



# **2023 ANNUAL REPORT**



**ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION**



## **ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION**

Ensuring the future of elk, other wildlife,  
their habitat and our hunting heritage.





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## MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT & CEO

The numbers show 2023 was a year to remember and one highlighted with a slew of conservation accomplishments.

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## MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT & CEO



I'm a bit of a numbers guy. As a former college athlete, current coach for several softball teams and an outdoorsman, how could I not be? First-hand experience tells me that statistics, whether sports or scouting for a hunting or fishing trip, assist in the preparation for success. That also holds true when reviewing our mission progress at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Thanks to meticulous attention and sound, proven practices, RMEF ended 2023 in a position of financial stability and strength. Among other things, a market turnaround from a year ago resulted in investments rebounding to a net of \$7 million. Plus, planned giving efforts generated another \$2.7 million for the mission.

Our positive fiscal stature allowed us to carry out significant mission accomplishment. To run down a few notable stats, RMEF enhanced 161,180 acres of wildlife habitat and protected another 72,813 acres. That's not only good news for elk but also for mule and whitetail deer, moose, bighorn sheep, pronghorns, wild turkeys, sage grouse and many other wildlife species. We also worked to open or improve public access to 77,960 acres for hunting and other outdoor recreational activities.

In 2023, we allocated more funding for wildfire restoration, conserving migration corridors and migration mapping, supporting Appalachian elk country, chronic wasting disease research and management, and took on elevated responsibilities related to OutdoorClass.

A land conservation and access project that stands out to me from this past year closed just before Christmas. Thanks to a team effort by diligent partners, RMEF helped conserve and open access to nearly 55,000 acres of Kentucky elk range (see page 6). It's important to point out that the entirety of this project is on private land but now the public has permanent access to it. It's a significant win for wildlife and habitat management, hunting and public access.

Lastly, here are some numbers worth keeping an eye on going forward. In 2024, RMEF will celebrate four decades of conservation. During our 40th anniversary year, we will surpass nine million acres of conserved or enhanced habitat. It may be difficult to grasp the enormity of that nine-million-acre figure but it's a vast measurement of where elk live—winter, summer and year-round range, calving grounds, transitional range and migration corridor habitat.

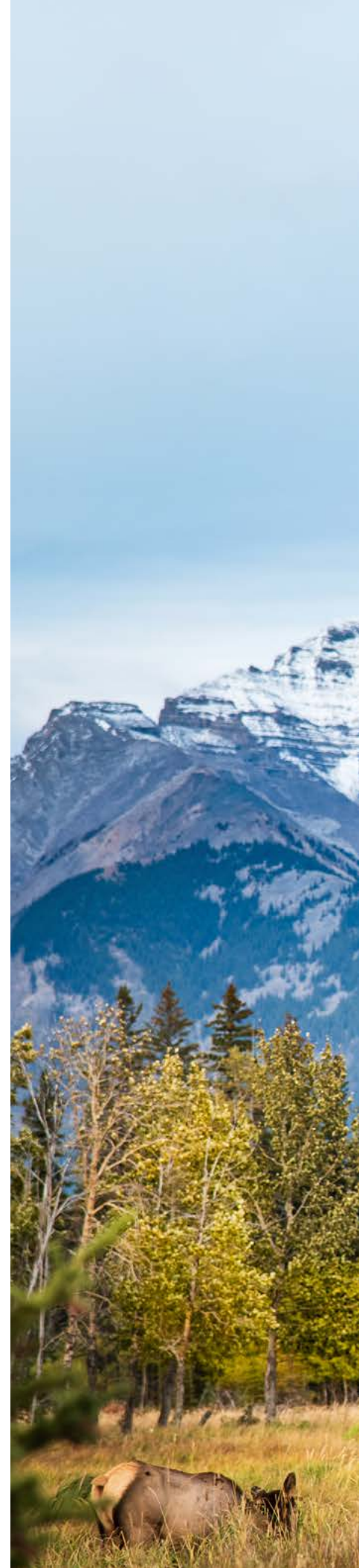
The bottom line is RMEF's mission work makes a meaningful and measurable difference for elk and other wildlife. And it simply does not happen without our "rock star" volunteers that host vital fundraising banquets and other events as well as supportive members, conservation partners, outdoor industry sponsors, donors and so many others. For that we are grateful, and we say, "Bring on the 40<sup>th</sup>!"

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "R. Kyle Weaver".

