

The Ownership Distribution of Private Land/Habitat in MT and Changes From 2024-2023

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In the United States, most wildlife habitat is privately owned, creating challenges for the management of species held in the public trust. In this context, the rights and objectives of private landowners may conflict with those of wildlife beneficiaries. Although recent research has increasingly incorporated private landownership into various analyses, broad-scale evaluations have been limited by restricted access to ownership data and a lack of analytical tools. In this study, we introduce new methods for processing and analyzing cadastral datasets and apply them to examine patterns and changes in private landownership across Montana from 2004 to 2023. Our analysis reveals a high concentration of landownership among a few owners with very large properties juxtaposed to parcelization of medium-sized properties into smaller parcels and a corresponding increase in the number of private owners in these size classes. Ownership has increasingly shifted toward legal entities (e.g., LLCs) away from individuals or families. We review these trends and discuss the implications for conservation and management of wildlife held in the public trust.