

Wildlife under the Big Sky

2016

A Multi-Agency News Update

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- Bureau of Land Management, Central Montana District: (406) 538-1900
- Montana Natural Heritage Program: (406) 444-5354
- Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: (406) 538-4658
- Natural Resources Conservation Service: (406) 538-7401 (Lewistown) or (406) 429-6646 (Winnett)
- U.S. Forest Service, Judith-Musselshell Ranger District: (406) 566-2292
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge: (406) 538-8706

Greetings!

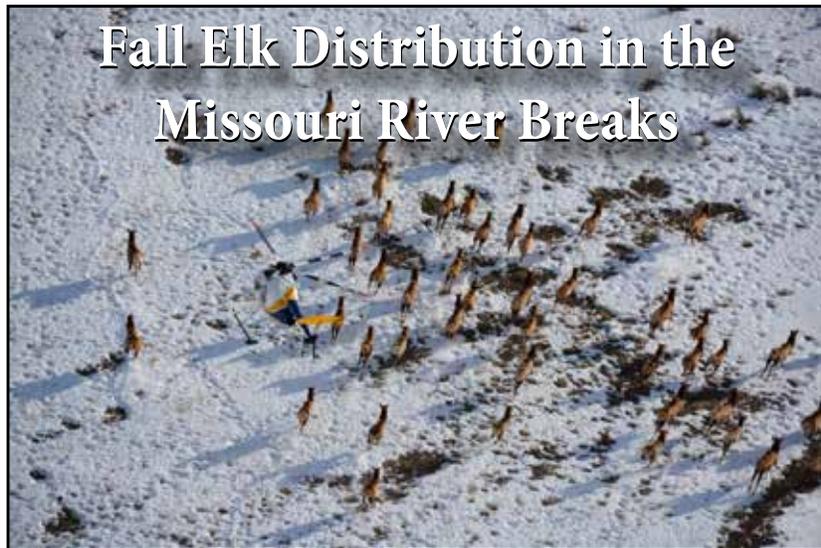
Welcome to the third edition of the Central Montana Wildlife Newsletter. Two quotes from Rachel Carson felt like a good start to this edition:

There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature--the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

We hope you are able to enjoy the repeated refrains of nature often and experience them with a child.

Fall Elk Distribution in the Missouri River Breaks



A spotter plane looks on as the Quicksilver helicopter nets a cow elk. MFWP photo.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge recently partnered on a study that focused on elk distribution north of the Missouri River in hunting districts 621, 622 and 631. Elk numbers in this area have been above the established objective of 1,700-2,000 animals, set in the 2005 FWP Elk Management plan, since before the year 2000.

Wildlife management generally calls for increasing rifle elk hunting opportunities and license quotas in order to increase harvest and reduce elk populations. In this case, however,

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increased license quotas have not resulted in sufficient harvest to reduce elk numbers. Harvest success rates have actually declined. Hunter access restrictions on and through private land is thought to be a limiting factor in elk management.

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate public hunting access and other landscape factors that may affect elk distribution during fall hunting seasons. Managers wanted to better understand how private land restrictions to public hunting, and factors like distance from roads and topographic roughness, affect elk availability to harvest.

A total of 50 cow elk were captured across southern Phillips and Valley counties by helicopter net-gunning during February 2013. Each elk was evaluated for health, pregnancy status, screened for exposure to diseases, and fitted with a GPS radio collar. The collars collected location data once per hour until they were programmed to drop off each animal in February 2015.

None of the sampled elk were positive for exposure to brucellosis among the 6 diseases in the screening panel. The average pregnancy rate was 77 percent, a bit lower than pregnancy rates from other Montana elk studies.

In hunting district 621, 91 percent of all elk locations during rifle season occurred in areas accessible to public hunting and 68 percent of all elk locations were accessible in archery season. In hunting district 622/631, 66 percent of all elk locations during rifle season occurred in areas accessible to public hunting and 50 percent of all elk locations were accessible in archery season.

