lands and waters.**



1990'S



PUBLIC LAND  
WATER ACCESS  
ASSOCIATION INC  
• EST 1985 •

2000'S



2025



# PLWA Who We Are: Board Member Brad Peters



PLWA is excited to welcome Brad Peters as our newest board member. Brad is a lifelong Montana resident. He was born and raised in Billings, Montana and graduated from the University of Montana with a business management major and communication minor. Brad is a commercial loan officer for Stockman Bank and has been in the financial services industry his entire career. He lives in Bozeman, Montana with his family.

Brad first heard about the PLWA as a young child growing up next door to Lee Gustafson, a former member of the organization, who stressed how special Montana's public access laws are. Brad is an avid fly fisherman and outdoor enthusiast who has enjoyed recreating in Montana his entire life. He is passionate about protecting the public's ability to access the outdoors. "I have 3 children and various nieces and nephews that all live in Montana. I want the next generation of Montanans to be able to enjoy the outdoors in the way I have been able to in my lifetime. I can't imagine how different my life would be without being able to enjoy these special places."

**Did you know?**



**Montana has over  
70,000 miles of roads!**





PUBLIC LAND  
WATER ACCESS  
ASSOCIATION  
• EST 1985 •

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[plwa@plwa.org](mailto:plwa@plwa.org)

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## Support Public Land & Water Access Association!

Interested in becoming a member?  
Memberships start at just **\$20!!**

To join or renew your membership head to  
<https://www.plwa.org/giving>.



OR scan QR code to  
[donate online](#)

**Check payments may also be mailed to the address above using the form below.**

☐ I would like to renew my membership or join PLWA with a donation of:  
\$20 \$50 \$100 \$200 \$500 Other \$\_\_\_\_\_

Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

E-mail:

\_\_\_\_\_

Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

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