

# WE TAKE OUR STAND

## Montana Writers Protecting Public Lands

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[www.wetakeourstand.org](http://www.wetakeourstand.org)

Montana has a long tradition of listening to and respecting — revering — its writers and the state's literary tradition. In an unprecedented show of unity, more than forty of Montana's best writers have gathered, in rapid response fashion, to write original essays and testimonials advocating for the protection of our public lands, and endorsing Democratic House of Representatives candidate Rob Quist's position on this (literally) most common ground of issues.



Photo by Steven Gnam

### Essays and Testimonials from Contributors:

Rick Bass, Sandra Alcosser, Marc Beaudin, David Brooks, James Lee Burke, Kevin Canty, Russell Chatham, Nancy S. Cook, Seabring Davis, Chris Dombrowski, David James Duncan, Cristina Eisenberg, Tess Fahlgren, Amanda Fortini, Jessie Grossman, Tami Haaland, Max Hjortsberg, Matt Holloway, Lowell Jaeger, Allen Morris Jones, Greg Keeler, Walter Kirn, Tim Linehan, Ben Long, Tom McGuane, Scott McMillion, Miles Nolte, Andrea Peacock, Doug Peacock, David Quammen, Shann Ray, Russell Rowland, Brian Schott, Robert Stubblefield, Todd Tanner, Toby Thompson, Carter G. Walker, Alan Weltzien, Richard Wheeler, Todd Wilkinson, Louisa Willcox, Pat Williams.

# INTRODUCTION

## I'll Take My Stand

Rick Bass

If ever there was a nation at a juncture it is ours. We have lost our standing and respect in the world, earned by over two hundred forty years of blood and guts and, yes, diplomacy. It is only with humility and pride — the latter not to be confused with arrogance — that we can regain that standing and respect, that position of leadership in the world, as well as on our own soil.

Whichever side of this most dangerously divided of nations, these dangerously dis-united states, our special election in Montana falls upon, what I hope to capture here, on the eve of this terrifying moment, is how terribly frightened we are by what is happening with the foxes in the henhouse, in Washington D.C. We stand either to regain some of the foundations of our democracy or to cede the future, as if by sleeping proxy, to a tiny cluster of bombardiers, oil barons, polluters. Liars. Rich liars.

We have been watching as much of that which we hold sacred is dismantled as if by barbarians: Our educational system, the dignity of decent and affordable healthcare, our clean air and water, our wilderness — as American an icon as anything — and the financial security of our children's generation. And, in some ways most painful of all, our respect among the nations.

Our election on May 25th will come down not to judicial bullying or Russian election tampering. I think it will — and should — come down to the condition and capacity of the human heart — and to courage: The courage to demand something better; the courage to rekindle the senses — our sense of home, sense of place, sense of duty — the courage to awaken.

Are we as a nation ready to cede our power completely, with neither check nor balance, to misleading zealots who crave Montana's public lands, who seek to empower further — after we bailed them out once — the banks of Wall Street?

Forty years from now, young people will be calling upon us to tell them what it was like, in this crucible-forged time when democracy was attacked not just from abroad, but from within. What was it really like, they will ask. They will want to know how close and intense these elections were, state by state, vote by vote, with these issues in the balance, and how we achieved our victory, their victory.

We sharpened our knives, we will tell them. We were frightened, and we were fearless. We chose courage rather than silence. We turned our backs forever on the myth of pure self, on the myth of utter

independence and disconnectedness. That myth, we will tell them, was no longer compatible with the genius of democracy.

We were frightened — terrified — of the seeds, the sprouts, of dictatorship arising in our own homeland, we will tell them, but we cut it down, just barely in time, by throwing everything we had at it — body and soul, intellect and intuition, everything. We rose above our fears, we will tell them, and, in Montana, we chose action.

It was terrifying, we will tell them. It was glorious.

*Rick Bass is a writer and board member of the Yaak Valley Forest Council, and Writer-in-Residence at Montana State University.*



Photo by Tom Murphy

*Dedicated to author and friend, William "Gatz" Hjortsberg. Rest in peace.*

Produced by Rick Bass

Edited by Seabring Davis and Brian Schott

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# Riparian

Sandra Alcosser

If we wash our legs with frozen water  
Watch it rill down hairy flesh — oh the power  
Of the body to refresh — to lie down at night  
Wake again among harebells and bees, lichen  
Speckled boulders, mists of sweet white  
Clover — if we cock our pollen hats  
Like Leonardo da Vinci and sketch  
Riffles come to nurse the thirsty  
Rubble, we can lean back, sieve  
Our tea among secretive  
Rocks — soak away the meanness  
Of a year's duplicity — no one can reach  
Us here — no human noise — A river will gentle the cruelest voice

*Sandra Alcosser, Montana's first poet laureate, lives in Florence, Montana.*

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## The Changing Ways of Flowing Water

David Brooks

Protecting the headwaters of our nation's rivers and streams was a key reason the federal government created our system of public lands. Those of us who value our state's and nation's fisheries know that maintaining the health of those headwaters continues to be a key benefit of our public lands. In Montana, a full two-thirds of native trout habitat is on federal public land.

We know that taking these places out of federal hands through land sale or transfer of management will mean losing access and seriously diminishing the Montana way of life. Public land giveaways would erode our hunting and fishing traditions and the \$6 billion outdoor economy those activities and access to public lands provide.

To borrow from Heraclitus on the ever-changing nature of nature, no man, woman, or child "ever steps in the same river twice." In Montana, our right to step into a river or stream at all depends on access. Publicly owned and managed land provides most of that access. The health of the water we love depends on the protections provided by public ownership and management of land. Just as we are awed by the changing ways of flowing water, we rely on the permanency of public lands.

*David Brooks is the Executive Director of Montana Trout Unlimited.*

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## Another Blue (*Ardea herodias*)

Marc Beaudin

The voice of the heron carries the  
rasp of pterodactyl and archaeopteryx  
it is an unmarked watery grave that reaches

suddenly with taloned fingers and  
startles the man swimming alone  
among cattails and mud-sleeping turtles

He once, years before, carried a dead heron close  
to his chest like an infant—this old  
friend and father, teacher in the school of

lake water and moonlight, omen,  
bringer of dreams, found floating  
in the reeds at lake's edge, waiting

## Another Blue (*Andrea herodias*) (continued)

Marc Beaudin

From his canoe, aluminum turned brass in  
evening light, he watches the bird's spirit, or  
something, fly from the willows, bank above

the still water and disappear over the mosaic  
of trees climbing the hillside Today  
standing thigh-deep in the water of the marsh

he rubs that memory between thumb  
and finger, enjoys the sun sinking into face  
and shoulders and tries to ignore the insistent  
buzzing of an airplane sounding like some  
small insect at the window, trapped  
and waiting for death

(originally published in *Fragile Arts Quarterly*)

*Marc Beaudin is an award-winning poet, theatre artist and bookseller living in the writer's haven of Livingston, Montana.*

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## Stealing Mountains

James Lee Burke

Conservation science and the establishment of public lands are American traditions that go back to Teddy Roosevelt. The fact that our representatives in Montana are toying with the notion of transferring them into private hands is mind-numbing. The fact that these men pretend to be serving our interests is disgusting.

This isn't a political issue. Democrat, Republican, Independent, unreconstructed Confederate, it's doesn't matter. This is our country; our national parks and wilderness areas comprise the most beautiful landscape on earth. Within fifteen minutes, we can enter forests that are like the first day of Creation. Why in the name of suffering God would anyone in his right mind want to transfer such a treasure into the hands of people who wish to exploit it for personal gain?

I don't think Donald Trump is a political entity but a sociopath. He's a sick and self-deluded man who at some point will probably be impeached. The people who use him are to my mind much more corrupt than he. They protect him in order to pursue their own agenda, which is to steal everything they can get their hands on.

There is no mystery to the human personality. People are what they do. A lying son of a bitch is a lying son of a bitch. Right now we've got these babies in spades. I'd hate to tell my grandchildren I stood by while they stole the most beautiful mountain ranges and rivers and lakes in the entire world.

*James Lee Burke is a writer who lives on a ranch southwest of Missoula.*

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## Clearwater

Kevin Canty

Spring came, and with it the runoff, snow melting out of the high country and swelling the rivers to brown, churning overflow. All but the Clearwater, which flows out of a chain of lakes and thus stays clear. The fishing is never very good but it will fish when nothing else will.

So: sunny afternoon, pleasantly cool, I am waist-deep in the water, casting to the far bank when I get the feeling that I am being watched. I turn around. A small bear stands on all fours on the bank, a dozen feet away. I don't make eye contact. I expect him to flee, as black bears usually do, but this one doesn't. He stands up on his hind legs and growls at me. The sound goes right through me, some deep-rooted fear that's older than humankind.

The bear drops to all fours again but stands his ground. I turn my back on him and start to walk down through the water, letting the current push me along. A hundred yards and I'm not dead yet. I turn around and he's walking the bank behind me. When I turn, he rears again on his hind legs. No eye contact, I remember. I turn again and go, down the cobbled stream bottom, closer to where the car waits.

## Clearwater (continued)

Kevin Canty

When I get to the car, he's just gone. It's like he never existed. The woods are ordinary green and ordinary quiet and the river runs quietly in its banks. I could start fishing again if I wanted to, which I don't. I put the rod away with shaking hands and open a beer. This could have ended some other way. A wildlife biologist told me later that it was most likely not a black bear but a yearling grizzly.

When I think about wild lands and free country, I come back to that bear, a distillation of everything that matters: wild, powerful, indifferent to my well-being. He was the one in charge of that encounter. He chose to have it, chose the outcome. The million acres of forest behind him all came to a point in his eyes, and he was looking at me.

It's possible, even useful, to think of these places instrumentally: wild lands make for clean water which makes for good fishing which is good for tourism, etc. There are sound practical reasons to preserve our wilderness. But these are not my reasons. I want to be touched by mystery, to walk in a place that surpasses my idea of it, to not be in charge for once. I want to touch something greater than myself. And this is where it is.