Despite elk being largely available for public hunting, whether land was open to public access was still the strongest predictor of elk home range during hunting seasons and the effect was strongest during archery season.



The Quicksilver capture team takes the net off a captured cow elk. MFWP photo



MFWP tightening a GPS collar on a cow elk. MFWP photo.

It was found that even relatively small geographic areas within an elk population range being managed for restricted or no hunter access may have a disproportionate effect on elk distribution and contribute to insufficient harvest of elk to manage at objective levels.

With elk availability for public hunting an issue in many parts of the state, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission recently adopted “shoulder seasons” for many hunting districts in an effort to reduce elk

populations. Working cooperatively with stakeholders to provide adequate hunter access and implementing harvest strategies to achieve elk population objectives would also be beneficial. Distribution of elk across public and private land, respect for landowner concerns, and equitable availability of wildlife resources for all Montanans is the ultimate goal.

Help for Sage-grouse?

Sage-grouse avoided Endangered Species Act protection in September 2015. So why do sage-grouse continue to garner much attention across the West?

Now it's time to implement the plans that Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service changed to benefit sage-grouse.

What actions are being taken locally for sage-grouse?

- Conifers removed from nearly 3,300 acres in 2014 and 2015; almost 3,000 more acres are planned in 2016.
- More than 80 miles of high collision risk fences near 22 leks marked. In 2015, these leks had more than 400 male sage-grouse.
- Crested wheatgrass converted to native species on nearly 200 acres.
- Sagebrush and sage-grouse forbs collected and grown at Special K nursery.
- Grazing management targeted on more than 10 allotments (over 40,000 acres) to improve sage-grouse habitats and nest success.

How do changes in habitat relate back to sage-grouse, and how certain are we that the changes made in management are the cause?

There is not enough information known and we'll likely never know that if we cut XX acres of conifers from sagebrush, then next year we'll see XX many more sage-grouse. Current literature and local observations indicate that more intact and higher quality habitats result in higher male sage-grouse counts and quicker population rebounds when the weather conditions are favorable. Treated areas are expected to be used more by sage-grouse due to increased quantity and quality of habitat, increased forbs, decreased raptor perches and decreased collisions with fences.

What other opportunities are available?

All items listed currently plus fence removal or modification, conservation easements, and 30 year sagebrush leases.



Sage-grouse habitat before cutting junipers in fall 2014. BLM photo



Sage-grouse habitat looking from the same location post-treatment less than one year later. Removing conifers increases desirable forbs for sage grouse food and reduces raptor perches. Sage-grouse often avoid areas with trees and taller structures. BLM photo



Fence markers placed every 3-4 feet along the top fence wire have been shown to reduce sage-grouse collisions by over 80% in areas close to leks with flat terrain. BLM photo

Where can I get more information?

Contact MFWP, BLM or NRCS (see back page for numbers), Matt Comer at 406-538-1925, or Andy Oestreich at 406-538-1929.

Modified fences more friendly to wildlife

The Bureau of Land Management has been focusing more attention on minimizing unintentional impacts to wildlife due to range improvement projects such as fences and stock tanks.

BLM fire crews have been installing fence markers on the top wire of fences to reduce the risk of fence strikes by sage-grouse. While walking fence lines, they have also been identifying wildlife migration corridors and common crossing areas.

On BLM lands crews, have been using carabiners to lift wires in areas that have been identified as crossings. These modifications will reduce physical impacts to wildlife.

In large migration corridors, it is beneficial to modify or build fences to wildlife friendly standards. Wildlife-friendly designs typically raise the bottom wires to 16-18 inches above the ground and use smooth wire. The middle two wires are barbed and are 24 and 30 inches above the ground. The top wire is barbed at a height of 40-42 inches and at least 12 inches from the third wire from the bottom.