R. Kyle Weaver

President & Chief  
Executive Officer







**130**  
Habitat Stewardship  
Projects  
in **22** States



**RMEF**  
**IN 2023**



**43**  
Wildlife Management  
Projects (includes research)  
in **19** States



**11**  
Land Conservation  
& Access Projects  
in **9** States

**475**  
**PROJECTS**



**291**  
Hunting Heritage  
Projects  
in **38** States

**8.9** MILLION  
ACRES  
IN LIFETIME MISSION ACCOMPLISHMENT





## ATAYA-CUMBERLAND FOREST, KENTUCKY

Talk about coming full circle. In December 2023, hunters, anglers and others who enjoy the outdoors gained perpetual access to nearly 55,000 acres of private land in eastern Kentucky thanks to a landscape-scale voluntary conservation agreement by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR), The Nature Conservancy, RMEF and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. KDFWR will manage the land for wildlife habitat, public recreation, sustainable forestry and clean water. Called “an historic conservation milestone” by RMEF

President/CEO Kyle Weaver, the project is within the Cumberland Forest, home to Kentucky’s elk herd, and connects 274,000 acres of elk range stretching into neighboring Tennessee. It also supplies important riparian habitat as many streams cross the property. The agreement came 26 years after RMEF supplied more than \$2.5 million and significant volunteer support to help restore wild, free-ranging elk to their historic Kentucky range beginning in 1997. Today, that population is the largest east of the Rocky Mountains.





## AMARGO CANYON, NEW MEXICO

Tens of thousands of elk and mule deer leave the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado for their northern New Mexico wintering grounds every year. Thanks to a voluntary conservation agreement between RMEF and a New Mexico landowner, that historic migratory highway remains open for business. The transaction conserved more than 3,500 acres of crucial winter range and corridor habitat. The property, originally part of the iconic Broken Butt Ranch,

is between the 10,950-acre W.A. Humphries State Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to the southwest, 20,209-acre Edward Sargent WMA to the east, U.S. Forest Service land to the northeast and Jicarilla Apache Nation lands to the south. The agreement results in an increase in protected, contiguous open space for wildlife. It is in the same area as four (and possibly soon-to-be five) other RMEF conservation agreements.

**11** Land Conservation & Access projects that conserved **72,813 acres** in nine states and opened/improved **77,960 acres** of public access in eight states





## BRUNEAU OWHYEE SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT (BOSH) PROJECT, IDAHO

Landscape-scale habitat enhancement projects do not get much larger or more impactful than this one. Over 10 to 15 years, crews plan to enhance 617,000 acres in southwest Idaho managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the State of Idaho and private landowners by removing encroaching junipers that choke out native grasses, shrubs and hog the water supply. Treatment methods include hand-cutting and mastication, pile burning and reseeded on a

landscape that supports 350 species of plants and animals including elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and sage grouse. Part of the project work takes place in the same county where RMEF supplied funding for research to help wildlife managers better understand seasonal elk ranges, habitat use, movement patterns, migration corridors and survival. RMEF has so far awarded \$280,000 to treat nearly 150,000 acres over five years, including 44,000 acres in 2023.





## NORTH FORK POUND RESERVOIR BURN, VIRGINIA

The southern Appalachian Mountains are home to far north of 12,000 elk in Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. To enhance habitat along the Virginia-Kentucky border, RMEF and its partners ignited a prescribed burning operation in early 2023. Crews used a combination of aerial and ground ignition across 5,300 acres on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests to burn off a buildup of leaves,

twigs, downfall and older, less palatable and nutritious ground cover while greatly reducing competition for the regeneration of oaks and yellow pines. The treatment helped spawn the growth of blueberries, huckleberries, blackberries and other leafy early seral and native vegetation greatly preferred by elk, deer, wild turkey, black bears and other wildlife. It also improved overall forest health and reduced the risk of large wildfires.

**130** Habitat Stewardship projects that enhanced **161,180** acres in **22** states





## MIGRATION CORRIDOR MAPPING

In late 2023, RMEF committed \$250,000 to advance research associated with mapping 40 western wildlife migration routes. Migration maps help guide development, determine the need for roadway crossing structures, target problematic fencing and identify critical private lands that support migratory herds. Over the previous five years, researchers mapped nearly 200 big game corridors across Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming in line

with Secretarial Order 3362, a directive to bureaus to enhance winter range and migration corridor habitat on federal lands. RMEF supplied grant funding to catalog 150 of those corridors resulting in three distinct volumes of the U.S. Geological Survey mapping series “Ungulate Migrations of the Western United States.” The latest commitment boosts RMEF’s financial support to identify and conserve corridors from 1998 to 2023 to \$3.5 million that leveraged \$29.5 million in partner funding.