*Kevin Canty's seventh book, a novel called "The Underworld," was published this spring.*

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Photo by Tom Murphy

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## Corrective Measures

Russell Chatham

Word has reached me from a number of reliable sources, men and women who would sacrifice their lives for the right causes, that our illustrious chief executive is hatching some evil plans to sell off our birthright, that of public open spaces still pristine, to the highest bidders. Imagine that: the one percent with all the money could then presumably also own all the land too. If it's a fight they want then let's give it to them and turn the mode of government by the government, of the government and for the government around sending it back east with some strongly suggested corrective measures designed to protect the valuable and irreplaceable land which belongs equally to everyone.

*Russell Chatham has been a professional author for fifty years and a painter for sixty. He lives at Point Reyes, California.*

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## A Place to Be

Nancy S. Cook

Please don't reduce what we hold in common. Public lands are important to all Montanans. I know this to be true, and here's why: My parents divorced, I spent winters with my mother in a city, and summers with my dad on a sheep ranch in the Bitterroot Valley. The ranch was big enough to work all day without seeing anyone beyond family, and small enough to imagine we were in control. Sunup to sundown, there was always work, and it seemed that the ranch itself rebuked us — a sagging gate here, an irrigation pipe change demanded there, a new fence needed to manage pasture. Tools clanged in the truck bed as we raced from job to job, walking or riding too slow in our race to improve the land. Buzzards circling told a gruesome story we followed—a lamb maimed, a ewe gone. Grim and pinched by death, we worked harder. We took pleasure in work done well, but we took no leisure.

Once in awhile, my dad called a break in the late afternoon and we headed across the valley, often to Carlton Creek in the Bitterroot

## A Place to Be (continued)

Nancy S. Cook

National Forest. At the end of the dirt road out we hopped and started walking, up. Here, we savored the silty sweat earned from walking not working. The land offered no rebuke, the lists quieted, and we listened in — the buzz of insects, the skittering of creatures indifferent to herding. Even after a day's work, our bodies felt weightless without posts, wire, fence tool, workman's gloves. Our sight shifted from the long view of tasks and goals to the near view — bluebell, balsamroot, fairy slipper, pussy toe, or shooting star — a poetry of names my father rarely spoke. Our imaginations floated free. No longer drudge, but sprite, I hopped rock to rock for the sheer pleasure of balance, fording, and re-fording Carlton Creek, cool and wet, tickling my boots.

Sometimes while they raced for a peak, I embraced the saddles, or the cuppy warmth of tufted grass and boulder. Here I rested, not against the clock, but an equal among living things, managed by nobody, or so it seemed. Our garden strawberries, carefully weeded, tasted nothing like the wild strawberries on these afternoons. Here were chipmunks, pika, a lizard — all independent of me and my fencebuilding.

Even though my family owned land, and a lot of it by some accountings, public land gave us what we couldn't own — a place free of the guilt of work unfinished, a place where nature did just fine without our plans, a place to play, to be quiet in, to slow down and listen in, to adjust our focus. We were not the powerful ones in such places. We need places where humans are humbled, and we need places where the gates are not locked, and the signs welcome rather than warn us to keep out.

*Nancy S. Cook lives in Missoula, where she teaches at the University of Montana.*

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## The Land Is Our Story

Seabring Davis

Recently I spent a day in Washington D.C. with my husband and two daughters. We toured the sites: The Washington Monument. The U.S. Capital building, where my 12-year-old learned about our country's founding motto: E Pluribus Unum. "Out of Many, One." The Jefferson Library. The Lincoln Memorial at night, where my older daughter stood beneath the Gettysburg Address and wondered at such a fine testament to democracy. We were jolted by the patriotism of the WWII Memorial and hollowed by the Vietnam Memorial. The MLK memorial left each of us speechless.

Standing there, it occurred to me that if no one had told me the story of this place, I would not recognize its symbolic value or its history. It would only seem a collection of arbitrary structures in a vast urban sprawl. Yet the names matter. Washington. Jefferson. Lincoln. Martin Luther King, Jr. The hundreds of thousands of people who fought for my freedom of choice and my family's quality of life, they matter.

Not many people in Washington D.C. know the stories of Montana. There is a disconnect with the fact that some of the grandest historic paintings at The Smithsonian depict our state's mountains, our clean waters, our wild animals as representations of the ultimate national treasure. They may not recognize the sacrifices of indigenous people who fought for freedom and quality of life against the odds of America's great expansion. They may not know the importance of preserving all the "empty" space.

But when I get home and stand at the scenic overlook on the way to Pine Creek Falls trailhead, I think of this land. I see Paradise Valley spread in front of me, threaded by the Yellowstone River and I see time spent on the water with my family and friends. I see my eldest daughter's first whitetail harvest, hikes to lakes and peaks and brushes with bears. These trails have tethered our family to the land and to each other. These mountains offer respite and challenge and freedom. This land is our story.

Friends who visit me in Montana have said: There's nothing here. An incredulous comment meant in a good way. One year our state's tourism office even used the phrase as a marketing slogan for ads that plastered billboards in Minneapolis, Chicago and Los Angeles. Montana: There's nothing here. Juxtaposed with a brilliant night sky or bighorn sheep tiptoeing atop massive mountains in Glacier National Park, a sweep of the Yellowstone River or a herd of horses storming across open prairie, the campaign won national awards and attracted millions of visitors.

Yes. Nothing. There are mountains in the Absaroka range that have no names, only designations by elevation on a topo map. There are trails that I've hiked and camped these last two decades that are unseen by millions of other people. There are stretches of rivers and forests remote and plentiful enough that I may never see them all in my lifetime. Even still, they are not nameless, they are Public Land. Wild. Valuable. Accessible. Worth protecting.

*Seabring Davis is a writer and editor in Livingston, Montana.*

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## The Palace of Ordinary People

Chris Dombrowski

Once while hunting mule deer in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness, I encountered what I like to call a ghost.

Late November in the snowy Front Range on a cold, still day, I cleared a stand of leafless aspen and paused to catch my breath in the dappled light. Curds of hail dropped from the sky, ticking my upturned face.

## The Palace of Ordinary People (continued)

Chris Dombrowski

From the sheer cliff up-slope, sand trickled audibly from a circular cave wide as two horse troughs and twice as deep, a stone eye weeping a very old tear. A creature could live a long time in there quite undisturbed, I thought. Suddenly, a wind rushed down-mountain, spilled over the scarp like a waterfall, and rattled the scree at my feet. Then the air went still again.

On my neck, invisible hackles rose in reptilian alert, a familiar but nonetheless quickening backcountry sensation. Deep in grizzly bear territory, I listened for a sow's warning woof, but deduced that fear that hadn't frozen me. Nor had the instinct to cup an ear towards the draw and listen for antler tine against tree limb. Seven miles from the trailhead and another dozen down a dirt road from a small Front Range town, the hunter in me recalled his empty chest freezer back home and urged the poet in me uphill — but it was awe that shackled me in place.

I turned north, more awe.

East: a third potent dose, this one coupled with the feral notion that another human being must have, at some point in history, ascended this ridge-spine to this precise location, regarded the circumference of his or her surroundings, and, with a wild shudder, lifted arms to the sky in amazement.

I felt fortunate to commune with even a trace of this remaining wonder, albeit presumed, or at best perceived, on my part. "We left what we felt at what we saw," wrote Nobel-winner Czeslaw Milosz, and for generations we Montanans have marked this unsurpassed landscape with our appreciation for it. We have planted our love for the mountains, buttes, hills, hoo-dooes, canyons, draws, coulees, rivers, streams, springs, and rills in the very soil of this great state. Our experiences on public land, what someone once called "the palace of ordinary people," have bound us to the country that we access for solitude, adventure, food, and livelihood, among myriad other reasons.

Today, from my desk, a hundred or so miles as the crow flies from the aforementioned cave, I'll allow that the metaphysical notion of what the Celts called a "thin place" and the Greeks called a "numen" — a sacred location — might be hard to sell in Washington these days. And so I return my attention to the physical world and the strand of spring water eked from the rocks near my feet that cold November evening. After a long quiet while, I knelt down and sipped from it.

And now from my knees, I beg you: keep our public lands public. Do not commodify them in any way.

*Chris Dombrowski and is poet and writer who lives in Missoula, Montana.*

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## What Are "America's Public Lands"?

David James Duncan

“The basic mood of the future,” wrote Thomas Moore, “might well be one of confidence in

the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth. If the dynamics of the Universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the Earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and the seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process.”

In this context, America's public lands can be seen as a weave of places, weathery forces, flora, fauna, and intricacy to which people from all over the world rightfully flock like grateful birds to see Earth being Earth; see wildness intact; hear the blithe, polyphonous, frightening, beautiful, comical languages Earth speaks as she creates our lives and all life. This tapestry of land and mystery is not something we created or know how to create, and no corporate or political power can recreate it once their powers have torn the fabric to shreds. These vast lands are our only reliable guides to continued abundant life; they are what enable biodiversity to diversify, natural selection to naturally select, and generations of American children to muck around, without fear of pollutants and poisons, in creek, pond and river shallows burgeoning with frogs, fingerlings and damsel flies.



Photo by Steven Gnam



## What Are “America’s Public Lands”? (continued)

David James Duncan

Public lands in truth are governed not by temporal “governors” or “corporate persons” but by elemental and celestial harmonies as powerful as sun’s light and Earth’s spinning, yet as delicate as a hummingbird’s iridescent throat and orbweaver’s dew-bedecked web. These unexploited places and forces, to put it the ancient way, are our Mother; the living terrain her body, the flora her clothes, the lakes, rivers and rills her blood and arteries, the seasons and weathers her moods, the winds her whispers, the birds, fish, fauna, humans all, equally, her offspring. And every man, woman and child striving to defend her life — even in poverty or political impotence, even against seemingly hopeless odds — is not only a hero but an integral part of her, hence every bit as holy as she whom they seek to defend.

*David James Duncan is a small scale compassion activist, river rat, and author best known for his novels The River Why and The Brothers K.*

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## The Big Wild

Cristina Eisenberg

For the past 20 years I have lived with my family in a cabin adjacent to vast areas of public lands near the Bob Marshall Wilderness, at 1 million acres one of the largest federal wilderness areas in the contiguous United States. There is a powerful connection between carnivores and public lands. They are a big part of what makes this landscape healthy.

