UNKNOWN BUT NOT UNIMPORTANT
The rarely seen white-faced ibis wades shallow marshes in parts of Montana. Chronic lack of funding for nongame wildlife conservation limits state biologists' knowledge of the habitat requirements and population status of this and hundreds of other nongame species.

What about the Others?

A popular new bipartisan bill working its way through Congress could kick-start Montana into caring for the majority of its wildlife species. By Tom Dickson

White-faced ibis
PHOTO BY GARY KRAMER

At a glance, Ed Beall doesn't seem like a guy who'd be advocating on behalf of Montana's songbirds, prairie dogs, long-eared owls, and other nongame wildlife. The 57-year-old businessman and devoted elk bowhunter is president of Capital Sports, which does a brisk trade in guns, ammunition, and other hunting gear. Yet Beall cares about all species, not just the trophy elk, mountain goats, and mule deer mounted on the walls of his Helena establishment. "We live in Montana to experience the whole package of wildness here," he says. "That includes the big game animals, sure, but also the songbirds, birds of prey, and all the other wildlife."

People drawn to this region have always appreciated wildlife's diversity. Early Native Americans valued all animals, great and small. Lewis and Clark marveled at every new creature they encountered. In 1928, a contributor to *Montana Wild Life* magazine wrote, "The true sportsman is a keen observer of nature's wonderful creations [and] a sincere advocate for the conservation of nature's useful creations and their welfare."

Now Montanans and visitors are increasingly extolling the virtues of critters that aren't pursued for sport, say Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks officials. "We're hearing from more and more people that they want us to do more for nongame species," says Ken McDonald, head of the agency's Wildlife Division.

BIG PICTURE BOOSTER Ed Beall, president of Capital Sports in Helena, believes that Montanans will find a way to fund nongame wildlife management. "I'm convinced most people here recognize that our wildlife is like nowhere else in the country and will want to do something to make sure it's conserved for the future," he says. Beall and other state conservation leaders are now trying to figure out what that "something" might entail.

Appreciating nongame wildlife, however, differs from funding its conservation. "The big question is how would we pay for that additional work when almost all of our budget comes from fees and federal excise taxes paid by hunters," McDonald says. That dilemma has vexed Montana wildlife advocates for years. A recent breakthrough at the federal level provides hope that the vast majority of Montana's wildlife species could soon garner the management attention that ducks, deer, and other game species have received for decades.

Essential roles

There's no denying nongame wildlife's value. Species like the elegant trumpeter swan inspire awe and wonder. American pikas and black swifts represent wildness. Tiny hummingbirds, flammulated owls, and least weasels are downright adorable. Wildlife delights us, whether it's a busy black-capped chickadee at the feeder or mating sandhill cranes pirouetting in a soggy field. "One year, the highlight of our elk bow hunt in the Breaks was finding a little horned toad," Beall says. "It became our camp mascot."

Because each nongame species plays an essential role in the intricate interactions of all life, like the complex machinery under a car hood, it only makes sense to conserve them all. As conservation guru Aldo Leopold wrote, "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering." Clark's nutcrackers spread the seeds of limber pines, essential winter cover for mule deer. Burrowing prairie dogs and ground squirrels mix and aerate soil layers. Some "keystone" species can even signal intact ecosystems. "A healthy grizzly population means a healthy landscape