Benefits of lifting wires as opposed to fence conversion:

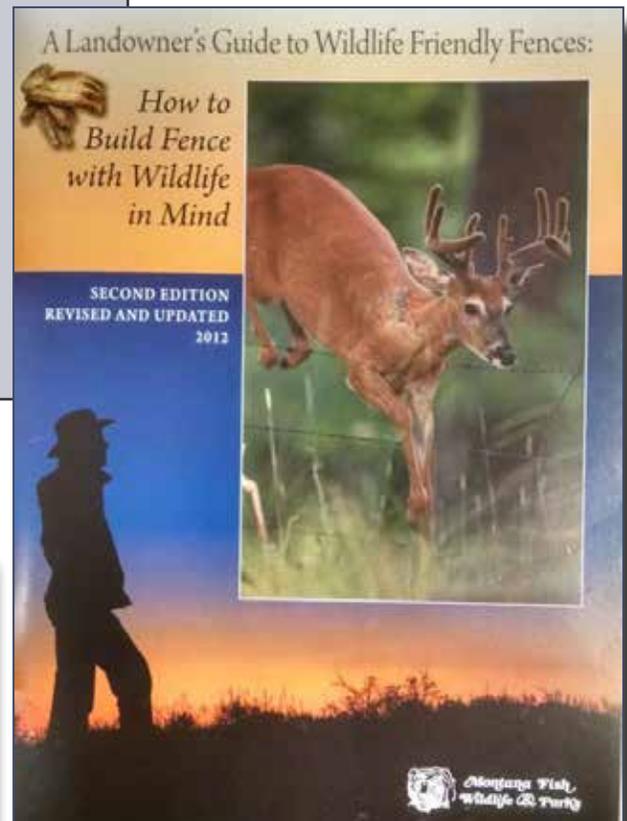
- Wires can be clipped up or un-clipped as the needs of the pastures change like calving season.
- Cost and labor savings for existing fence.
- No visual deterrents for wildlife.
- Benefits species that use the same habitual crossings.

Benefits of fence conversion:

- Smooth bottom wire reduces injuries.
- Individual crossing sites don't need to be identified.
- Benefits multiple species, not just habitual crossing users.
- Best alternative for new construction.
- If calves get out they aren't limited to specific crossing sections to get back in.

Either method will reduce animal hang-ups, incidental wildlife mortality, and fence damage. It is common for deer, elk, and antelope to get caught in fences. It is estimated that one animal is killed for every two and a half miles of fence per year.

A variety of other alternatives exist to meet the needs of landowners and wildlife. If you would like more information on wildlife friendly fences, please contact the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks or the BLM for a copy of the publication pictured here. The BLM contact is Andrew Oestreich, wildlife biologist, 406-538-1929.



This pronghorn antelope has lost a significant amount of hair on its back from crossing under barbwire fences. The loss of hair and injuries can lead to infection, frost bite, increased winter energy requirements for warmth, and incidental mortality.



NRCS Montana makes honey bees a conservation priority



The U.S. Department of Agriculture has invested \$4 million in five states to address declining honey bee populations. Montana is one of the five states targeted for this special conservation initiative, because of its prominent role in honey production.

Over the past 25 years, a variety of pests and diseases that attack honey bees have been introduced into the U.S. These, along with exposure to pesticides and loss of pollinator habitat, have led to unprecedented declines in honey bee populations.

Honey bees pollinate an estimated \$15 billion worth of crops annually,

including 130 different fruits and vegetables. Planting native pollinator species and cover crops like buckwheat, mustard, clover and sunflowers provides high value food for honey bees. Cover crops also increase soil nutrients, break pest cycles and increase organic matter in the soil. NRCS also works with landowners to ensure pasturelands and rangelands include a variety of legumes, forbs and shrubs that also provide pollen and nectar.

These conservation improvements benefit not only bees, but improve the sustainability of an operation. Appropriate cover crops and better rangeland and pasture management

reduce erosion, increase soil health, inhibit the expansion of invasive species and provide food and habitat for insects and wildlife.

Technical assistance and funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is available for Montana producers who wish to improve honey bee and other pollinator habitat on their operation. Landowners interested in participating should contact their local USDA Service Center.

Partnership for native plants

In 2006, the Bureau of Land Management developed a native plant grow-out program with the Special K Ranch in Columbus, Mont.