My backyard lies near the heart of The Crown of the Continent Ecosystem, the most important wildlife corridor in North America. Seventeen species of carnivores live there — all the species present at the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804.

Looking beyond the Crown of the Continent, public lands matter to carnivores on a continental scale. Public lands provide a refuge. They are essential to create ecologically resilient landscapes.

Large carnivores, such as grizzly bears, need lots of room to roam in order to thrive. As we move into the brave new world of climate change, public lands are essential to help these animals and other at-risk species adjust to climate change. Public lands give them habitat to meet their ecological needs.

Beyond “The Bob,” as those of us who live here call it, from our cabin it’s possible to walk south or east for 100 miles, or north for 2000 miles, without leaving public land. Your land. My land. I like to call this “the big wild.” The animals that live here — particularly the carnivores, which are crucial to the health of ecosystems, and which help make Montana be Montana — need as much big open public land as they can get so that they can thrive.

*Cristina Eisenberg is the author of The Carnivore Way and the chief scientist at Earthwatch Institute.*

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## No Public Lands Transfer

Tess Fahlgren

In Valley County my childhood was expansive and arid blue. My backyard, a million acres of public land, was complete with sandstone castles, cactus, and hardy wildflowers. My father, who managed the Valley County BLM for most of my life, taught me well: the land was for all of us.

Every year throughout middle school, the Valley County BLM office held Take Your Kid to Work Day. Many of Dad’s colleagues had kids who happened to be my age. We’d take the day off school and cram into SUVs to drive for miles on weaving gravel roads to “count grass,” survey a prairie dog town or witness a sage grouse mating dance. We were comfortable in the knowledge that the land was ours. However, while we may have felt like young royalty visiting our vast dominion, in no way were those dry hills more ours than any other American’s. Our parents had the responsibility of managing land that truly belongs to every American citizen, and we had the privilege of experiencing it. Not just on those days, but any day.

My dad and his colleagues worked hard to keep the land of Valley County healthy, much of which is allotted for grazing by local ranchers. Public land usage boosts the economy in rural, ranching areas. In addition, fishing, hunting, camping, and off-road vehicle usage on public land are staples of the livelihood in Valley County.

As well as the million acres of Valley County BLM land, northeast Montana is home to Fort Peck Reservoir, the sprawl of which reaches almost a quarter of the way across the state. This is surrounded by the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge made of 915,814 acres of isolated and rugged public land.

All of this is in danger of being lost.

This spring, Montanans are being asked to choose between a wealthy businessman from California with no incentive to work for Montana’s true interests, and a Montana native who has pledged to keep public lands public.

Greedy voices have warped what should be an equalizing issue. While the transfer of public lands to state hands might not immediately result in the loss of access to these lands, know this: if the state has the ability to sell our land, it will be sold. As soon as Montana feels the pinch of financial instability, the land will be sold. With the wrong man in charge, the land will be sold, and the proud, brilliant folks of Montana will only be able

## No Public Lands Transfer (continued)

Tess Fahlgren

to watch their backyards shrink. This, above all else, will forever change Montana as we know it.

In uncertain times, Montanans want to trust, at least, that they have that land. By protecting access to public land, we make a statement that goes beyond the nostalgia of family camping trips, beyond weekend hunts in the backcountry, beyond even the preservation of elk, black-footed ferrets, or sage grouse.

We make a statement of values, unity and pride.

If this country has any pride left, let it be for the land.

*Tess Fahlgren was the recipient of Montana Quarterly's 2016 Big Snowy Prize for Nonfiction. Her work has appeared in numerous publications around the state.*

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## For the Public Good

Amanda Fortini

Far too many of my teenage memories involve being chased out of this or that wooded area by police, praying I wouldn't get arrested for trespassing. My friends and I were always looking for a hidden copse of trees or patch of grass where we could sit on the ground away from the hectoring gaze of adults, and find some companionable isolation (and, OK, drink a few beers). But in the Illinois suburb where I was raised, the nearest we got to a space where we could roam around unencumbered was the mall.

It was only when I moved to Montana 20 years later that I realized the psychic toll it takes on a person not to have anywhere wild and natural to retreat to. Here, I finally experienced the beautiful liberation of being able to hike somewhere far from the blare of billboards and advertisements and manmade anything, and feel yourself and your anxieties diminished by the vastness and grandeur of nature, even while your animal self feels a part of it. In Montana, anyone can fish, hunt, hike, or just meander around and think under the wide blue expanse of sky and not worry that the police are on their way to run you off. Those who have not spent time out West will have a hard time understanding the immeasurable public good conferred by our precious public lands. They keep us free.

*Amanda Fortini is a writer in Livingston, Montana*

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## Small Things

Jessie Grossman

I'm wandering in a low dark forest. I can't see very far: I could walk for days in these dense woods without crossing a fence or seeing a "no trespassing" sign. I'm looking at small things — ochre specks of lichen on granite boulders, moss-covered patches of soft soil. All day, a kaleidoscope of sunlight has been moving across the damp ground. I follow what interests me — thickets of black raspberries, vines of damp monkshood, weasel fur and bones scattered on top of a high stump; the remains of a hawk's lunch. I'm not thinking beyond these details. It feels good to get out of my head and into the wind and sun, the raw elemental world — away from the polarizing and frightening politics of the world I inhabit more regularly — and into a bigger space for a while.

I am only looking forward, looking over the next fold, into the next drainage, wondering what I'll find there. At some point in wandering, I realize I am no longer aware of my path home. After focusing so intently on where I've been I'm unable to recall how to get back to where I started.

I search for a path home through this damp dark garden, and find one. At times, I'm on my hands and knees, crawling in soil and decomposing leaves, ducking through dense alder, legs stinging from hidden patches of devil's club. My boots are damp. My knees are dirty. It's getting dark. I'm tired, a little anxious. Just before dark I walk through a grove of old growth cedar. There's a small pond from which comes a chorus of frog song.

Being lost breeds fear, determination, doubt, and sometimes inspiration. Public lands are the gift of space — where we can get lost and safely find our way home — where the world is not parsed and divided into ownerships. No one is excluded by law or any other predetermination. What could be more democratic?

What does a country look like, when lost? I think it looks like where we are. But I trust, so long as we have our land, we can find our way back.

*Jessie Grossman is a writer, activist, and educator in Yaak, Montana.*

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## Wild Land

Tami Haaland

My family came to Montana at the turn of the last century and I grew up where we were free to wander the prairie and river valley. This need to go out and explore, to see what might be around the next bend in the trail is in my bones and blood. When I spend enough time in wild places, the buzz of technology goes away and I fall into an ancient, meditative rhythm. Having access to public land gives us the opportunity to find the best of our human nature. I can't imagine life in Montana without wild land.

*A former poet laureate of Montana, Tami Haaland teaches at Montana State University Billings and is the author of two books of poetry, Breath in Every Room and When We Wake in the Night.*

# Eventide

Max Hjortsberg

In the bright calm engulfing a late March afternoon a father took his son fishing. They followed the water's edge of the Yellowstone River up from the county bridge. A herd of angus cattle stood there watching with their big blank eyes. The grip of winter's ice had only just come off the river the week before. It still felt raw in that intervening period between proper seasons.

The boy spent most of the day watching his father fly cast instead of the worm and bobber setup of his own. After catching two trout they sat on the bank and ate ham salad sandwiches made from the leftovers of their Easter dinner.

There was a time, his father told him, when gold was mined upstream and arsenic leached from the tailings worked its way into the river. Water is a patient element, he added, methodically traveling around anything in its path, unperturbed with time. The poisonous runoff made the river lifeless for years, and years after the mine played out too. Treasure what you have now. Fight to hold on if you must, because this won't be here forever.

The boy remained silent, giving only a smile in return. The sun breaking through the clouds distracted him with beams of light stretching out across the valley.

*Max Hjortsberg is a poet, and the Conservation Director for Park County Environmental Council in Livingston, Montana.*

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## Childhood Unplugged

Matt Holloway

All of my favorite places in the world are within a stone's throw of my Columbia Falls, Montana home. Mountains, valleys, rivers, and meadows that I return to season after season, year after year. And they are all public lands.

Barely north of town in the Flathead National Forest, I sneak silently through drooping rainforests of cedars and hemlocks, all the while crossing the tracks of moose, deer, and elk. Wolf and grizzly tracks, too. Farther up the North Fork, my family and I rent the historic Hornet Lookout and wake in the clouds. If it's sunny, we gaze forever north into Canada, or west across the timbered mountains of the Whitefish Range, and east at the dentate skyline of Glacier National Park. Or we rent Schnaus Cabin, Ben Rover Cabin- or Wurtz Cabin — all public facilities, and all places where we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, friendship, and life. We watch river otters swim and ospreys hunt from the sky. My old dog Chief is buried above a long bend in the river that faces east toward the sunrise. Minus the scattered homesteads, ranches, and Polebridge, all of the North Fork is public land.



Photo by Tom Murphy

Or what about the east flanks of the Swan Range, or the Middle Fork and South Forks of the Flathead, where I hunt deer and elk. Thickly brushed basins with elk wallows the size of tennis courts and game trails as good as sidewalks. Places you get to know like the back of your hand as you learn how the elk move through them. Places you come to understand and love like you would a person. Public land that literally feeds my family. And provides the wood that heats our home.

Or what about the time my family and I camped on top of Doris Mountain and watched the Fourth-of-July firework celebration thousands of feet beneath us in Kalispell and Whitefish — tiny, myriad pops of color and sparkles on the valley floor. Us wrapped in sleeping bags, huddled together atop the open, beargrass mountain. Or the kiddy backpacks to Stanton Lake in the Great Bear Wilderness. The countless hikes to the waterfall and overlook on Columbia Mountain. My kids know mountains and wildness better than they know cities or technology. Childhood unplugged.

Where else are these things possible? Certainly not back in Mississippi, where I was born. To hunt, hike, or camp there is to know someone with a lot of private land. To be lucky enough to gain entry.

Montana, however, is a special place, and it is most special because of its public lands.