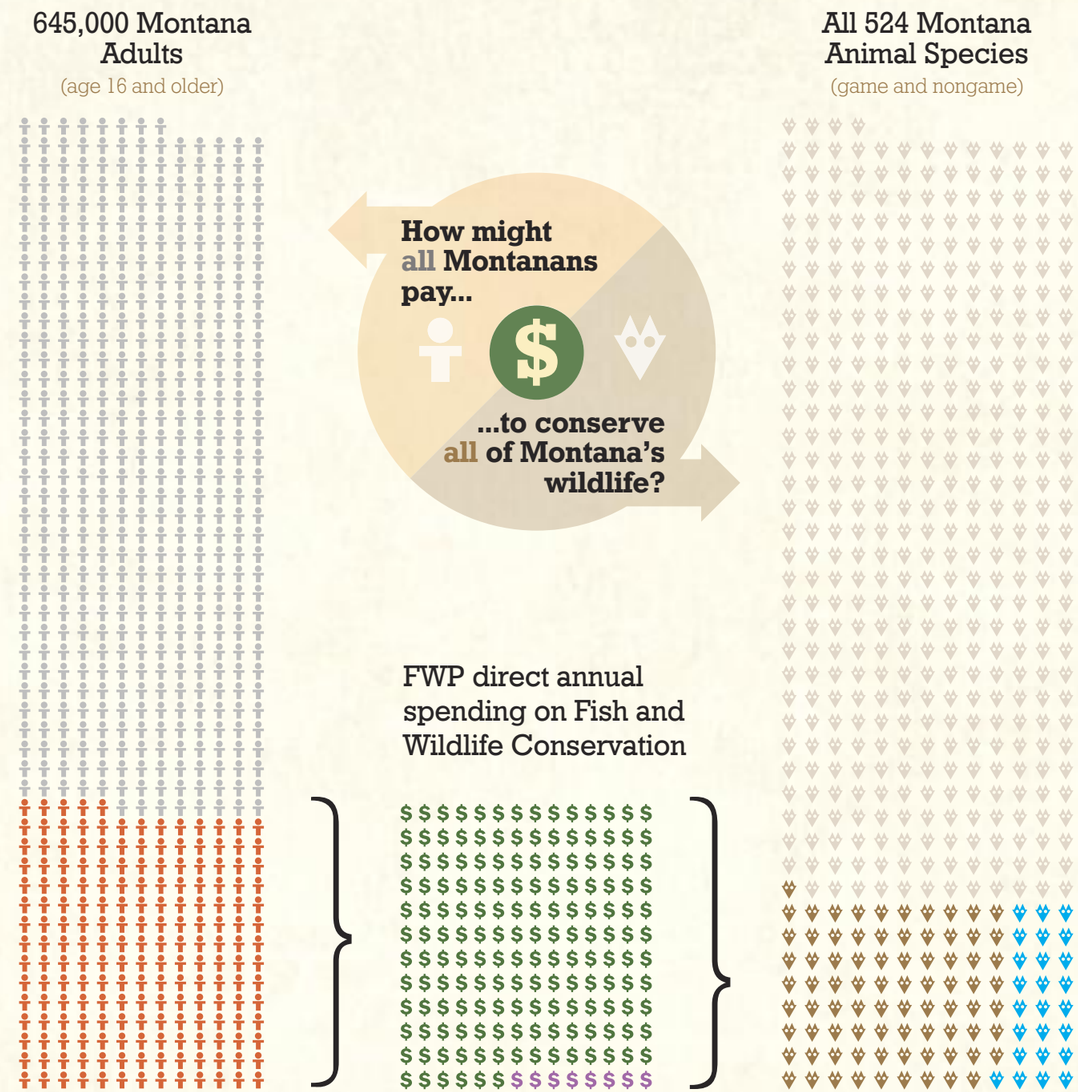
Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

ON THE BACKS OF HUNTERS Most of the money FWP spends conserving Canada lynx, grizzly bears, and other federally protected species comes from hunter license dollars. The federal government provides limited funding to states to help manage these species.

TOP TO BOTTOM: THOM BRIDGE; KERRY T. NICKOU

The Nongame Funding Dilemma

Almost all of the money that FWP spends annually on managing 80 game fish and wildlife species comes from hunters and anglers—a classic example of "user pays, user benefits." Some big questions facing Montana: 1. How will FWP manage the remaining 85% of fish and wildlife that are nongame species? 2. Who will pay for that work, and how?



=1,000 Montanans

71% of Montanans who don't hunt or fish

29% of Montanans who hunt, fish, or both

$ = $200,000

$ 95% of these funds come from license fees and federal taxes on guns, ammo, fishing gear, boats, and boating fuel.

$ 5% comes from federal grants, hydropower mitigation, nongame tax checkoff, and other sources.

= 1 Montana species

Montana is home to 524 species of mammals, fish, birds, amphibians, and reptiles.

Most FWP fish and wildlife funding goes to manage roughly 80 game species.