Committed **\$5.7 million** that leveraged **\$26.7 million**  
for habitat enhancement & wildlife management





## WAFWA ELK SUMMIT

In early 2023, RMEF hosted more than three dozen wildlife professionals from the Yukon, Canada and Alaska, across the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies, the Desert Southwest and the Dakotas, at the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Western Elk Summit. They discussed challenges and possible solutions to a litany of issues. Later in the year, RMEF announced a three-year allocation of \$400,000 to accelerate the conservation of migration corridors, matched by WAFWA at

least 3-to-1, thus putting more than \$1.6 million on the ground to enhance the movement and health of elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and other species across 13 western and Midwest states. Projects include modification or removal of fencing, improving grasslands, wildlife crossings, identifying barriers to wildlife movement, invasive grass treatment, wildfire restoration and research focused on migratory movement and the impact of renewable energy and solar installations on wildlife.







HUNTING  
HERITAGE



## OUTDOORCLASS

In 2022, RMEF launched a bold, new endeavor by addressing the hunting heritage portion of its mission like it never had before. Teaming with several partners, it launched OutdoorClass, an online, subscription-based learning hub for all hunters, despite their varying levels of experience and ability, to better expand their knowledge base and hone their hunting skills. In 2023, RMEF stepped up even more, taking on full management duties of



the innovative program. Together with partners Randy Newberg and Corey Jacobsen as well as other frontline experts and information sources like Remi Warren, Jaime Teigen, John Barklow, Hank Shaw and Elk 101's University of Elk Hunting, participants learned about early and late season elk hunting, elk calling and bowhunting, finding mule deer and other wildlife species, backcountry survival, cooking, E-scouting, marksmanship and much more.





# WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP AWARD SCHOLARSHIPS

In 2023, RMEF solidified its long-time support of future wildlife management professionals by doling out Wildlife Leadership Award scholarships to a dozen promising college students studying natural resources in Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and Wisconsin. All winners receive a \$5,000 scholarship and an RMEF membership thanks to RMEF's Torstenson Family Endowment (TFE), furthering the late Bob Torstenson's legacy of conservation education. The program began in 1991, expanded thanks to a gift from the family of Jerry L. Turpin in 2006 and received another boost in 2013 from the TFE. 2023 recipients eye careers in everything from wildlife biology, predator/prey studies and migration corridors to ranchland-habitat management and studying reptiles and amphibians.



## FROM TOP:

### MATTIE BUDINE

An artist, equestrian and honors student, Mattie stands out in many ways. Chad Bishop, director of the University of Montana wildlife biology program, describes her as a rising superstar. Now a junior, Mattie recently started hunting, bringing home her first deer while taking an RMEF-sponsored Wild Sustenance course last fall (see "Bringing Hunting to Higher Education," Bugle, July/August 2023). After her undergraduate degree, Mattie aims to earn a master's working on the conservation challenges surrounding feral horses in the West.



### PAYTON BROWN

Payton grew up working on his family's farm and sawmill in Summersville, West Virginia, where he also became an avid hunter with a passion for giving back to his community. An Eagle Scout and vice-president of the Glenville State University Forestry Club, he is dedicated and hardworking with a knack for inspiring others, his mentors say. Now a junior in wildlife management, Payton would like to begin his career as a biologist for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources managing wild turkeys then eventually land a biologist position assisting with elk reintroduction.



### LOGAN BRATSCH

Logan gained a love of the outdoors and hunting from his dad. Now a junior at the University of Montana, he mentors anyone he's met at college who wants to learn how to hunt. He also volunteers at a game check station near his hometown of Hamilton, Montana, where in high school he helped lead his Envirothon team to top 10 finishes in national environmental and natural resource problem-solving competitions. After college, Logan plans to become a wildlife biologist working to ensure wildlife and ecosystems are conserved for future generations.

### GABBY MARTIN

Gabby's aspirations to work as a state or federal wildlife biologist are rooted in her love of hunting. "It isn't just a pastime," she says. "It also helps control and manage wildlife populations. Without hunting there is no conservation." A senior at North Carolina State University studying fisheries, wildlife and conservation biology, Gabby mentors students new to hunting and spent this past summer collaring black bears and mountain lions for research in New Mexico. After graduating, she aims to one day go elk hunting.







## CALLS TO ACTION

Due to its stature in the conservation world, RMEF can move the needle on issues that impact its mission. Same goes for its membership. In 2023, RMEF issued 14 calls to action to its membership base, either on a state-by-state or national basis. Issues ranged from wildlife management in Minnesota, Colorado and New Mexico, commission reform in Oregon, preventing Pennsylvania lawmakers from raiding funding set aside to promote

conservation and bills that threatened hunting in California and Washington. In each case, RMEF members sent messages to lawmakers letting them know their thoughts. Nationally, RMEF membership successfully urged the U.S. Department of Education to not block funding to schools that have hunter education and the National Archery in the Schools Program. In total, RMEF members delivered more than 18,000 messages to decisionmakers in 2023.