Teddy Roosevelt understood this idea, and during a time when our country was struggling to establish an identity, he capitalized on the one thing we had that the old world of Europe had lost — vast, wild landscapes. And he wanted these lands to be public — for all people of America.

It is this freedom of landscape that mirrors the freedom of the human spirit.

Because of our public lands here in Montana, we still have the chance to be free.

*Matt Holloway lives with his family in Columbia Falls.*

# Wondrous World (Jewel Basin, Montana)

Lowell Jaeger

Many wonders I've beheld in this wondrous world  
of canyons and chasms and summits of sculpted snow.  
None so radiant, so indelible, as my daughter,  
nine-years-old, perched on a granite ledge, dangling her legs,  
awash in sunshine above a slope of scree slanting  
into an alpine meadow of riotous and frantic blooms.

I'd left her there while I scouted our most favorable  
path of descent. And navigated to her side again  
by the music of her song — a child's song she'd learned  
for the pageant at school. Her bird-like voice in the breeze  
amidst the incense of nectar. Her smile and rejoicing  
wave upon my return. A dozen mountain goats,

curious, nosing closer, transfixed to witness  
this ever-unfolding wondrous world. Where I,  
like the goats, paused in reverence. And like the goats,  
I inched forward toward her, while clouds above  
continued to flow and blossoms widened  
to the sky's melodious allure. And beneath us

ancient strata rose toward daylight through dark.

*Lowell Jaeger is Humanities Division Chair at Flathead Valley Community College and author of seven collections of poems.*

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## A Creek of Our Own

Allen Morris Jones

This is a very short essay on an enormous topic. It starts in Bozeman, Montana where I live with my wife and six-year-old son.

Bozeman, growing by almost 4 percent a year, sits cupped by mountains. They're at a distance but close enough to be felt. Veined through with creeks and trellised with hiking trails, they are the reason most everyone wants to live here.

I'm a hiker, hunter, fisherman, and father to a son who is emerging from that netherworld of too big for the backpack but not big enough for a long hike. And because I would rather spend time with Corey and my wife than anyone else, for the last couple of years, when we say, "Let's go for a hike," we're really saying, "Let's go for a stroll."

Mostly we've flirted around the edges of the Gallatin National Forest. Lots of sticks bounced rhythmically off of tree trunks, lots of stones pried up from creek sand and tossed into the current with the most satisfying of plops. Photos of wildflowers. The occasional habituated mule deer nosing around old campsites. We've seen ospreys pulling fish from lakes. We've seen river otters and elk and more waterfowl than you can count.

What's more remarkable, however, is what we have not seen. Barbed wire fences across trailheads. "No trespassing" signs. We haven't had to dodge outraged landowners. We've not felt furtive, or put upon. We have felt at home.

My son is devoted to his comic books, as I was. Defensive of his leisure time. Slightly resentful when we ask him to go for a hike. But then he blooms into it. During the course of a morning in the woods, he becomes happier. More carefree. Chatterier. I've seen it time and again.

The history of our national forests is a story of how things can, against all odds, occasionally go right in politics. Everyone can hike these trails, regardless of ethnicity, income, education, language, or politics. Us, me, you, them. They have been our guaranteed inheritance as American citizens. In today's poisonous political context, I find it to be a cheering affirmation of larger cultural values. We are a place, and a people, who acknowledge that yes, this is something we need, something we value. Everyone deserves this.

To hike even ten, fifteen minutes up one of Bozeman's trails, far enough to leave the traffic noise behind, is to gain a perspective that has nothing to do with altitude. It is to find the valve on pressures that maybe you didn't know were building. A recent spat with a spouse, credit card debt, insults and regrets and thwarted ambitions. Ten minutes into the woods, you can be consoled by the syllables of streams, by the sound of wind through pines. You can be pleasantly diminished by the realization that, grand scheme of things, it's not all about you. The bones of the world are fleshed heavy with ongoing narratives, and most of them not of our making. You can come to the woods, or not. Things will proceed. Like most of us, I've taken it for granted.

Until recently.

Until last year's Republican platform included this language: "Congress shall immediately pass universal legislation providing a timely and orderly mechanism requiring the federal government to convey certain federally controlled public lands to the states." The reasonable corollary, the expectation, being that the states will then sell them on the private market.

The umbrage I feel at this. The very personal insult. The outrage on behalf of my son.

Who the hell do these people think they are? To take this away from us.

Until one of the things that define us as Americans, that allow us to say, without irony, that we live in a free country, will have gone the way of the passenger pigeon.

## A Creek of Our Own (continued)

Allen Morris Jones

It's April, as I write this. And from my window, I can see snow falling over the Gallatin National Forest to the south. Nice to see moisture this time of year. Midsummer, that snowpack will still be feeding the Gallatin River. The water we drink.

As I write, we are three months into the presidency of a man whom I despise so thoroughly that I can't write his name, can't listen to his voice on the radio. That his transparent, self-serving con job could have been swallowed wholesale by so many of my fellow voters has represented a tectonic shift in my view of our country. Dishes rattled, chandeliers swayed, and everything in the world moved a few inches to one side. This isn't quite the country that I had thought it was. Racism and misogyny aren't as despised as I had believed; gaudy cynicism more prevalent than I had feared.

Make America great again? As a start, how about keeping it great. Keeping public lands in the hands of the public. Where my son might eventually take one of his kids up into the woods, away from the sound of traffic, to pry stones away from the sand and plop them into the creek. A creek that they will own, along with the rest of our country. All of us.

Even the bastards who want to take it away from him.

*Allen Morris Jones is the publisher of Bangtail Press and author, most recently, of the novel A Bloom of Bones.*

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## P-u-b-l-i-c L-a-n-d-s

Greg Keeler

I found a way to make big bucks,  
If you promise not to tell,  
From a public that must be  
so damned dumb they can't spell.  
So just in case they overhear,  
I'll spell out what works best.  
Yes, I'll tell you the s-e-c-r-e-t  
Of my success.  
Chorus:  
P-u-b-l-i-c  
L-a-n-d-s,  
M-i-l-k them for all  
They're worth and screw the rest.  
Just find you some connections for  
An l-e-a-s-e,  
And if you play your cards right, it's  
Damned near f-r-e-e.  
Yes, the m-i-n-i-n-g  
l-n-d-u-s-t-r-y  
Wants o-p-e-n p-i-t-s under that big sky.  
Never mind the water  
Hold your nose and open wide  
For a heavy metal toxic cocktail  
Laced with cyanide.

Chorus

The F-o-r-e-s-t

S-e-r-v-i-c-e

Wants to sell off grizzly

H-a-b-i-t-a-t.

So get your c-h-a-i-n-

S-a-w-s.

What the hell, it's easy bucks,

And Smokey, he knows best.

Chorus

Watch out for e-n-v-i-r-

O-n-m-e-n

T-a-l-i-s-t-s.

They'll try to stop you when

They see you coming with your saws,

your dozers, and your trucks.

But in the West, them wimps is s-

H-i-t out of luck.

Chorus (then Mickey Mouse Club theme ending)

P-u-b, be a long time 'fore you can drink this.

L-i-c, see where they took off the top of that mountain?

L-a-n-d-s.

*Greg Keeler is a poet, songwriter, and flyfisherman.*



Photo by Steven Gnam

# A Great Equalizing Force

Walter Kirn

Public lands put us on an equal footing; they give people a sense of ownership in the way that only aristocrats had historically. Everywhere else we're trespassing, but when we're enjoying public lands we can do so with a sense of individual and collective freedom. Public lands translate in my mind to space for people — people of every kind, background, income.

One could argue that in Montana people of various social classes mix so freely (and in a way they don't almost anywhere else in America) because public lands are a great equalizing force. There are no such other spaces like this in America. If they disappeared, a terrific sense of togetherness — one that we aren't even necessarily conscious of — would disappear too. They are a place where you don't see anyone who shouldn't belong there. You belong there by virtue of being there. Public lands make people equal.

*Walter Kirn is a novelist and essayist in Livingston, Montana.*

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## Keep Federal Land in Public Hands

Tim Linehan

My wife and I own and operate Linehan Outfitting Company. We provide lodging, fly fishing and hunting guides to clients who travel here from all over the country seeking an adventure. This year we are celebrating twenty-five years in business.

Public lands are the backbone of our life and the lungs of our business. We have the great good fortune of living within the Kootenai National Forest in Lincoln County in the northwest corner of the state. This is a place of dense, coniferous forests, incredible biodiversity, it's rich in fish and game populations, and a place where it smells like Christmas all the time. We never take these public lands for granted. We remind ourselves they are a gift to be treasured and protected at all costs.

These public lands, specifically the 1.8 million acres on the Kootenai National Forest have provided my wife and I, and our staff with a means to make a living. Our guides are now in their middle thirties and are having children. They are making a living, paying their bills, and saving for their children's college tuition due entirely to the fact that they live within an area of public lands where they can pursue their version of the American dream by making a living off the land. And I'm certain you are aware of the trickle down economic effects of businesses like mine that provide income to families and small businesses through a variety of channels.

Our guests often comment on how lucky we are to live here with so much access to these mountains, these valleys, these rivers, lakes and streams. Some are surprised when we remind them it's their land too. This is a national forest, I tell them. Your taxes are also funding the management of this and many other large tracts of public land around the country. I offer, you can come back here anytime on your own and camp, catch a native westslope cutthroat trout, hike to the top of a mountain and stay in an old firetower, slip through the dark timber and chase one of the biggest whitetail bucks you've ever seen, pick huckleberries, ride a snowmobile into the frozen backcountry in January or just sit by the creek with your toes in the water on a summer day. A smile usually spreads slowly across their faces as the reality of the fact sinks in.

We are completely aware that there is a movement within certain political philosophies to sell off public lands or to transfer ownership in some form. And we want you to know we believe that's a terrible idea and totally outside the realm of what's even vaguely appropriate.

There's talk in some circles of transferring ownership of federal lands to individual states. Wait, what? Let's do the real math on that and not offer up alternative facts. Any reasonable person would agree that individual states would have a very difficult time funding and managing vast tracts of public lands and that without doubt, states would have to drastically change the scope of how lands were managed in order to cover cost. While that may have a specific appeal to certain corporations and alt political agendas, the vast majority of American families and small businesses that rely on federal lands to pay bills have made it clear they want federal public lands to stay in public hands.

