

Happy Trails for Habitat, Recreation and Views

By **LORNA AND JIM RITTENBURG**

After spending 35 years raising our kids in Pennsylvania, we decided it was time for a change. We sold our house, loaded the U-Haul and headed to northwest Montana to take on a new adventure. We bought property with a house on 142 acres of forest, nestled on the edge of Glacier National Park. Little did we know what was in store as we drove the final 40 miles of dirt road.

We had seen old photos of the property from 25 years ago that showed dramatic views into Glacier National Park to the east and across the Whitefish Mountains to the west. Old photos showed elk grazing near a pond on the property and people riding their horses on trails. We heard stories of the past when pioneers homesteaded the property, growing hay and raising cattle.

It was early summer of 2017, in what was to become one of the worst wildfire seasons in Montana's recent history. The property had evolved. There were no open vistas or noticeable wildlife to be found on the property. The mountain views were crowd-



ed out by densely stocked stands of primarily lodgepole pine. Initial hikes of the property involved scrambling, and sometimes crawling, through thick trees, ducking under tree limbs and swatting massive mosquitoes, all while admiring colorful but invasive noxious weeds.

Northwest Montana was experiencing hotter than average temperatures, lower than average rainfall, dry vegetation and blustery winds. The dense and uniform forest was at high risk. Forest fires began popping up in the area and we knew we had to take immediate action to manage the land.

Fortunately, Montana State University Extension in collaboration with Stoltze Lumber Company of Columbia Falls has designed the perfect solution for new landowners like us. They coordinate a low-cost, annual Forest Stewardship workshop. We registered as soon as we heard about the opportunity. The weeklong workshop is designed to educate owners of family forests and assist them in developing achievable forest management plans for their property. During the course, participants pri-

oritize goals and develop a long-term strategic plan to identify sustainable ways to meet goals, both ecologically and financially. Potential grants and resources to help with costs of implementing the plan are identified. As a part of the Forest Stewardship course, we listened and interacted with foresters, wildlife biologists, forest financial experts and other landowners who provided a wealth of knowledge in the different aspects of forest management. They helped us develop a strategy to implement our goals.

We had a long-term goal that the forest should have some commercial value to cover the costs of maintaining a healthy forest for future generations. Our plan took into consideration the existing forest conditions, topography, rainfall patterns, aspect, soil types and the value of commercial and precommercial timber on the property. The primary goal was to establish and use trails as the backbone for implementing and maintaining the secondary goals of the plan, which enhanced the property not just for recreation, but also for thriving



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Lorna Rittenburg and Mark Boardman, working with the crew from Stoltze Lumber company, lay out the skid roads that will later become recreational trails.

PHOTO COURTESY: JIM RITTENBURG

habitats, healthy forests and soils, and a sustainable income mechanism to cover the long-term costs of family forest stewardship.



PHOTO COURTESY: JIM RITTENBURG

An elk browsing along the edge of a meadow area.

The property is bordered by several million acres of National Forest. An abundant variety of wildlife uses the Forest as part of their large, regional range. To encourage wildlife onto the property, we needed to provide forage for herbivores and the predators would follow. Dense forests provide plenty of hiding and thermal cover. We envisioned a trail system that meandered through a diverse network of meadows, islands of dense cover and “parked-out” areas of larger trees and native grasses. This would provide a wide variety of habitats for wildlife, including deer, elk, moose, snowshoe hares, lynx, wolves and bears. By letting the mosaic of habitats guide the trail plan, we could enhance the viewshed and aesthetic value of the property by opening “windows” into Glacier National Park. We would provide recreational opportunities for hiking, wildlife viewing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, and help cover the management costs by selling associated timber from thinning.

In late summer of 2017, we consulted with Mark Boardman of Stoltze Lumber Company who surveyed the property and evaluated the existing timber. We designed a carefully balanced plan of cutting commercial timber for saw logs and poles to offset the cost of precommercial

thinning, clearing trails and meadows, and planting new trees. Consideration was given to future stand diversity and productivity, avoiding impact to riparian areas, control of noxious weeds and planting palatable, native grasses to encourage ungulates. In the strategy, we also carefully considered the reduction of fuel and treatment of slash piles.

The skid roads that were used to remove the timber were also intentionally designed and placed to become the basis of the trail system. Extending about 1.75 miles, the skid roads provided a perimeter trail around the property. This placement of the skid roads and location of the landing sites for timber processing had the secondary advantage of clearing views of the mountains. Our trail system would connect to National Forest roads, hundreds of miles of old skid trails and existing hiking trails that wind through pristine wilderness.

To establish the skid roads as the primary trails, we first cleared all stumps and fallen logs, sprayed for noxious weeds and planted with grass mix that would sprout early in the spring before the noxious weeds could take hold. Being skid road

width, the primary trails allow snowmobiles and ATVs to access the area for ongoing management and maintenance. The skid roads wind through a wonderfully diverse mosaic of habitats, leading to the slash piles that will become both permanent and temporary meadows after burning. They pass through reserve islands of dense lodgepole that provide cover for small game and birds. The islands are interspersed with small meadows and parked-out forest where healthy Douglas-fir, larch, cottonwood, spruce and aspen were favored and lodgepole pine were largely removed.