Federal law requires Montana to manage an additional 17 species listed as threatened or endangered. Lack of other funding sources means that FWP must use hunter and angler dollars for this costly work.

INFOGRAPHIC BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

that will continue to provide the scenery, the clean water, and the many other natural resources that people value," says Dave Chadwick, executive director of the Montana Wildlife Federation.

Nongame wildlife's greatest importance might simply be that it's been here so long, says Lauri Hanauska-Brown, chief of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Nongame Wildlife Program. Native species have survived in this part of North America for millennia, and some—like the pallid sturgeon—for tens of millions of years. "Most people would consider it shameful for us humans—relative newcomers to this region—to let any species disappear forever," she says.

Broadening the scope of wildlife management was on the minds of Montana legislators in 1973 when they made it clear they wanted to conserve the state's full suite of species. That year the legislature expanded responsibility of the Fish and Game Department, as it was known then, to include not just the roughly 80 game animals but all 524 mammals, fish, birds, amphibians, and reptiles that call Montana home. Unfortunately, in an oversight repeated at the state and federal level for the next four decades, lawmakers offered no new funding to pay for the additional workload.

Wildlife and fisheries biologists already had their hands full managing game species, which make up only 15 percent of Montana's fish and wildlife, along with federally protected species. For "managed" species, biologists track populations, study individual animals, and conserve habitats. That work has proved enormously successful. Elk, deer, trout, wolves, grizzly bears, bald eagles, and more have grown to numbers unimaginable in the early 1970s. Hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching opportunities abound. Businesses and local economies based on that recreation thrive.

Yet most of Montana's 440-plus nongame species receive scant attention. Many benefit from habitat provided by the state wildlife management areas and coldwater trout rivers protected and improved for game animals. But most are just out there, some doing okay, others struggling, many with fates unknown for lack of basic knowledge about their numbers and whereabouts. "Montana has to take inventory of what it has," says Beall, a member of the Private Land/Public Wildlife Council and several other state conservation committees. "Only after you identify what's out there can you take steps to care for it."

Compelling need

Monitoring and conserving fish and wildlife can prevent serious problems. For instance, if a species is federally listed, landowners, businesses, and state agencies face burdensome and costly regulations. Hanauska-Brown notes that in recent years the Arctic grayling and sage-grouse were kept off the endangered species list largely thanks to population monitoring, research, and habitat conservation. She points to recent studies on golden eagles that revealed more of the raptors than was previously known and identified flight paths that will help wind developers site turbines that do less harm. "With good information, we can get ahead of problems before they occur," she says.

Another reason FWP feels compelled to conserve additional species: The state's wildlife is held in public trust by all Montanans—not just the 29 percent who fish, hunt, or both. That majority is asking FWP to do more for nongame wildlife. A statewide survey in 2004 found that most residents want the agency to conserve curlews, loons, raptors, songbirds, and other nongame species. That's one reason the department's new ten-year vision calls for the agency to also serve Montanans who care about wildlife but don't care to hunt or fish.

What's more, a growing number of citizens, landowners, and communities want FWP to tackle wildlife problems like overabundant urban deer, raccoons entering attics, and elk, grizzlies, and wolves harming gardens, crops, or livestock. Tack on to that the ever-increasing calls to FWP to care for wounded raptors and orphaned bears.

As demands for its services grow, FWP can't keep up. Montanans often are surprised to learn that FWP receives almost no state tax dollars for fish and wildlife management. Almost all of that work must be paid for by hunting and angling license fees and longtime federal taxes on shooting, fishing, and boating equipment.

That puts the department in a bind, squeezed between state and federal mandates to manage more species and a limited funding base. "We're really restricted as to what we can do for nongame species, wildlife rehabilitation, and wildlife conflict management," McDonald says.

> "Why aren't other Montanans who care about wildlife paying their share?"

The current funding model also places undue financial pressure on a minority of Montanans. "It's unlikely that hunters and anglers can or will be willing to pay for the growing conservation programs required of FWP, like managing endangered species," says Chris Smith, a former FWP chief of staff who is now the western field representative of the Wildlife Management Institute. "And even if they were, you'd have to question the fairness of that. Why aren't other Montanans who care about wildlife or demand nuisance wildlife removal paying their share?"