*Tim and Joanne Linehan own and operate Linehan Outfitting Company in Yaak.*

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## Ours to Lose, Ours to Defend

Ben Long

The German-born wildlife artist Carl Rungius emigrated to America and earned a global reputation in the galleries of New York the roaring 20s. When Hitler took power in the 1930s, he wanted Rungius back in the Fatherland, painting propaganda posters for the Third Reich.

Hitler's emissary found Rungius at Banff National Park, in Alberta, and tried to woo Rungias back to Europe. The Nazi diplomat, knowing of Rungius's fondness for nature and the hunt, said Goebbels would give him permission to hunt the imperial estates of Germany.

Rungius gestured toward the sweeping grandeur of the Rocky Mountains and said: "This is my hunting estate now. I don't need anyone's permission." Rungius had become an American and cited one of the great ideas of North America: that access to nature, be it in Banff National Park, Yellowstone, or the great national forests he loved in the United States, belonged to ALL people. Unlike Europe, where hunting estates were the realm of the moneyed and blooded elites, America's wild nature was there to inspire and challenge all of us.

That, certainly, was the aim when President Theodore Roosevelt created our national forests, including the Kootenai National Forests where I live, in northwestern Montana.

## Ours to Lose, ours to Defend (continued)

Ben Long

There is a mountain on the Kootenai that I consider my "hunting estate." On a day with good tracking snow I have followed the spoor of seven distinct species of big game. In one day. That spot is part of me at some isotopic level. The mountain has fed me protein from its elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, trout and forest grouse for 25 years. By my count, my friends and I have packed 18 head of big game off that mountain. Literally tons of meat, which we ate and fed our families. It literally sustained us.

Frankly, the mountain does not give a rip for me and has made that abundantly clear many times: the time it left me chilled near to hypothermia in a rainstorm; the many times I've been bewildered in a blizzard; once I stumbled at close range upon a bear gorging on a gut-pile and for a moment feared it was a cranky grizzly instead of the timid black bear that cannonballed off at first sight of me.

My fondness for the mountain is heartfelt, if unrequited. I have watched too many golden eagles soar below me on the open ridgeline to not grow a deep affection for the place. I have seen the fog lift from too many dawns, like God's own veil swept from his grandest sculpture, the Cabinet Mountains. I have taken too many deep, satisfying afternoon naps in the duff beneath Ponderosa pines that were old centuries before the first white explorers passed through Kootenai country.

When Theodore Roosevelt created the national forest system, he was disparaged by many and called, among other things, a Bolshevik. Today, those same sorts of critics want to dispose of our public estate entirely because it does not square with their ideology of what America should be. We should not be surprised. America is largely a capitalist country where we keep score with dollars, hold property rights and unfettered business enterprise near sacred.

But there is something else in America besides the bold line between what is yours and what is mine. There is what is ours. And to be truthful, "my" little mountain on the Kootenai National Forest is not merely mine, it is ours. The entire national forest system, and the entire 640-million-acre public estate, is ours.

Our national forests are important to all 1 million Montanans, but are likewise important to all 320 million Americans. You cannot wrest something away from 319 million owners and give it to a smaller group of people (any group of people) without being called out for what it is: theft on a grand scale. A most unpatriotic theft at that.

Our national forests are our national treasure. But they are not merely ours, either. They also belong to our children. For those, as Roosevelt said, in the womb of time.

But today, they are ours. Ours to use. Ours to enjoy. Ours to defend. Ours to lose.

*Ben Long is a father, outdoorsman, and conservationist in Kalispell.*

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## Keep the Promise

Tom McGuane

The West's famous optimism is defined by its great spaces where the original American dream of freedom is palpable. Montana is uncommonly blessed by its vast public lands; indeed they define us. But there is a persistent effort to take these lands away as we have seen at the armed occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. This abominable activity was not even condemned by the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee who with his colleagues would prefer to remove public lands from the American public altogether. The head poobah of this committee, Rob Bishop, renowned for his smart ass commentary and craving for Diet Coke, has managed to change house rules so that transfer of public lands would be achieved at "no cost" to the government. A no-cost transfer of public assets is unheard of but will make it easier to glom what we have had for so long. Usually, this bad idea is pitched to a credulous local public with the come-on that the states would do a better job managing public lands. But history shows us that states cannot afford to do so and when such transfers occur, the states hang onto the profitable portions and rest gets privatized. If Montanans haven't seen enough keep-out signs to suit them, this plan would be a bonanza. Others see it as a catastrophe that would change Montana forever and abolish its promise to all of us.

Ryan Zinke knows better, has seen the glaciers shrink with his own eyes, but he has entered a world where pandering is the coin of the realm, serving an administration virtually at war with the natural world. Gianforte might be happier if Montana began to resemble his native New Jersey but longer term stakeholders wouldn't like it much. Judge Gorsuch won't be taking a hard look at the Citizens United ruling which says that corporations are people just like your wife, your dentist or your mail man. The Supreme Court has long lost its ethical prestige since it went into politics but retains the power to keep rogue rulings like this one in place. It's no accident that climate change research fell off a cliff when the Supreme Court confirmed Citizens United the very title of which, as compared to its reality, elevates bullshit to a fine art.

No one thinks jobs are unimportant but the sly bottom feeders in government use their promise to sell schemes whose great advantages accrue to themselves. There's nothing wrong with having local people dig the Keystone Pipeline; just give them a cut when the polluting goo comes out the other end. As it is, undeserving One Percenters rake it in right after they've sold locals another load of temporary jobs. These workers are good people who believe they are contributing to the nation's energy independence and seem unaware that the gunk is bound for other shores. The Canadians could have taken the short route to Prince Rupert but no one up there wants to keep this gunk around.

Private property is a fine thing and empowers us to keep strangers off the lawn. But public lands are how we entrust each other as Americans and what makes Montanans of all political inclinations feel so lucky, and so disinclined to be bullied. Keep this in mind as you vote at the special election. Let's keep what we've got.

*Tom McGuane is a writer in McLeod, Montana*

# Keep it Public

Scott McMillion

I don't worry so much about losing our wilderness areas and national parks. I don't think the takers could stand up to the fight if they tried to grab those jewels. It's the smaller chunks of land that I fear for, the places with scars and without fame or constituency.

A couple years ago, my grandson and I were hunting a sliver of national forest land adjoining the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness, even though we'd just driven past about 300 elk on the wrong side of the barbed wire. We found a few beds and some fresh turds. And we found something remarkable: bear scratches on a young lodgepole pine and, just below them, scrape marks where a buck or bull had taken out his frustrations in the previous rut. Two species, predator and prey, marking the same tree. It was cool.

That patch of land is close enough to town that you can hear the train whistles and it's rugged enough to keep most people out, but not enough to keep the loggers out. They cut a bunch of Douglas firs there twenty years ago and you can still see the skid trails, though the roads have long been closed.

Despite that, the country remains wild enough for all kinds of animals. The logging occurred as part of a complicated land swap back in the 90s, one that paid with trees for valuable grizzly habitat in another drainage. I supported the trade at the time and still do. The logging was fairly aggressive but plenty of trees remain and I'd like to see them stay there. A new owner might have a different view, depending on timber prices.

I really enjoy a very different and distant piece of public land, a place where I chase dogs and birds through the sagebrush every year. It's on the prairie south of Malta and the Bureau of Reclamation manages it. That outfit spends a lot of time draining or damming streams around the West but also allows cattle grazing. Some years the place gets pretty cowbombed: shit smeared and denuded of grass. Other years, it looks pretty lush, and the bird hunting improves when there's more ground cover. I'd like to see the grazing managed better, especially in dry years, but a private owner likely would focus more on the size of his calves than the number of game birds.

I fear that places like these likely would be on the short list for land sales or giveaways. They aren't on a lot of radar screens and they don't produce much revenue, though private owners might squeeze some dollars from them. And they'd have the right to paint the fenceposts orange, to tell me to go away.

All of our public lands are important, even the bruised places. As a nation, we argue over where and whether to drill, log or dam. But when those proposals arise, we all get to eyeball the details, weigh the pros and cons, pitch in on the debate. It can be tedious, but it's important.

And if the land goes private, we can't even have the conversation.

*Scott McMillion is the editor of Montana Quarterly magazine and the author of Mark of the Grizzly.*

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# No Compromise

Miles Nolte

I'm not a fan of cell phones. Having one is necessary, however, for practical reasons, and I am not impractical, at least not entirely. Wearing clothes in hot weather is unpleasant too, but we choose our sacrifices.

My phone's wallpaper shows the first licks of sunrise on a high cloud morning over a river valley. The water flows dark, reflecting touches of orange sky. In the distance, ragged hills claw the horizon, the snow covering them is barely visible, but I know it's there. I know because I took that photo from atop a hill on the opposite side of the river valley, climbed that hill well before dawn, boots biting wet clay through the previous night's dusting.

The photo itself is poorly lit. It would mean little to a stranger who happened upon my phone, slipped from pocket, lying silent on gravel at a trailhead. If anything, they'd probably notice the skyline, the pastel sunrise: yellows, purples, blues, oranges. But that's only the upper third of the frame, and not the most important part, at least not to me. The most important part is the land: the twisting valley, the tangled cottonwoods, alders, and willows that appear as darkness, lifelessness, nothingness, empty space. The shaded, in-between spaces, these I covet.

I took that photo from one of my favorite places to watch the world wake. That place is, for now at least, available to all Americans willing to exert the effort to get there. In the fall, deer appear and disappear between the liminal, shaded underbrush, and pheasant cackle up the light. The hike is steep, just treacherous enough to be interesting, and just long enough to coat me in sweat. Watching the sunrise on an icicle morning, tucked into a rock fold, steam rising from my collar, knowing I'll soon cool into discomfort. Dry twigs. Cold sage. The photo brings me these images. That's why it posters my cell phone.

