

# MONTANA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

**55<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 2017**

***Habitat: The Science, Art and Politics of Conserving It***

**March 6-10, 2017**

**Helena, Montana**

**Vanna Boccadori, President 2017-18**

**Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society**

**Held Jointly with the Northwest Section of The Wildlife Society**

## **Introduction**

This year's theme was Habitat: The Science, Art, and Politics of Conserving It. The idea for this came about when I thought about all the factors that have to be navigated to develop and implement a successful habitat project. From the science perspective, you need to understand the habitat that you're working in, its ecological state, function and disturbance ecology and apply appropriate science. Then there's the matter of scale. To be more effective, many projects are applied at the "landscape-level", which means you're often working across landownerships and therefore have to navigate the different side boards and mandates that each agency must work within. While agency folks trip their way through the bureaucratic hurdles to get their projects done, private landowners maintain 70% of the land base in Montana, including valuable habitat for wildlife. Habitat can be enhanced or reduced depending on the land use practices. Land trust organizations, non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and state and federal agencies must work cooperatively to conserve and enhance wildlife and fish habitat. And all of this can become that much more complicated depending on the political winds that are blowing at the time.

This year's plenary session and banquet presentation were designed to explore some of these influences affecting habitat conservation and management. At the plenary panel we heard from Jeff Laszlo, a private landowner engaged in large-scale habitat work on his ranch in the Madison Valley; Jeff Herbert, a retired FWP biologist speaking to the active influence that sportsmen and women have had on habitat conservation in Montana; Bok Sowell, an Montana State University professor of range ecology challenging our interpretation of scientific studies; Martin Nie, a University of Montana professor specializing in natural resource policy on western public lands and the need to improve forest plans rather than dispose of federal lands; and Jennifer Fielder, a state senator who supports the transfer of federal lands to the state so they can be better managed.

Greg Neudecker was our banquet speaker. He is the state coordinator for the Montana Partners for the Fish and Wildlife Program with the USFWS. He's worked with well over 500 landowners on projects ranging from conservation easements, fee acquisition, instream restoration, wetland restoration, grazing management and grizzly bear conflict abatement. His presentation addressed how science, art and politics shaped the successful collaborative habitat conservation program that has come to be known as the Blackfoot Challenge in the Blackfoot Valley of western MT. Over 300 wildlife professionals attended this year's conference.