One major reason: Unlike the license fees and federal excise taxes that anglers and hunters pay, birders and other wildlife supporters are not licensed or taxed for management and conservation.

Other states' successes

Several states have cracked that nut, devising innovative ways to broaden wildlife conservation funding. In 1976, Missouri passed a constitutional amendment dedicating one-eighth of 1 percent of sales tax revenue to wildlife conservation and education. In the 1990s, Arizona, Minnesota, and Colorado created state lotteries to generate wildlife conservation money. A portion of state sales taxes collected on outdoors equipment in Texas and Virginia pays for conservation projects. Florida and South Carolina use real estate transfer taxes to help fund wildlife management.

Inspired by its northern neighbor, Arkansas passed an amendment similar to Missouri's in 1996. "Arkansas did something really smart," says Chadwick, who formerly

> "Most people would consider it shameful for us humans—who are relative newcomers to this region—to let any of those species disappear forever."

Shortnose gar

Bohemian waxwing

LEFT TO RIGHT: SOLOMON DAVID; JAMES RIDLE

Nongame Timeline

Significant state and federal efforts to manage and create funding sources for nongame wildlife:

Federal action · Montana effort

1937

Pittman-Robertson Act approves the use of federal excise taxes on firearms and ammunition to fund wildlife conservation. Though some nongame species benefit from habitat protected and improved using P-R funds, most of the money goes to support game species.

1965

Land & Water Conservation Fund is established by Congress to use federal funds to provide quality outdoor recreation and conserve the land and water that support those opportunities. Money goes to parks, pools, ball fields, fishing access sites, and natural areas for wildlife. Nongame species benefit somewhat.

1973

Endangered Species Act requires states to develop plans and pay for recovering listed species. Currently Montana has 17 species listed as federally threatened or endangered. Little funding is provided to states for this important work.

On December 28, 1973, President Richard Nixon signs the Endangered Species Act into law.

1973

Nongame checkoff is established on Montana state tax forms so people can donate to nongame wildlife management. Donations over the next four decades average just $35,000 per year.

1980

Forsythe-Chafee Act is passed by Congress to promote the conservation of nongame fish and wildlife, but it is never funded.

1997

Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA I) would tax outdoors gear so the millions of recreationists who don't hunt or fish can contribute to wildlife conservation and management. The bill has strong public and industry support but not enough to pass.

1998

Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA II) is a new bill—this one proposing to use federal oil and gas lease royalties rather than an excise tax—with even greater industry and bipartisan support than CARA I. Yet it fails at the last second due to cold feet by some in Congress.

2001

State Wildlife Grants (SWG) Program is created by Congress to help states carry out comprehensive wildlife programs that address at-risk species. The idea is to prevent species from becoming federally endangered and saddling states, industry, and landowners with regulations. To ensure the money (from federal oil and gas leases) is spent effectively, SWG requires each state to develop a comprehensive assessment of fish and wildlife and habitats. Funding for states has declined over the years—in Montana from $1.3 million in 2002 to $750,000 in 2015. Yet SWG still represents a significant increase in nongame wildlife conservation revenue.

2005

As required under SWG, Montana completes its **Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy,** identifying the state's critical fish and wildlife species and habitats.

2014

FWP forms a **Finding Common Ground** committee of citizens to explore funding options for nongame wildlife management.

2015

By 2015, FWP has established a **nongame wildlife specialist** in each of its seven regions across the state. Funding comes primarily from hunter and angler licenses and federal taxes on shooting, boating, and fishing equipment.

2016

Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining Diverse Fish and Wildlife is convened in 2014 by Bass Pro Shops founder John Morris and former Wyoming governor Dave Freudenthal. The goal: Find a way to fund the conservation of at-risk nongame species and habitats. In 2016, the panel recommends that Congress dedicate $1.3 billion from leases on oil and gas wells on federal lands and waters for broad-based conservation by each state. Many in Congress support the idea, but as this issue goes to press a bill has yet to pass in the House or Senate.

worked for the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies studying nongame funding efforts. "The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission went to the public and asked, 'What do you want your fish and wildlife agency to do? What needs aren't being met?' Then the commission told the agency to figure out what all that would cost."