The Special K Ranch (SKR) is a non-profit working ranch of 230 acres and operates 17 greenhouses to give a lifetime residential and vocational opportunity to adults with developmental disabilities. The unique relationship has established a reliable plant material supply for wildlife enhancement projects and disturbance rehabilitation projects (e.g. crested wheatgrass conversion, wildfire, etc.).

This project ties the Seeds of Success wilding collection of locally important rehabilitation and sage-grouse focused plant species with

a greenhouse grow-out and winter hardening process.

The SKR residents have participated in the collection, grow-out, and field planting for a full understanding of the cycle. Plants have been grown for the BLM Montana and Idaho offices, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the State of Colorado, and the Idaho Botanic Garden. Many of the focus species have potential climate change adaptability for the local project sites that will provide for a more successful long term habitat enhancement.

The BLM Lewistown Field Office will be planting winterfat and sagebrush plants grown at SKR from locally collected sagebrush and winterfat seed.



Chicago Botanic Garden intern Becky Riley collects winterfat seeds. BLM photo

Tenderfoot Creek Area Land Acquisition

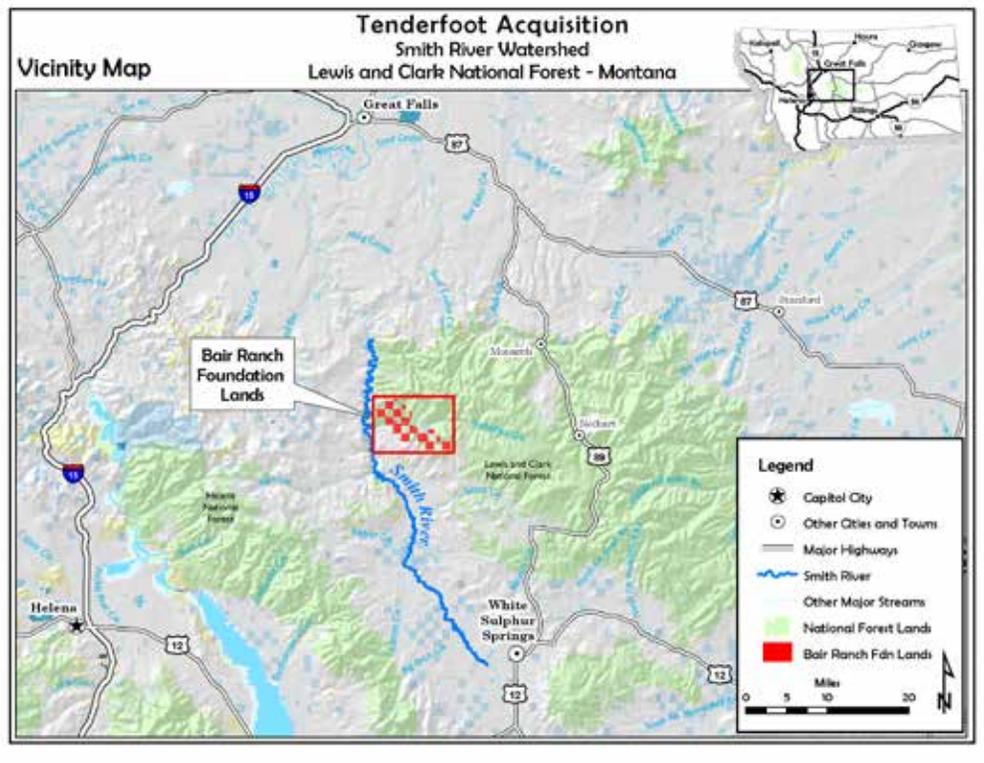
Background

In 2007, The Bair Ranch Foundation contacted the U.S. Forest Service and suggested a public purchase of The Bair Ranch Foundation Property.