## CAPITOL HILL VISIT & TESTIMONY

In addition to providing public comment on state, regional and national issues, and supplying testimony before state legislatures and wildlife commissions in 2023, RMEF staffers visited with key decisionmakers on Capitol Hill. Topics of discussion focused on conservation, active forest management, public access, hunting, predator management and others. During its visit, RMEF also testified before a congressional committee about endangered species management and how some manipulate the regulations to prevent state management of wildlife. Another key area of focus was gaining support to fix the 2015 Cottonwood decision, which triggered a major step backwards for forest, wildlife and habitat management.



## FINANCIALS

### STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

(in thousands) 2023

<b>Support and Revenue</b>	
Program service revenue	\$ 21,039
Contributions	19,466
Return on investments	5,520
Membership	8,362
Special events, less direct benefit to donors	25,390
Advertising, royalties, other sales (less cost of sales)	3,958
Other income, gains and losses	18
<b>Total Support and Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 83,753</b>
<b>Expenses</b>	
Program services	\$ 52,179
Fundraising	17,906
Administrative	4,035
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 74,120</b>
<b>Increase (Decrease) in Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 9,633</b>

### STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

(in thousands) 2023

<b>Assets</b>	
Current assets	\$ 40,267
Investments	78,307
Property and equipment, net of depreciation	12,711
Lands held for program accomplishment	7,473
Intangible assets, net	4,544
Other assets	809
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$ 144,111</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>	
Current liabilities	\$ 8,998
Non-current liabilities	1,774
<b>Total liabilities</b>	<b>\$ 10,772</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>	
With donor restrictions	\$ 50,711
Without donor restrictions	82,628
<b>Total net assets</b>	<b>\$ 133,339</b>
<b>Total Liabilities and Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 144,111</b>

The complete audited financial statements for RMEF can be seen at [www.rmef.org/resources/rmef-financials](http://www.rmef.org/resources/rmef-financials).

## 2023 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### CHAIR

Fred Lekse Collbran, CO

### VICE CHAIR

Tobias "Toby" Buck Prior Lake, MN

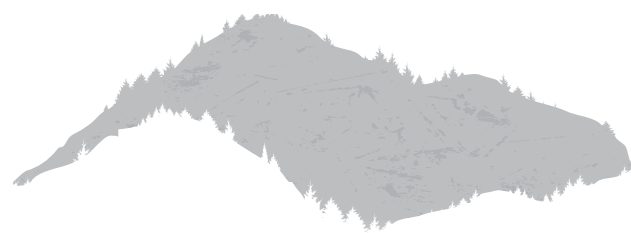
James J. Baker	Bozeman, MT
Charlie Decker	Libby, MT
Nancy Holland	Cedar Hill, MO
Maurice Hull	High Point, NC
Kent Johnson	Big Lake, MN
Donna McDonald	Alder, MT
Tom Robinson	St. Simons, GA
Vince Rosdahl	Mansfield, TX
Dave Stephens	Nehalem, OR
AshLee Strong	Martinsdale, MT
Dr. Martin Vavra, Ph.D.	La Grande, OR
Todd Walker	McLean, VA
Michael Wright	Canton, GA

### OFFICERS

R. Kyle Weaver	President & CEO
Grant Parker	Secretary / General Counsel
Shane Cronk	Treasurer / CFO

## RMEF FOUNDERS

Charlie Decker  
Bob Munson  
Dan Bull  
Bill Munson



# 8.9 MILLION ACRES

## IN LIFETIME MISSION ACCOMPLISHMENT



## BOARD CHAIR MESSAGE



One of the benefits from service on the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Board of Directors is the view. As volunteer board members, our primary focus is on the strategic priorities of the organization. To accomplish this, we balance keeping an eye on our current standing while working with staff to develop and implement strategies designed to keep us effective in delivering our mission and ensuring organizational health.

Looking back at 2023, we not only see success in advancing the mission, but we also see mission having impact on a much broader scale. Notably, we made significant strides in creating new partnerships, and beefing up current ones, to conduct more on-the-ground conservation.

To cite a few examples, RMEF entered a three-year agreement with the Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society that will result in more habitat improvements via active forest management projects across the Great Lakes and Appalachian States. This is a great example of working with like-minded nongovernment entities to enhance the delivery of our shared missions on behalf of our stakeholders.

Additionally, we reinforced a RMEF- Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies commitment that will result in more than \$1.6 million over three years to protect and conserve critical winter range and migration corridors, not only for elk, but for a variety of big game species. These are state-led, shovel-ready projects that include fence removal/modification, wildlife movement studies, wildfire restoration and assessing the impact of renewable energy development on big game.

We also committed \$200,000 to various partners to promote the scientific understanding and management of chronic wasting disease. And to increase advocacy outreach efforts, RMEF strengthened its relationship with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, an organization with both good ties and strong influence with Congress and state governments.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Fred Lekse".

Fred Lekse  
2023 Chair, RMEF Board of Directors



# RMEF