With a price tag and a public mandate for action, Arkansas conservation leaders and a bipartisan legislative committee successfully lobbied for new funding. "If you want to better connect people with the purposes of their fish and wildlife agency and their taxes, you need to tell them specifically what you intend to do with their money and how that work has value," Chadwick says.

Montana could also learn something from Oregon, says Smith. Recently, a broad-based, bipartisan commission appointed by Oregon's governor looked at the Department of Fish and Wildlife's broad responsibilities, including managing more of the state's wildlife species and serving a broader base of citizens. The commission also surveyed Oregonians to learn what they wanted from the department. The commission asked what it would cost to fulfill those responsibilities, then identified two options to fill the gap: a small surcharge on the state income tax, or a tax of 10 to 20 cents on a six-pack of soda or beer.

> "Nationally, for every game species that's thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline."

Montana lacks a sales tax, and its roughly $13 million per year in state lottery proceeds goes to the state general fund. Paying for

Playing for free

Most of the fastest-growing outdoor activities in Montana—wildlife watching, kayaking, mountain biking, and hiking—require no licenses or fees. And unlike hunting and fishing equipment, the gear people use for these activities generates no funding for managing public lands and waters. Yet outdoor recreationists expect maintained river access sites and forest trails, clean water, and abundant wildlife. Unlike hunters and anglers, who pay for their recreation, these other users play for free. For decades, state and federal conservation leaders have tried without success to devise an outdoor recreation fee or license, similar to those required for hunting and fishing. They have also explored creating a federal excise tax on outdoor equipment that would help fund the management of outdoor recreation.

Federal Excise Taxes on Outdoor Equipment

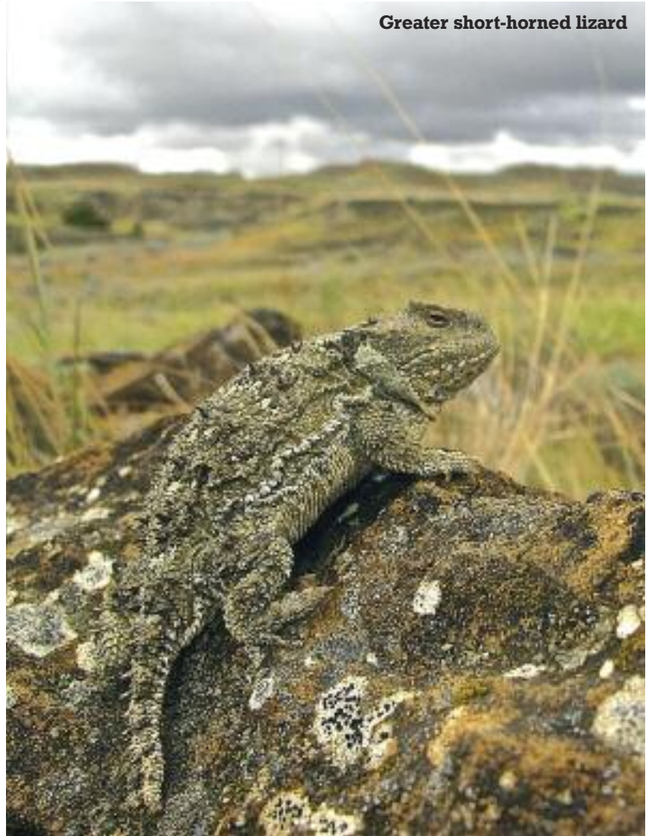
Revenue used to manage fish, wildlife, land, water, and recreation

Guns and ammo	11% tax
Bows and arrows	11% tax
Fishing gear	10% tax
Boat fuel	10% tax
Mountain bikes	0% tax
Camping gear	0% tax
Kayaks, binoculars	0% tax
Bird seed	0% tax

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; DIANA LEVASSEUR; JOHN CARUSO; ERIC ENGBRETSON; NATHAN COOPER

Sora

Yellow-bellied marmot



Greater short-horned lizard

Iowa darter


Northern redbelly dace


American pika


Mountain plover


Long-toed salamander

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: BILL MCDAVID; KATE & ADAM RICE, SHUTTERSTOCK; ERIC HEIDLE; DONALD M. JONES

broader wildlife conservation will require an entirely new revenue source. Montanans have done that before, creating a motel and resort "bed tax" that pays for the state's tourism promotions. New nongame funding would require similar innovation.

