

AN ACT OF FINDING COMMON GROUND



Showing bipartisan cooperation, Congress advances landmark legislation that could rescue vulnerable wildlife species.

BY TOM DICKSON

Dave Chadwick shakes his head, smiling at the wonder of it all.

“A bill that proposes to spend more than a billion dollars a year, in this political environment, with more than 100 cosponsors in the House, half Republican, half Democrat, less than a year after it was introduced. There’s just no way not to be impressed.”

Chadwick, executive director of the Montana Wildlife Federation, is talking about the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA). The law, if passed, would redirect roughly \$1.3 billion each year to state fish and wildlife agencies to conserve at-risk species and habitat, manage human-wildlife conflicts, boost conservation education, and add public outdoor recreation opportunities.

Based on a formula that considers each state’s population and size, Montana would stand to receive about \$30 million each year—far more than what the state currently spends to manage and conserve species at high risk of disappearing.

The bill has moved steadily through both houses of Congress over the past two years, thanks largely to broad-based grassroots advocates who have cultivated bipartisan cosponsors. RAWA supporters include such disparate entities as Bass Pro Shops/Cabela’s, the National Wildlife Federation, Audubon, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, Toyota, and Richard Childress Racing. “When you see Audubon teaming up with a NASCAR group, you know something amazing is happening,” Chadwick says.

PRESSING NEED

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of extinction, according to the National Wildlife Federation’s “Reversing America’s Wildlife Crisis” report. If these at-risk species do not receive concerted attention, their demise will trigger costlier and more restrictive “emergency room” measures required under the Endangered Species Act.

Of Montana’s nearly 700 species of mammals, fish, birds, amphibians, and reptiles, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has identified 128 as “species of greatest concern.” At-risk fish and wildlife include the American pika, mountain plover, long-toed salamander, northern redbelly dace, and trumpeter swan.

Reasons for conserving imperiled wildlife species mirror those for game animals. Healthy fish and wildlife populations and habitats help support Montana’s robust \$7 billion outdoor recreation economy. They provide reasons for people—especially screen-addicted youth—to spend time outdoors. Many nongame species, like hummingbirds and owls, represent wildness and inspire wonder. All are essential cogs in nature’s complex ecological machinery that sustains clean water, healthy forests, and fertile plains.

What’s more, wildlife conservation agencies are coping with increasing risks to both game and nongame populations. Threats include aquatic invasive species, habitat lost to housing and other development, West Nile virus and other diseases, climate change, and human-wildlife conflicts in urban and rural areas.

Montana has long recognized the need to manage more than just game animals. The 1973 Legislature made clear that all wildlife species are FWP’s responsibility. Four decades later, a 2005 statewide survey confirmed that most Montana residents still want the department to manage both game and nongame animals.



LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; RIGHT: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS



The hurdle, however, has always been funding.

In Montana, almost no state tax revenue goes toward fish and wildlife conservation. Hunters and anglers pay for most of the work with their hunting and fishing license fees, along with federal excise taxes on hunting, fishing, and boating gear. In this user-pays, user-benefits system, game species receive almost all of the funding.

That's why FWP focuses primarily on roughly 80 game animals—elk, trout, deer, walleye, and the like—plus 17 threatened or endangered species such as the grizzly bear and pallid sturgeon that federal law requires the state to manage. The department can't afford to give many of the remaining 600-plus species much notice.

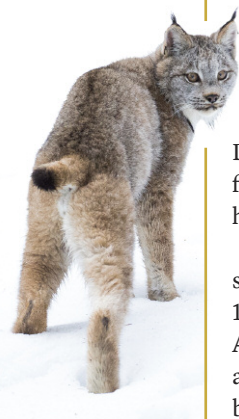
"Without reducing the attention focused on important game species, we definitely need to find a way to manage for other fish and wildlife in critical need," says Lauri Hanauska-Brown, chief of the department's Nongame Wildlife Bureau.

So far, Montana and other states haven't found a way. RAWA could be the solution.

BLUE RIBBON PANEL

Nongame wildlife advocates have long pressed for greater federal funding. In the 1990s, a coalition of 3,000 businesses and conservation groups nearly convinced Congress to provide dedicated revenue for state-based nongame conservation. The effort failed, but proponents pressed ahead.

A breakthrough came in 2014, with formation of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources. Chaired by Bass Pro Shops founder John Morris and former Wyoming governor Dave Freudenthal, the panel of national business and wildlife conservation leaders recommended Congress dedicate \$1.3 billion, 10 percent of the roughly \$13 billion the federal government receives from oil and gas well leases, to fish and wildlife restoration and conser-



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vation annually. The panel noted that game animals like white-tailed deer, rainbow trout, and wild turkeys are abundant thanks to traditional management supported by hunters and anglers. Yet many other species are neglected and in peril. "For every game species that is thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline," read the panel's final report.

The Blue Ribbon Panel's recommendations inspired the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, formally known as HR 4647 and sponsored by U.S. Representatives Jeff Fortenberry (R-Nebraska) and Debbie Dingell (D-Michigan). The act would dedicate federal funds for management of "greatest need" species and habitats as determined by each state.

RAWA is modeled after the dedicated funding streams created by the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Act of 1937, for wildlife management, and the Dingell-Johnson Act (D-J) of 1950, for fisheries management. Montana and other states have used P-R and D-J dollars to recover big game populations, create sustainable sport fisheries, and protect fish and wildlife habitat. RAWA would complement this traditional hunting- and fishing-based funding. Just as nongame wildlife gain from habitat improvements for game species, game animals would benefit from habitat and research focused on new species.