To those who have never tasted them, never wetted ankles in creeks, or scratched knuckles against boulders, our public lands are the photograph on my phone. They might see the pretty sky, but miss the richness beneath. That beauty must be known to be valued. Public lands are not valueless, as Congress asserted. But what can we expect from those who don't know?

Most Montanans know, and we should be angry. If we allow our land to be traded, sold off, locked up, razed, plowed, drilled, dug, blasted, grazed, exploited, we will be the last ones to know its value. Our public lands will become shadows in old photos. We stand to lose our visceral understanding of the complicated, brutal, sublime, minimalist, uncaring poetry of place, to lose the spaces that teach us to experience ourselves as human animals. These experiences do not exist on screens and cannot be represented in ones and zeros. They cannot be created by laws of men, but they can be destroyed by them.

Carrying a cell phone and wearing pants in summer are compromises I will abide, but when it comes to our land, compromise is unacceptable.

*Miles Nolte is the Angling Columnist for Gray's Sporting Journal, and an avid supporter of public lands.*



# The Blackfeet Nation

Andrea Peacock

Nowhere in the West does the rolling sea of the high plains meet the mountains with such dramatic effect as in northwestern Montana. State Highway 2 stretches through the northern Hi-Line for miles of coulees and intermittent creeks, antelope, buffalo and Plains Indian country, crossing the seemingly endless, expansive prairie that gives the Big Sky Country its name, before crashing abruptly into the Rocky Mountain Front. A patchwork of national park and national forests, reservation and rangeland, the sparsely populated Front provides one of the last best refuges in the lower 48 states for grizzly bears, and shelters the nation's largest bighorn sheep herd. A great span of wilderness totaling five million acres that extends from the capital in Helena to the Canadian border, the Front hosts every single species of animal that lived here when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived 200 years ago, with the exception of free-ranging bison.

Oil and gas companies have coveted the Rocky Mountain Front — known to geologists as the Montana Thrust Belt — for decades. The kind of violent tectonics responsible for this dramatic scenery tends to create pockets for oil and gas reservoirs. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated in 2002 that the Belt might harbor some 8.6 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 109 million barrels of oil and 240 million barrels of natural gas liquids. Environmentalists argue these amounts are miniscule compared to our national needs; industry folks counter that every bit helps. But no one really knows what lies underground, because in 2006 Congress banned leasing along the Front.

The ban capped off a 30-year campaign to Save the Front (the rallying cry of the coalition of ranchers, outfitters and environmentalists who oppose drilling there), but probably had less to do with their political power, and nearly everything to do with the Blackfeet Nation.

The Blackfeet reservation sits at the north end of the Front, straddling the foothills abutting Glacier National Park to the west. The Blackfeet are large people — imposing in stature and big-hearted, a physical and spiritual match to the landscape. One of only six tribes in the United States whose reservation occupies their ancestral homeland, their 19th century reputation as fierce and fearsome warriors survives to this day.

The Blackfoot Confederacy includes three groups in Canada, with the Blackfeet (or South Piegan, or Pikuni) the sole tribe settling south of the border. The Confederacy's territory once stretched from the Northwest Territories to the north end of present-day Yellowstone National Park.

Historians date the Blackfeet's tenure in the Northern Rockies at a mere 300 years. But as one archaeologist told me, the combination of linguistics, oral tradition, mythology, and archaeology makes possible an 8,500 year time span or more. Tribal Historic Preservation Officer John Murray cites 10,000-year-old archaeological sites in the nearby mountains tied to his people. The Nation's website proclaims: "We come from right here."

At the heart of "here" is a smallish piece of land, 130,000 acres southwest of the reservation. Technically, the Badger-Two Medicine is national forest land, and to the naked eye is not distinguishable from the rest of the Lewis and Clark National Forest. But the Badger is the key to what happened here and why.

The Badger-Two Medicine is part of the Backbone of the World. It's full of mountains named for the supernatural beings who live there, "other-than-human persons," as one writer calls them: Morningstar, Poia, the colorful Thunder bird, Wind Maker, and Medicine Grizzly. "It is precisely this mythic understanding of kinship and reciprocity with the land — all rocks, plants and animals — which empowers the Badger-Two Medicine as a sacred landscape," writes author Jay Vest.

When oil companies Chevron and Fina were poised in 1993 to send in their drilling rigs, Floyd "Tiny Man" Heavy Runner told reporters, "What you're doing is putting us on the road to extinction. We are here to notify you that we have no alternatives. We are not going to stand back."

Almost 25 years later, it's still the landscape that unites Montanans. Without this wild land beneath our feet, without the fierce and resilient animals that live there, our lives become commonplace, our days dull and lonely. This is where we take our stand, this is where we bury our hearts. To quote the late Edward Abbey, we stand for what we stand on.

*(Excerpted from a series produced with the support of the Alicia Patterson Foundation.) Andrea Peacock is a journalist and the co-owner of Elk River Books in Livingston.*

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## Veterans for Rob Quist

Doug Peacock

I am writing as an American veteran. My own war was Vietnam and I brought back with me the common baggage of that war: Three combat decorations, the least of which is a Bronze Star, along with a combat disability. I was a Green Beret, a Special Forces medic and for the last 35 years, I've worked with veterans and veteran groups. I write books, help organize and lead veteran trips into wilderness landscapes, trekking in the desert or skiing and mountaineering in Montana — the wounds of war run the spectrum.

These days, I work mostly with younger warriors from Iraq and Afghanistan, protecting rhinos from poachers in Africa or fighting for public lands in Montana. Our key battle today is to elect Rob Quist to Congress. We hunt and fish and heal on those public lands and Rob's wealthy opponent has been known to oppose public access. I also believe climate change is today's greatest threat and I don't want a Congressman representing Montana who doesn't believe in science. Quist will fight for all of us, defend our access, our firearms and our wildlands. Rob Quist is a man of the people and it is crucial we elect him to serve Montana.

*Doug Peacock is a decorated Vietnam war vet, author, father, husband, and longtime grizzly bear activist.*

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## A Pioneering Idea

David Quammen

The Statue of Liberty stands on a piece of federal land, known as Liberty Island, but "federal" doesn't mean it belongs to Washington. The National Park Service administers it, but it doesn't belong to that agency. It belongs to a schoolteacher in Vermont, a coal miner in West Virginia, a waitress in Las Vegas, a tattooist in San Francisco, and to you, and to me, and to every other American citizen. Liberty Island is public land.

## A Pioneering Idea (continued)

David Quammen

Those facts are worth remembering now amid the post-election clamor about shrinking the federal government and — among other constrictions — its role in land stewardship. Sell off the federal lands, some critics urge, or give them away to the states! Unload, transfer to local control, privatize! The 2016 Republican platform instructs Congress to divest “certain federally controlled public lands” to the states, without specifying which lands.

Public lands under federal management, including not just national monuments but also national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges and other entities, deliver enormous value, of several sorts, to the communal and individual lives of Americans.

We pioneered this idea of protecting landscape for all the people. On March 1, 1872, Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill creating Yellowstone National Park, America’s first and the world’s first such place, “set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Those words reflected the wisdom that all citizens have spiritual and recreational needs, as well as economic needs, and that access to open landscape helps feed the hungers of the soul.

Parks are only the most obvious, least controversial form of public lands. Yellowstone Park lies embedded in a Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, a larger zone of contiguous, wildish landscape, encompassing 10 times as much area as the park itself and including portions of five national forests, three national wildlife refuges, Grand Teton National Park and parcels administered by the Bureau of Land Management — all of that federal — as well as some state and private lands and part of the Wind River Indian Reservation. The park boundaries are unfenced, and wildlife flows back and forth across them.

Take away just the non-park federal lands from that geographical mosaic — which would be a horrendous hit to what Yellowstone is — and you would disrupt migration corridors, reduce winter range and otherwise subtract habitat from the elk, the pronghorns, the mule deer and other creatures that live their lives in and out of the park. You would severely jeopardize the survival of the Yellowstone grizzly bear. Yellowstone Park is big, relative to other national parks, but it’s too small to serve as a solitary ark for the fauna Americans go there to see.

National forests and national grasslands, managed by the United States Forest Service for multiple uses, amount to 193 million acres, mainly in the West. Besides offering timber for extraction and harboring wildlife, those watersheds supply fresh water to 66 million people. Those lands also provide outdoor recreation for hikers, hunters, fishermen, skiers and snowmobilers. (Proponents of divestiture should check with the National Rifle Association and the National Wildlife Federation to be reminded how hunters feel about public lands.) Among the various economic benefits of public lands, outdoor recreation alone contributes \$646 billion annually in consumer spending, and 6.1 million jobs. These are the tangibles.

The intangibles are important, too. Teddy Roosevelt, a great Republican president, understood that American landscapes had both tested and nurtured our uniquely American spirit, stubborn as it is, and that any citizen might find joy or solace in a day, or a night, spent outdoors. That’s why he signed the Antiquities Act, in 1906, and used it to designate 15 national monuments, including Devils Tower, Muir Woods and one at the Grand Canyon, which later became a national park.

In the 11 decades since, other presidents and their administrations have designated more than 140 additional national monuments and national historic landmarks, ranging from Admiralty Island in Alaska to Yucca House, a Pueblo archaeological site in Colorado, to Fort Matanzas in Florida. African Burial Ground National Monument preserves a small site, on Duane Street in Lower Manhattan, where 15,000 African people, mostly enslaved, some free, were buried during colonial times. It was protected in 2006, under custodianship of the National Park Service, by declaration of President George W. Bush.

That’s valuable real estate. Should we sell it? Of course not, nor Yellowstone, nor Muir Woods, nor Grand Staircase-Escalante, nor Liberty Island either.

I spoke recently with Will Rogers, the C.E.O. of the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit organization that helps protect great public landscapes and create parks, even small parks, closer to where children live. “Our democracy is bound up in these places,” he told me, then added, “I hope.”