To accomplish this historic conservation effort, a model partnership was soon formed between TBRF, the U.S. Forest Service, the Tenderfoot Trust, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. The 8,221-acre Tenderfoot Creek acquisition has received support from the Meagher County Commissioners, Montana's Governor, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and over 30 local Montana sportsman and angler conservation groups. The project has also received financial support from the Elk Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Trust, Cinnabar Foundation and other Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Habitat Partners.

The acquired lands are located in the Tenderfoot Creek drainage, which flows into the nationally-recognized Smith River, a highly popular floating and fishing stream, within the heart of the historic Lewis & Clark National Forest, in Meagher County, Mont. The lands are located approximately 35 miles northwest of White Sulphur Springs in the Tenderfoot watershed of the Little Belt Mountains within the boundary of the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Remarkably diverse, the lands provide a rich mixture of savannah, forest and riparian wildlife habitats, linking high sub-alpine forests to the valley bottom of the Smith River. This acquisition will conserve key cold-water habitat for native west slope cutthroat trout, identified by the Forest



Service and cooperating federal and state agencies and landowners as a Sensitive Species, which is at risk due to restricted range and considered vulnerable to extinction. Acquiring these intermingled private lands will maintain an outstanding natural setting and conserve valuable habitats for elk, moose, deer, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, mountain lion and a number of other native species.

The 20,000-acre Tenderfoot watershed consists of intermingled private, State of Montana and National Forest System lands. Except for a few small homestead parcels, all of the private land was owned by The Bair Ranch Foundation and is now consolidated into public ownership. The acquired lands span over 3,200 feet in elevation, from sub-alpine mountain ridges and productive forests, to grass meadows and riparian areas, down to the Smith River. This purchase will protect the integrity of this entire landscape as undeveloped forest land, grasslands, and public space. The Tenderfoot

watershed is perhaps the most critical tributary of the Smith River recreational corridor. Overall, because of the access it provides and the habitat it secures, this acquisition will be enormously valuable to Montana's hunters and anglers.

The Project

During the past six years (2010-2015), the Tenderfoot partners have successfully completed a total of nine phased acquisitions, consolidating all 8,221 acres of offered lands into the Lewis and Clark National Forest. The final phase was completed in 2015. The project received Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) funding as well as private donations.

The Future

The Bair Ranch Foundation has helped to ensure the ongoing health of the land by donating five percent of the purchase price to a trust fund dedicated to stewardship of the land.

Broad Public Support

Recognizing the outstanding public values and the serious risk of losing public access in the Tenderfoot area, the Meagher County Commissioners, Montana Governor Steve Bullock, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and numerous sportsmen's and conservation groups (listed below) are strongly supporting the Tenderfoot land acquisition. The following groups have supported this project: *Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership; Montana Audubon Society; Trout Unlimited; Montana Wildlife Federation; Montana Wilderness Association; Backcountry Anglers; Montana River Action Network; Orion – The Hunters Institute; Public Land/Water Access Association, Inc.; Anaconda Sportsman's Club; Billings Rod & Gun Club; Gallatin Wildlife Association; Skyline Sportsmen's Association, Butte; Dillon Sportsman; Rosebud/Treasure Wildlife Association; Dawson County Rod & Gun Club; Electric City Archery Club, Great Falls; Great Falls Archers; Safari Club Int., Great Falls Chapter; Russell Country Sportsmen, Great Falls; Fly Fishers of the Bitterroot; Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association; Bear Paw Bowmen, Havre; Helena Hunters & Anglers Association; Laurel Rod & Gun Club; Libby Rod & Gun Club; Park County Rod & Gun Club; Custer Rod & Gun Club, Miles City; Big Sky Upland Bird Association, Missoula; Hellgate Hunters & Anglers, Missoula; Polson Outdoors; Broadwater Rod & Gun Club, Townsend; Jefferson Valley Sportsmen's Association; Meagher County Sportsmen's Association*

For more information, contact: Mike Mueller, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation 406-493-6650; Butch Marita, Tenderfoot Trust 850-766-0960; Mitch Godfrey, Tenderfoot Trust 406-949-1111; or Carol Hatfield, Forest Service 406-547-3361.