The trails pass by small piles of cut timber which provide a habitat for a variety of small mammals and birds. Dead trees were left as snags for birds of prey and woodpeckers. There were a number of small aspen stands in the forest. To allow the aspen groves to flourish and enhance habitat, all trees within 20 feet of the existing stands were removed. The trails meander through aspen stands that will provide beautiful seasonal colors in the fall and help lighten up the forest in the summer and winter with their white bark. To encourage

—Continued on next page—



PHOTO COURTESY: JIM RITTENBURG

Commercial timber was cut for the purposes of creating trails and meadows and thinning for forest health and fire mitigation. The value of the timber covered the costs of creating trails, planting grasses and trees, spraying for control of noxious weeds and conducting precommercial thinning.

birds, nesting boxes were hung along the trails and logs and brush were piled as habitat to provide thermal cover for snowshoe hares. To monitor the progress towards our healthy habitat goal, we placed a few game cameras along the trails to observe new visitors.

In the fall of 2017, the snow came early; the lumber company finished their work with the skid roads and initial thinning by early December. Peace was restored to the forest. We spent a wonderful first winter snowmobiling, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing on our new trails and admiring the dark night skies and views into Glacier National Park and the Whitefish Mountains in the Flathead National Forest.

From the new trail system, we are already observing significantly more wildlife. During winter, the tracks in the snow are monitored to evaluate progress. The results are both rewarding and informative. Small rodents love the dense areas of cover. The elk, deer, moose, bobcat, wolves and foxes appear to enter through National Forest land, using the new trails to roam throughout the property. Elk are frequent visitors to the newly thinned areas around both the house and pond. We even had a



PHOTO COURTESY: JIM RITTENBURG

Using a snowmobile with a tow sled, we can travel around the trails and conduct maintenance. In this case the sled is carrying bird boxes which are being positioned in trees alongside the trails and meadow areas.

moose and calf wander by the house, and on one occasion caught an elk on video licking the game camera. With the arrival of spring and new grasses appearing in meadow areas, more animals will frequent the property and become a regular part of the new trail environment.

Sustainably managing the trail system and forest will be an ongoing process. Plans for 2018 include connecting the wider skid roads with narrower winding paths that are cut by

hand and maintained with a weed wacker. The skid roads and meadow areas will be maintained using a brush hog attachment on the Bobcat. Spraying of meadows, trails and roads to prevent spread of noxious weeds, followed by seeding with succulent grasses, will be an ongoing part of the trail maintenance program.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance through their Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). We have submitted an application and are currently working with the NRCS to develop a multiyear plan, which will include additional precommercial thinning and tree planting to enhance forest health and diversity.

In summary, using the trail system to define forest management zones and the location of skid roads allowed us to establish a path toward a healthier forest with recreational and aesthetic value, and diverse habitats—all within six months of moving to the property. As new family forestland owners, the process of developing a forest management plan and building a trail system has connected us deeply with the property—the habitat that it provides and the

—Continued on page 31—

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continued from page 26

wildlife that relies on it—making it quickly feel like our home and habitat too, despite being recent transplants. It's a dream-come-true to bring in the New Year with all of the family on the trail, enjoy the views of the park and the wildlife tracks, and ski cross-country to bed. ■

LORNA AND JIM RITTENBURG received post-graduate degrees from the University of Maine in Animal and Veterinary Sciences and Microbiology, respectively. They both love nature and the outdoors, and in 2017 bought a 142-acre forested property in northwest Montana near Glacier National Park. After completing a forest stewardship program, they developed a multiyear forest management plan for the property, and completed the first phase including trail development, timber harvest, precommercial thinning, habitat enhancement and fire mitigation. Lorna can be reached at 267-992-0881 or LornaRitt@aol.com; Jim can be reached at 215-796-1592 or Jim.Rittenburg@icoptix.com.



PHOTO COURTESY: JIM RITTENBURG

Taking a refreshment break along the ski trail that runs along the west edge of the property where it borders the Flathead National Forest. The trail design allows virtually unlimited travel on old logging trails and roads.

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

Adams Timber Service	27
AKS Engineering and Forestry	29
American Forest Management	20
Arbor Info LLC	24
Association of Consulting Foresters	18
Bancroft Buckley Johnston & Serres	29
Cascade Hardwood	16
Forest Seedling Network	10
GeneTechs	31
Hampton Tree Farms, Inc.	3
International Veneer Company, Inc.	21
Lorenz Forestry	28
Lusignan Forestry	30
McFarland-Cascade	19
Millwood Timber Inc.	26
Norm Michaels Forestry LLC	5
Northwest Forestry Services	7
Northwest Hardwoods	4
Northwest Management	6
NW Forest Properties	10
ODF—Private Forests Division	27
Oregon Forest Resources Institute ...	Back Cover
Pacific Fibre Products	14
Pacific Logging Congress	12
Pattillo Tree Farms	6
Port Blakely Companies	8
Professional Forestry Services, Inc.	3
Rosboro	28
Silvaseed Company	11
Starker Forests	17
Stuntzner Engineering & Forestry	13
Sustainable Forestry Initiative	31
Tree Management Plus	30
Trout Mountain Forestry	19
Victor Musselman	12
WACD Plant Materials Center	4
Washington Farm Forestry Assoc	9
Weyerhaeuser Company	23
World Forest Investment	22



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