*David Quammen is the author, most recently, of *Yellowstone: A Journey Through America’s Wild Heart*. Portions of this essay originally appeared in a *New York Times* Op Ed.*

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## Sacred

Shann Ray

The value of our public lands in Montana cannot be underestimated: it is lifeblood to the heart of the nation. I understand our public lands to be physical, visceral, and worthy of complete devotion. To me they are an essence, the spirit of God moving over the waters, a place of mountains, rivers, sky, and plains, a home of soul, the embodiment of ultimate expansion in people, a place robust with natural fierceness and beauty, a vessel of unconditional atonement, a humbling landscape, a land where mercy and justice meet one another; a place where truth and beauty kiss each other. Sacredness exists in the wilderness of landscape, animals, forests, wildlife, and in the wilderness of the human heart. Our public lands summon this sacredness. I unite with others to declare we protect, preserve, and expand our public lands forever.

*Shann Ray, author of *American Masculine*, grew up in Montana and still wanders the nearly 100 mountain ranges as often as he can.*

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## Drawing Lines

Russell Rowland

When you drive along these roads, whether it’s the four-lane highway, the narrow strip of asphalt that takes you from one 200 person town to another 200 person town, or the gravel road where people still erect a finger or two in greeting, you think to yourself that there’s more than enough for everyone. This land stretches out in every direction, naked and vulnerable, in a way that makes it impossible to not fall in love. And there’s just so damn much of it.

And yet there are lines. Lines you can’t see. Lines drawn on a map somewhere that tell you not to stop along that road and get out of your car; hop that fence, take a walk and smell that deep, rich grass. Dip your hands in that stream. And it’s the ones who draw those lines that decide whether we get to walk here, or here, or here.

## Drawing Lines (continued)

Russell Rowland

The Natives didn't understand ownership. We handed them pieces of paper and pointed out where the lines were and they thought the whole idea was absurd. They knew that none of us really own anything. They probably didn't even take it seriously at first, these papers with lines. So when we offered \$24, a handful of beads, a week's supply of meat, it seemed like a good deal. Because we didn't really mean they couldn't come on the land again forever, right? Because there really seemed to be more than enough for everyone. Wasn't that obvious?

Until the guns came out when they crossed the lines. And suddenly they realized, Hey, these guys are serious about these lines. They're not messing around!

It's that kind of sneak attack that always gets us in the end. It's the way they tell you what you want to hear, offer a few tokens while they're drawing these lines behind your back. They're clever that way, being able to create such beautiful lines. Lines you'd never think were possible.

*Russell Rowland is the author of three novels and one work of nonfiction, Fifty-Six Counties: A Montana Journey.*

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## Moving to Montana

Brian Schott

I moved to Montana when I was 23 because there was space to breathe. The lesser-known haunts of the Flathead National Forest opened me up inside as I wondered what to do in the world. My goal that summer was to reduce my life to the bones. Explore the woods. Read. Work enough to live. The lands owned by all of us made all the difference.

Near Tally Lake, I rented an old cabin. I explored game trails with no particular direction, just followed rutted paths past huckleberry bushes and stalks of budding bear grass. I fly fished remote creeks, picked mushrooms rising up from a recent burn. The forest floor had never before offered me a reason to really look. How many times had I walked among the trees, lost in some thought, missing everything that I was stepping on? The woods brought me new gifts every day. What would I give back to the world?

During my time wandering, I discovered that there is a vast difference between being lonely and being alone. And much of it depends on an ever-present, distant voice. An intimate relationship with thought.

Who could ever think of selling public lands? Even one acre.

In the woods I saw everything more clearly. A spider web in the moonlight. A dewdrop on the petal of a Glacier Lily. I pressed my hand into moose prints by a pond shore.

One afternoon as I sat by a pond gazing at ducks, a moose walked by me. It was massive — its muscular horse legs rose up from the earth, attached to a barrel body with taut skin, like a huge burlap sack of sand. It paused and stared back at me; big apricot eyes below its jagged rack of dirty bone, cupped upward like shallow bowls. It looked curious, like it was thinking, considering me too. Then it moved on.

I became wilder and without worry that summer. I thought about the cost of making money. Sure, you might make good money, but how much does it cost you? I was on the right track. It didn't matter if I didn't know where it would lead.

The next day I walked through a meadow filled with butterflies, the light flashing on their wings as they rose up to the sky. Stay here in Montana, I thought. Read and write. Continue to learn how to live. You'll figure it out.

The public lands of Montana helped me determine how to live as a man. Wildly carefully. Too many people I saw had lost the dream, been gobbled up by life, and forgot about living. My time in the woods was about saving my future self. I had \$17 in the bank, but I was rich beyond my dreams.

One evening near the end of summer, I saw a mountain lion — from tip to tail it must have been six feet long. It flashed in front of me on the trail and was gone. Deadly power and frightful grace, a sleek outline I will never forget.

The lands we all own changed me. Made me who I am. One acre less is an affront to all that is good.

*Brian Schott is the founding editor of Whitefish Review.*

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## Our Public Lands

Robert Stubblefield

Growing up on a small farm and ranch in eastern Oregon provided me an early love for solitary pursuits and open spaces and a robust dislike for greedy elitists. The commonplace in our corner was that the wealthy and powerful, individual and institution alike, did not wish us we.

Quail hunting along our fields and fencerows armed with my .410, "a boy's first gun," as Charles Portis writes in *Dog of the South*, served me fine in those early years. When an early, deep snow drove chukar partridge down from the rimrocks and I caught sight and sound of their elegantly subdued plumage and muscular beauty, I was forever hooked, knowing I would pursue them along the rimrocks and river canyons as long as I am able.

The sagebrush and juniper steppes and canyons offering prime chukar habitat were primarily on Bureau of Land Management administered lands. Outfitted with a map and a twelve-gauge, I set forth, finding chukar along the margins of springs and seeps during the warm and dry days of October; then coveying and bursting from thick shrub cover in deep, powdery snows of early January.

Hunting and accessing public lands in many ways offered a primer for citizenship. I learned to read a map, to understand and respect lines and boundaries, but just as, or more importantly, how to stand up to bullies who would attempt to deny access to what was rightfully mine.

## Our Public Lands (continued)

Robert Stubblefield

And that robust dislike of greedy elitists? A little more complicated once I recognized my dual privilege in accessing public lands while continuing to hunt on family property. Still, it was a position I never again took for granted. I would have never developed the passion for pursuing chukar partridge, nor expended the sweat and taken the pleasure from that pursuit without access to those BLM parcels.

There are differing forms of pride of ownership. Most tend toward the greedy, exclusionist, and corrosive, but to actually consider that we are all owners of our public lands is to realize the communal and inclusionary, which is what I fear troubles those who would advocate dispersal and disposal of our public lands.

On my first trail run of the season along Mount Sentinel's (yes — public land) I pause and take in the distant peaks of the Bitterroot and Lolo National Forests and Selway-Bitterroot and Rattlesnake Wilderness areas. In the foreground lies the Clark Fork River, restored following the removal of Milltown Dam, the Bitterroot River, and a string of fishing access sites and trailheads to occupy and entertain, heal and restore for a lifetime of summers.

This birthright is accessible to all only if we continue exercising our rights and responsibilities, remaining vigilant, informed, and involved. Lolo Peak shines in equinoctial afternoon light. Runners, walkers, strollers, babies, bicyclists, birders, and daydreamers alike — all equal owners of that glistening peak. Would anyone present on this day consider squandering their share or auctioning it off for pennies?

*Robert Stubblefield grew up in eastern Oregon and currently lives in Missoula, Montana and teaches at The University of Montana.*

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## The Path of Water

Todd Tanner

Every day, we — my wife, my son and I — are infused with the blessings of public lands. And not in some vague, generalized, ambivalent sense. When my family turns on the tap, water that falls as rain or snow on the Swan Range a mile or so to our east - water that works its way down through the cracks and crevices of those sheer, gorgeous, publicly-owned mountains - comes gushing out from our faucet and slakes our thirst.

That water follows a traceable path. It starts high up with the grizzlies, the elk and the mountain goats and then trickles down into the ancient bones of the mountains, where it turns west as a subtle yet massive movement of groundwater, cold and pure and perfect, pushing into our valley. It gives birth to Wolf Creek, which offers shelter and sustenance to wild trout, and it percolates up through the myriad springs and seeps on our land, where it also fills our well with the essence of life.

When I walk out the front door and look east towards the Continental Divide, I know that those mountains — public lands, owned by “we the people” — are not just there for the hunters, anglers, hikers, bikers, horseback riders, skiers, berry pickers and campers who visit them on a regular basis. They're also the origin of the single most valuable commodity known to man.

Water is life. I can't say that enough. And here in the West it's impossible to build a wall between our public lands and our waters; we can not separate the source from the spring, the mother from the child. I look up at those mountains and I am humbled. Preserved as a legacy by the founders of this country, it's up to us to protect our public lands for our families and for future generations. I only hope that we're up to the task.

*Todd Tanner writes about it all from his home in Bigfork, Montana.*

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## A Priceless Right

Toby Thompson

The difference between accessing public rather than private land is the difference between wading a stream to reach a meadow and crossing a road to face a gate.

This has been brought home to me less in Montana, where free access to national forests is a right, than in New York where for years I lived near Central Park. To watch just a few of its 40 million annual visitors enter its woodsy environs is to watch a population reaching for, then grasping sanity. In contrast, 30 blocks south, at Gramercy Park — a two-acre private green with a locked iron gate — a frustrated citizenry stares through its fence at a few privileged New Yorkers taking the air in a landscaped Victorian garden.

In Montana that contrast is analogous to one between camping in the Gallatin National Forest and an RV lot near Billings. At Livingston, I can walk two blocks from my house to a highwater mark of the Yellowstone River, or drive six miles to a trailhead in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and approach something like sanity. That right is priceless.

*Toby Thompson is the author of five nonfiction books. He teaches writing at Penn State University and lives part of each year in Livingston, Montana.*



Photo by Tom Murphy  
www.wetakeourstand.org 20

# Protect This Place

Carter G. Walker

It could be any season here. The hills always golden, the clouds swept like a scatter of bones across a pale sky. The grasses blow this way, then that, waves in an ochre sea. When the wind is loud it smells sharp with juniper. When there is barely a breeze, I smell sage.

I come here less than I used to, twenty years ago, before kids, when time was cheap. But I come here still when I need to. And I do need to.

Lately, I come here a lot.

