



January 28, 2008

Swan Valley Easement helps keep land wild

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

CONDON - Environmentalists, with the help of Missoula County taxpayers, set aside nearly 600 acres of Swan Valley wildlife habitat in 2007, protecting corridors for rambling grizzly bears and winter range for elk.

“Everyone talks about hope for the future of our wild communities, and preserving the special qualities of life in these grand Western landscapes like the Swan Valley,” said Doug Chadwick. “As far as that goes, my thanks go to the property owners we work with, who are making that hope real, acre by acre. I know our children and grandchildren will thank them for their vision and open-heartedness.”

Chadwick is a Whitefish native, a National Geographic writer and a founding board member of Vital Ground. The group, which moved to Missoula from Utah in 2005, brokered the 2007 conservation easement deals that now protect the 600 acres of Swan Valley habitat.

The acreage was cobbled together from three separate easements - one each on Condon, McKay and Cooney creeks.

All are in Missoula County and the two largest - at Cooney and Condon creeks -

relied in part on funding from Missoula County's open space bond, which voters authorized in 2006.

“The work of Vital Ground is tailor-made for helping Missoula County achieve its goals of assisting rural land owners who wish to remain on their working lands, and of protecting internationally recognized natural resources,” said Pat O’Herren, director of the county's Rural Initiatives program.

The largest of the three easements covers 320 acres on Cooney Creek. Vital Ground purchased the easement - and will monitor land use into the future - as part of a \$525,000 package, which included about \$75,000 in open space money from the county.

That land, owned by the Hirschfeld family, is situated at the foot of the Swan Crest, sandwiched between Highway 83 and the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

According to Ryan Lutey, director of lands at Vital Ground, the Cooney Creek acres create a “protected travel zone,” linking the Swan with Albino Basin, a favorite spot for grizzlies.

“It's a very, very important corridor between the Swan and the Bob Marshall,” Lutey said.

The McKay Creek land abuts that Cooney Creek parcel, he said. Owned by Gene Tingle, it's also good winter range for deer and elk, and the easement came at the bargain-basement price of \$8,000, more donation than sale.

“The more we learned about our property's resources,” Tingle said, “the more apparent it became that our site was an integral part of a major migration route, and winter

habitat for grizzly bears, elk and deer moving to and from the Bob Marshall Wilderness.”

Tingle said he's always taken a “light-handed” approach to land management on his property, but still “it is comforting to know that our conservation easement ensures that subsequent owners will also maintain the property in essentially its current natural condition.”

The third parcel, on Condon Creek, is substantially different from the Cooney and McKay creek acres. Located on the valley floor, Lutey said it has “lots of river bottom and riparian habitat.”

Some is meadow, he said, well suited for winter range, and some is broad and brushy, excellent cover for all sorts of wildlife.

The Beck family, with generations of history in the Swan, made purchase and monitoring of that easement possible for about \$125,000, including \$67,000 in taxpayer funds.

“We wanted to keep our land wild for the many animals that have always made their home alongside our home,” George Beck said.

Grizzlies, moose, elk and many other critters frequent the Beck property, Lutey said, which is located just beyond a federally designated grizzly bear linkage zone.

Vital Ground's work in the Swan Valley is part of a much larger conservation effort there, headed up by the Trust For Public Land. That group hopes to protect private wildlands threatened with subdivision, especially lands being sold by Plum Creek Timber Co.

Already, thousands of Swan Valley acres have been protected from development, ensuring continued timber harvest and wildlife security, as well.

Vital Ground, by contrast, focuses on smaller parcels of private property.

“Vital Ground understands the importance that even relatively small acreages in critical locations have for the long-term survival of wildlife species like the grizzly bear,” said Tom Parker, a longtime Swan Valley resident and outfitter and director of wildlife research and monitoring for the nonprofit Northwest Connections.

In 2006, the group helped co-sponsor Missoula County's open space bond measure. Since then, the organization has attracted considerable private funding for Swan Valley conservation, including grants from foundations from both within and without Montana's borders.

Since 1990, Vital Ground has helped to protect and enhance more than 417,000 acres of habitat crucial for grizzly and other wildlife in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska and British Columbia.