Though no new or additional taxes would be required to fund the bill, states would need to provide a 3-to-1 match for the funds, as with P-R and D-J money (see "The state match challenge" below).

PLAN IN PLACE

Montana already has a plan for using RAWA funding. Formulation began after 2000, when Congress authorized the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP). A component of the Pittman-Robertson Act, WCRP aimed to help pay for state conservation work targeting species and habitats that need the most help. Through WCRP, Congress appropriates what are called State Wildlife Grants (SWG) to each state. To guide their

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The state match challenge

Under RAWA, Montana stands to receive up to \$30 million in federal dollars for nongame wildlife conservation. But there's a catch. As with Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds, the new bill would require a 3-to-1 state match. To receive the \$30 million, Montana would need to come up with \$10 million of its own.

To figure out how, Montana conservationists formed the **Montana Wildlife Futures Group**. Representatives from Headwaters Montana, Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana Audubon, Defenders of Wildlife, Montana Trout Unlimited, Endangered Species Coalition, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and National Wildlife Federation have assessed actions necessary to conserve Montana's nongame wildlife, with the aim of inspiring private contributions to FWP for matching RAWA funds. ■





share of federal SWG funding, each state was required to develop a comprehensive wildlife action plan. Acting as a conservation blueprint, each plan assesses the health of wildlife and habitat so that state experts know which species are in trouble. The plan then outlines steps necessary to conserve at-risk species before they become rarer and costlier to protect.

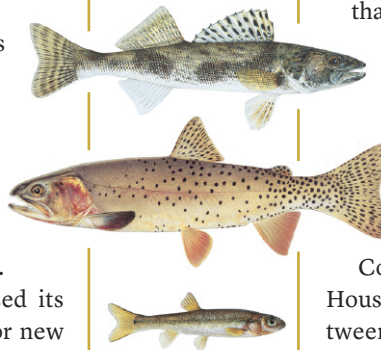
Though SWG funding has helped begin this work, it's been "grossly inadequate," according to the National Wildlife Federation. To inventory top-priority nongame species, conduct research, and protect habitats, Montana receives just \$1 million per year in federal SWG funds. By comparison, the state annually gets \$10 to \$20 million in P-R funds for game species.

In anticipation of RAWA, Montana has used its wildlife action plan to identify priority areas for new funding. In addition to conserving fish, wildlife, and habitats, the state would use the new revenue to increase statewide nature education; provide more wildlife-based recreation opportunities like bird watching and nature photography; and better manage conflicts between people and wildlife, such as keeping grizzly bears away from livestock and providing tools to help other landowners coexist with wildlife.

BROAD SUPPORT

First, RAWA has to get through Congress. Applying steady pressure is a diverse coalition of conservation and outdoors groups, including the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and dozens of other national organizations. More than 1,000 state and local groups and businesses have endorsed the legislation.

Leading the effort in Montana are the Montana Wildlife Federation and Montana Audubon, with support from groups like the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Wildlife Society, Montana Trout Unlimited, and two dozen local rod-and-gun clubs and Audubon chapters.



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In 2018 this broad-based, grassroots support helped build momentum in Congress during a time when the nation's political system seemed paralyzed. Conservation leaders regularly met with members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to extol the benefits of preventive conservation. "Members are starting to recognize that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do something significant for wildlife," says Naomi Edelson, senior director of wildlife partnerships for the National Wildlife Federation. Introduced in early 2018, the House bill had 116 Republican and Democratic cosponsors by December. The Senate version, too, was strongly bipartisan.

Congress ended its session in December with the House and Senate unable to reconcile differences between their two bills. "The main difference was that the Senate bill leaves funding subject to annual appropriations, while the House bill follows recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel to have dedicated funding," Chadwick says.

Still, he and other conservation leaders are hopeful the 116th Congress will reach consensus in 2019. There's certainly precedent. Generations ago, both P-R and D-J passed with wide bipartisan support, as did, more recently, the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program. Even the 115th Congress, often painted as rigidly partisan, passed significant bipartisan legislation on criminal justice reform, opioid addiction, and water infrastructure.

"Those bills give me hope," Edelson says. "If Congress can come together on prison sentencing and drug addition, it's entirely possible to imagine them doing the same for something as American and popular as wildlife conservation." 🐻

For more information on RAWA, contact the Montana Wildlife Federation at mwf@mtwf.org or visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov.

In the meantime...

For Montana, passage of RAWA would provide nongame wildlife management with a much-needed funding boost that comes once in a generation. But what can someone do today to help restore and conserve burrowing owls, swift foxes, common loons, and other nongame species?

One option is to **donate to the Nongame Wildlife Program check-off** on your 2018 Montana state tax form. Each year Montanans donate roughly \$35,000 to nongame wildlife species inventory, research, and habitat protection. Donations are often matched 3:1 from other funding, turning, for instance, a \$100 donation into \$400 for nongame wildlife conservation.

Another way is to **donate to the Montana's Outdoor Legacy Foundation**. The foundation directs private contributions to a variety of projects, most within FWP, that include raptor monitoring, grizzly bear and wolf management, bat conservation, harlequin duck research, wolverine conservation, and grassland enhancement. To learn more and donate, visit mtoutdoorlegacy.org. ■