I come like a wounded animal that needs to lie down. I come in joy too, in my gratitude for beauty I can walk across. I come for the way my heart beats fast on the climb, and the way my whole body slows when I rest in the limestone windbreak.

I love this place because I know it.

I know the cracks in the cliff where a child can climb up, and the ones where a dog can get down. I know where the tipi rings are, and the ancient cairns. But I never remember the way down through the trees. Never once in twenty years. I find it new every time.

The truth is, I come here to be lost.

On trails like stretchmarks over sandy earth, I see boot prints, hoof prints, paw prints, none of them mine.

When she was seven, my oldest daughter found bone shards. Together we imagined the mother and child who might have worked those same bones into a tool or a toy a thousand years before. Sissel was disappointed when I asked her to empty her fat pockets of bones and rocks, but she understood this place needed to stay as it was, so other people might find what we found.

Some years later, I picked up maybe the same shards with my niece and nephews from a faraway city. "How many children do you think have held these old bones?" I asked, teaching them to lick their fingers to tell bone from rock. "None," they said. As if we were the first, the only. As if the last thousand years had never happened.

I would bring you here if I could. You who can protect this place. With your voice. Your vote.

I would walk you up the gentle side trail, pointing out orange lichen and the almost-neon-green moss that grows beneath wind-twisted sagebrush. I would bring my dog, and we would laugh as tiny clumps of cactus turn this lumbering Lab into a Lipizzaner. I'd dig my fingernails into juniper berries and offer you a whiff. I'd show you where I came eye-to-eye with a hawk once, a surprise that I remember in my body. I'd tell you how I wait for that bird to come back.

We'd sit in the windbreak and look out over the wide valley to the snow-covered mountains beyond. I'd ask if you have a place like this.

It's yours, I'd say then.

Ours. Ours to lose, ours to defend.

*Carter G. Walker is a writer in Bozeman.*

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## Landscape Without Figures

Alan Weltzien

From Highway 278 eastbound after Badger Pass

Just beyond a chute fringed by lodgepole the roadbed rises then breasts, sagebrush clumps forever and the Beaverhead Valley unrolls, widening ripples in a giant pond, girded by near and distant ranges with local names tagged to memory. Somewhere in this broad brown bowl capped by winter snow a river runs through it and borders the town called home this quarter century, invisible in the big round view where riparian zones retreat to mountain shoulders and sheds or houses, infrequent, shrink below vision and what's changed since William Clark and crew trod through and long before them, Shoshone hunted and fished? Where is the crowded 21st century in this Montana panorama, this wide-angle basin and range? Where am I, a dot between wagging sagebrush? Novelist Thomas Savage said, "it's impossible. . . to look at the horizon. . . and consider that there is such a thing as Europe or neighbors or anything else." Big Sky Country shrinks a guy, enfolds me within countless open benches and ridges like standing on a mountaintop, growing tiny amidst a jumble of aspiring points. I lose myself in the curving rim without end that cups my middle life.

*Alan Weltzien teaches at the University of Montana Western in Dillon.*



Photo by Steven Gnam

# Every Blade of Grass

Richard Wheeler

I've often thought of public lands as the fruits of stewardship. Miraculously, given our acquisitive nature, our federal and state governments have set aside something of our natural world for future generations. Little did our fathers understand that this stewardship, this sequestering of nature from our itch to own and control every acre and every animal, would soon be our best hope, our salvation. Thanks to our public lands, we can still believe our children and our children's children, can find peace and joy and sustenance in the blessed fields and hills of the natural world. Every blade of grass blesses us.

*Richard Wheeler is a writer who lives in Livingston.*

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## Shared Dividends

Todd Wilkinson

The truth is there's no example on Earth where conservation, over time, has not generated huge economic, social, cultural, ecological and spiritual dividends. Rural people get this. In Montana, our pride as a state is owed to how we work together across fencelines in a cooperative way.

We respect private property rights while holding as holy our shared interest in public lands.

None of this is very complicated; it's not about us versus them; it's about who will best represent the kind of Montana values we cradle for our kids; it's about who absolutely, positively understands in their heart, mind and gut why public lands are a sacred part of being a Montanan. Fortunately, it's also clear who we can trust. Conversely, it's obvious who the desperate people are who believe, arrogantly, they can buy elections, who will say or do anything to get elected, who tout alternative facts, and who, at the end of the day, will claim to stand behind public lands but we know they can't be trusted. They insist they will go to Washington, D.C. to drain the swamp but Montanans know such candidates aren't genuine. Montanans are smart. We know who the candidate of true grit really is.

*Todd Wilkinson is a writer in Bozeman, Montana.*

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## Fighting for the Wild and the Human Spirit

Louisa Willcox

I was 14 when I first saw the impossible white spine of the Northern Rockies. Nothing in my life up to that point had prepared me for their immensity, having been raised in tidy, fenced farm country of southeastern Pennsylvania. I was drawn into these strange and magical mountains as a hound tracks fresh scent. I did not ask why, I just went.

I would eventually traverse all 21 mountain ranges in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, some numerous times, particularly its most massive: Wyoming's Wind River Range. Indeed, the spell of the wilderness has not been broken for me in nearly half a century.

The idea that these were public lands, that all citizens own and have responsibility for them, didn't mean much at first. I was simply consumed by feelings — of freedom, of adventure, of being in touch with part of myself I did not know existed, of breaking the strict codes that came with a Quaker upbringing. And, of course, there were the wild animals like bison and wolves, that had long since been killed off back east in the interest of "progress" and protecting private property.

Freedom was at the center of my family's tradition, but it was of a different species. We had some property. Caring for it — pulling weeds, picking rocks — was all consuming. Indeed all the land I had known till I went West was owned and controlled by somebody.

The first time it sunk in that the wilderness I loved was publicly owned was when the oil and gas industry wanted to exploit it, in the late 70s. This was my land too, and I could do something about it — but not alone. It would take a team — some with political savvy, or legal or scientific knowledge — but all on fire with love and outrage.

This battle against big oil and the successful ones that followed were fought on multiple fronts, using multiple angles. I do not recall one hero ever winning the day. It took many of us — mostly a rag tag assemblage of folks who lived nearby or who cared from afar. I never ceased to be amazed at the power of ordinary people working collectively to stop even the largest multinational corporation in its tracks.

While the banner we fought under was "protecting the public lands," for me and for others the real reason was a deeply emotional connection rooted in lived experience in a wild place and, most often, in the company of wild animals. The most effective interns I trained over the years — and there were many — were often the ones with longest spiritual tap roots in a particular place, often with a particular animal. My animal was — and still is — the grizzly bear.

There were light moments, but most of the campaigns I was involved in during the last three decades were deadly serious, because the stakes were so high. We know how to wreck wilderness. We've succeeded in 99% of the country. We haven't yet learned how to repair it. For me, the places we have lost to development, like parts of Wyoming's upper Green River country, still feel like open wounds.

I have gone grey and bear the scars of decades battling for our public lands — our collective emotional space. Never did I imagine that anyone would be talking about selling them off to the highest bidder — as are the rabid ideologues who currently control Congress. There is no returning if we go down that path. The wild places that I love — that so many of us love — in Montana would be tamed and degraded forever.

I have a memento that keeps me going sometimes. It is a red chert hand-axe I found high in the Bighorn Mountains, under an ancient

## Fighting for the Wild and the Human Spirit (continued)

Louisa Willcox

whitebark pine, in the shadow of Cloud Peak. It fits perfectly in my right hand.

The Bighorns were the favorite haunts of Crazy Horse, the Lakota warrior who led the campaign that brought down Custer and the US Cavalry for a time. Native peoples had no concept of private vs. public lands. The Earth was quite simply their mother. The connection to her was spiritual, which helps explain why they fought so hard to resist the European conquest.

The fight for the wild is now, as then, a fight for the human spirit.

*Louisa Willcox has advocated for wilderness and wildlife preservation in the Northern Rockies for over 30 years, and serves on the boards of Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative and The Wildlands Project.*

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## Our Dirt

Pat Williams

**W**e know this dirt beneath our boots  
and that which touch the sky.  
We know all but land  
will blow away  
and  
what is left  
is dirt  
and  
sky.

*Pat Williams has taught students from sixth grade through graduate school. He served in the U.S. Congress for nine terms from 1979 until 1997.*

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## The Land is too Important

Rick Bass

**W**hether U.S. Forest Service lands in Kootenai country, up in the Yaak, in the far northwestern corner of the state, or Bureau of Land Management lands at the farthestmost southeastern corner, down in the lovely Tongue River country — it is the shape of the land that gives Montana the contours of its character. Fire and flood are, to say the least, not unknown to us. But this May, we face a risk of the unnatural variety, one that can take away our Montana land not for a season or any other finite period of time, but forever. The choice in our May 25th special election is between empowering one of our own, who would keep public lands in public hands, or yet another member of the current party-in-power, which has for decades sought to liquidate public lands, and as recently as this year offered up yet another bill to do this, “disposing” of over 3 million acres of public land in the West.

Regardless of how one voted in November, or what one thinks of the current stinkfest in D.C., here in Montana, it's time to close ranks and defend. It's time to get your friends to the polls.

I trust Rob Quist on this issue, a thousand times more than I trust the party-in-power, and its chosen candidate in this special decision-point moment in time.

Montana, and our public lands, are too valuable to take the word of a stranger, or to take away our voice on this matter and cede it further to the party that is trying to take these lands. We need a check on what is being attempted, we need a balance against the terrifying imbalance.

These are hard times. One of the elephants in the room is of course that what people like myself call “our” land was taken, a scant 125 or so years ago, from other people. It's an elephant in the room, in these discussions, and an elephant has come into the state, seeking to take again. But most of us were around five or six years old when we were taught that two wrongs do not make a right.

The land: it's too important to us as Montanans to take risks. Defend it. Defend it this May, defend it always. We'll sort out our differences in the coming seasons. Defend it. Keep it.

*Rick Bass is a writer and board member of the Yaak Valley Forest Council, and Writer-in-Residence at Montana State University.*

# TAKE YOUR STAND

In Montana's Special Election

**MAY 25, 2017**

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## VOTE!

Vote to Protect Montana's  
Public Lands!



Photo by Steven Gnam