Blue Ribbon Panel

The most promising nongame wildlife funding news for Montana and other states comes from Washington, D.C. In 2014, Bass Pro Shops founder John Morris and former Wyoming governor Dave Freudenthal asked other business and conservation leaders to convene what they called the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources. The group's charge: find a new way to fund the conservation of all fish and wildlife. "There is a fish and wildlife crisis," states the panel's final report. "For every game species that is thriving, hundreds of nongame species are in decline."

That could spell economic trouble for states if declines lead to federal endangered species listing. Nongame wildlife loss also means revenue loss for retailers and communities that rely on campers, birders, and other recreationists to buy products and fuel local tourism economies. "We need to start down a new path where we invest proactively in conservation rather than reactively," the report concludes.

> "When you consider Montana's success and national leadership in conserving game species, it's surprising we've fallen so far behind other states in conserving our at-risk nongame species."

In spring of 2016, after looking at dozens of funding options that would support conservation of at-risk species and habitats, the panel recommended Congress dedicate $1.3 billion from leases on oil and gas wells on federal lands and waters. The proposal would put existing federal revenue—no new fees or taxes would be imposed—into the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program (WCRP). The WCRP has been on the books since 2000 but has never been funded.

Last summer, Alaskan Republican Congressman Don Young and Michigan Democratic Congresswoman Debbie Dingell introduced the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, which closely reflects the blue ribbon panel's recommendations. The bill attracted 20 cosponsors, Republicans and Democrats, from around the country. "That kind of bipartisan support is unheard of for a billion-dollar appropriations bill in an election year," says Chadwick. Congress adjourned at the end of 2016 without taking action on the bill, but sponsors plan on reintroducing it early in the new Congress. An effort to introduce a companion bill in the Senate is also under way, Chadwick says.

In the 2000s, a federal conservation program known as State Wildlife Grants (SWG) began giving limited oil and gas royalty revenue to states. To receive its share, every state had to develop a comprehensive conservation strategy that identifies and ranks at-risk species and habitats. If the Recovering America's Wildlife Act passes, the money would be apportioned to states based on population and landmass for conserving species and habitats identified in those plans. Montana's share: roughly $22 million a year.

There's just one catch. As with Pittman-Robertson money, the new bill would require a 3-to-1 state match. To receive the $22 million, Montana would need to come up with $7 million on its own. But from where?

Nationwide more than 6,000 groups teamed up to support the SWG effort in the early 2000s. Led nationally by the National Wildlife Federation, that coalition is now pushing for Congress to pass the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. Here at home, Montana Wildlife Federation is building a coalition of groups—from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to local Audubon chapters—to support nongame management funding in Montana.

"When you look at all the benefits that would come with it, there's no question Montana needs broad-based fish and wildlife conservation," Chadwick says. "And soon there could be this huge opportunity staring us in the face with the federal bill. All Montana has to do is come up with a way to fund its share."

Other states have done it. Conservation leaders are confident Montana can, too. Says Chadwick: "When you consider this state's success and national leadership in conserving game species—elk, pronghorn, trout, grizzlies—it's surprising we've fallen so far behind other states in doing the same for our at-risk nongame species."

5 reasons to conserve Montana's nongame wildlife

1. **Preserve their beauty, grace, and ability to inspire wonder**
2. **Maintain their ecological value**
   (all species are essential cogs in the great machinery of nature)
3. **Recognize their intrinsic value**
   (because they've been here for thousands of years)
4. **Protect their value to humans**
   (bats eat pesky mosquitoes, and snakes kill nuisance mice and rodents)
5. **Prevent costly endangered species listing**
   (species allowed to reach near-extinction will be federally listed, causing hardship to private landowners and state and local governments)