Team effort at Central Montana Fair

In a spirit of teamwork and cooperation that is alive and well in Central Montana, several agencies, businesses and individuals put together a rather unique display for the Central Montana Fair.

Since Central Montana is teeming with a unique spectrum of wildlife and habitats, organizers believed a nature display would draw much attention. It would also be an attraction for all ages, an important factor, since the fair is a community and family-oriented event.

The Bureau of Land Management Lewistown Field Office contributed many items such as animal tracks, antlers, information and personnel to run the booth. The BLM also sponsored a raptor display from the Montana Raptor Conservation Center in Bozeman.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife personnel from the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge gave presentations to youth on a number of nature topics. They also contributed furs, posters and other items.

The Lewistown and Great Falls offices of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks supplied posters, pamphlets, fishing bobbers and a large aquarium.

The Big Springs Trout hatchery put rainbow trout in the aquarium.

Lewistown Taxidermy loaned a variety of animal and bird mounts.

Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited were present with written information and video presentations and personnel.

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation donated an education trunk with skulls, antlers, hides, and activities that are available for any group to borrow (see Lewistown BLM office for loan information).

Alpine Floral and Krings Greenhouse supplied trees and shrubs to give the display a more natural feel.

Many fair-goers complimented the booth as well as the agencies and individuals who worked so hard to make it possible. Look for the Nature Display booth in the Trade Center again in the 2016 Central Montana Fair.

Anyone who would like to help or contribute items for the booth is encouraged to contact one of the agencies or businesses involved or Alan Shammel at 406-538-8686.



Trade Center display booth at the 2015 Central Montana Fair. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation trunk and contents in the foreground are available to borrow from the Lewistown BLM office. BLM photo

OVERVIEW OF AGENCY ROLES

Even though differences in the lands we manage are often not apparent, with multiple agencies contributing to this publication, we feel it's important to clearly define the mission and guidance that influences our actions.

FEDERAL AGENCIES:

BLM: The BLM's mission is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

USFS: The mission of the USFS is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

The BLM's and USFS's multiple-use missions mandate that they manage public land resources for a variety of uses, such as energy development, livestock grazing, recreation and timber harvesting, while protecting a wide array of natural, cultural and historical resources.

USFWS: The USFWS's mission is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

NRCS: The mission of the NRCS is to provide national leadership in the conservation of soil, water and related natural resources. The NRCS works with landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit the soil, water, air, plants and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems. Seventy percent of the land in the United States is privately owned, making stewardship by private landowners absolutely critical to the health of our nation's environment.

APHIS WS: The mission of USDA APHIS Wildlife Services (WS) is to provide Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist.

STATE AGENCIES:

MDNRC: The mission of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (MDNRC) is to help ensure that Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations.

Trust Land Management Division: Our goal is to manage the State of Montana's trust land resources to produce revenue for the trust beneficiaries while considering environmental factors and protecting the future income-generating capacity of the land.

MFWP: The MFWP, through its employees and citizen commission, provides for the stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks and recreational resources of Montana, while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations.

Web Resources of Interest

Montana Field Guide with Information on Montana's Bats and other Species
<http://fieldguide.mt.gov>

Montana's Bats: distribution, conservation status, and roost site overview
http://mtnhp.org/animal/presentations/Motana_Bats_Distribution_Status_and_Roost_Overview_20130601.pdf

Up-to-Date Information on White-Nose-Syndrome, including decontamination protocols. <http://whitenosesyndrome.org/>

Thinking about some new binoculars? Check out The Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2013 Binocular Review. With 102 binoculars reviewed in 5 price categories there is something for every budget and adventure! <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/>

The BLM has educational materials including books, rubbing plates, realistic scat and flexible molds for many different animal tracks to create plaster casts. Please contact the Lewistown Field Office at (406) 538-1900 to borrow some or all of these supplies.

Contact the BLM Lewistown Field Office at (406) 538-1900 or BLM_MT_Lewistown_FO@blm.gov with suggestions to improve this newsletter. This and future electronic editions can be found at http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/lewistown_field_office.html.

