



NEWSLETTER *of the* HABITAT COUNCIL

HABITAT COUNCIL TIDINGS A MESSAGE FROM YOUR CO-CHAIRS

UPCOMING NATIONAL EVENTS

Habitat Council Meeting and Retreat

May 12 - 14, 2022
Asheville, North Carolina

RMEF Mountain Fest & Elk Camp

July 21 - July 24, 2022
Park City, Utah

PBR Team Series Championship Event

Las Vegas, Nevada

RMEF Hunter and Outdoor Christmas Expo

December 1 - 10, 2022
Las Vegas, Nevada



Kent & Cyndie Johnson,
RMEF Habitat Council Co-chairs

Happy New Year! We hope you and your family enjoyed the holiday season. 2021 is in the books and we've been reminiscing on the great things that have been brought to us during this past year. Thank you for your support and making these happen. In this issue of the Habitat Council newsletter, we'll visit with our Lands and Conservation strategic team members and revisit some of this past year's mission accomplishments.

As we begin to plan for 2022, we are looking forward to seeing you at the 2022 Habitat Council Meeting and Retreat. Please make sure your calendars are marked for May 12-14, 2022. In Asheville, North Carolina, we'll take a journey in time together to revisit the past, explore the present and look toward the future. Registration information will be sent in the near future.

You'll learn about the past Smoky Mountains elk restoration nearly 20 years ago and the positive impact it has had on the local community members, especially the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The success of this restoration effort led RMEF down a path of commitment to ensuring wild elk will continue to roam on their historic range.

For our project tour, we'll venture into the present and step onto the William H. Silver Game Land acquisition where habitat stewardship work opened forest density to provide quality nutrition for wildlife. What was once impenetrable overgrowth is now a lush feeding ground allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor. The importance of our partnerships with state and federal agencies, non-government organizations along with private landowners will become apparent as the leaders relate RMEF's beneficial involvement in the area.

Knowing the next steps is essential to continue this success story. During our business meeting, the RMEF Board of Directors and executive staff will share their vision and provide you with the

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North Carolina elk



Biltmore Estate

2021: THE YEAR IN CHALLENGES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

We caught up with Chief Conservation Officer Blake Henning to capture his thoughts about the year RMEF just finished in 2021.

In terms of completing mission projects, COVID-19 had an impact on staffing levels and workplace requirements within agency partners and private partners. For instance, title companies were short-staffed which led to delays in closing land acquisitions and conservation easements. A significant disappointment was the loss of the Musselshell project in eastern Montana after an unusually low federal appraisal in conjunction with a hot Montana real estate market and booming ranch values sunk the transaction.

On the other hand, closing the first phase of the Minam River acquisition is a major accomplishment for RMEF, Manulife Investment Management and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. It is a big, big win for conservation, wildlife, hunting and public access! This project was on priority lists for more than half a century. The result was closing on more than 4,600 acres of prime elk winter range in fall 2021. The larger project, more than 15,000 acres, is in our sights and we couldn't be more excited about tackling the next challenge of fundraising for phase two.

Utilizing research data on migrations and landlocked public land, RMEF was able to stay true to tackling conservation of the right properties. The story of each of our land conservation and access transactions completed in 2021 highlights how RMEF and our partners tackle the top challenges facing elk and elk hunters.

Of course, land conservation is the foundation for better habitat and improved public access. RMEF showed that through a voluntary conservation agreement with private landowners in Wyoming. A property that fits into too many agency priorities to name, held the key to linking a peninsula of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest on Sheep Mountain to Forest Service lands in the Snowy Range Mountains to the west. The Terry Creek voluntary conservation agreement ensures the land will allow elk and mule deer to continue historic migratory paths while the private property keeps the same family name it has had since the mid-1900s. The same animals that utilize this property can be found on nearby National Forest lands to the south. Building upon the habitat protections from the agreement with RMEF, a newly installed wildlife-friendly fence on the property ensures wildlife can travel unrestricted.



Minam River, Oregon

RMEF looks at conserving private lands as an opportunity to holistically improve elk that journey from public to private lands. Without success stories like this, elk continue to face an uphill journey on a rapidly changing landscape.

In total, our 14 land conservation and access projects in 2021 protected 26,277 acres across 14 states. RMEF staff and partners also successfully collaborated to open or improve access to 31,205 acres in eight different states.

I am also very pleased with the habitat work completed. Despite a litany of challenges, like partner staffing and other restrictions like those mentioned above, we enhanced 138,276 acres of elk habitat across 20 states. Overall and due to our successful fundraising efforts, RMEF granted \$2.2 million dollars for mission in 2021 that leveraged \$22.4 million. That's a healthy 10-to-1 match.

Let's showcase the positive impact on the landscape by zeroing in on just a few examples of our work.

- Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Department of Transportation recently highlighted two RMEF-supported wildlife crossing projects. Partners monitored the effectiveness of the Colorado Highway 9 crossing system over the last five years. As shown in a recent video, 17 different species used the crossing, resulting in a 90 percent reduction in wildlife-vehicle collisions. Another crossing project

in progress falls between Durango and Pagosa Springs on Highway 160 and spans two miles in a critical migratory corridor for both mule deer and elk. It includes an underpass, overpass and multiple other infrastructure modifications to help elk and other wildlife cross safely.

- In October 2021, more than 100 volunteers across multiple organizations gathered to plant 14,000 bitterbrush and sagebrush seedlings in the Sawtooth National Forest and Idaho Fish and Game's Magic Valley Region.
- The Badger Fire burned 90,100 acres in 2020 and impacted a large swath of critical elk, mule deer and sage-grouse winter range in Idaho. The fire killed sagebrush in moderate to high intensity burn areas. The U.S. Forest Service and partners are assessing other vegetation restoration needs such as timber management, salvage logging, etc. Restoration work will continue into 2022 and beyond.

It's important to note that RMEF allocated more than \$400,000 in 2021 alone for wildfire restoration projects like the Badger Fire work just mentioned. In fact, when you look at 2021 and 2022 combined, we're providing more than \$1 million in funding to help restore charred landscapes and enhance elk habitat.

Our advocacy efforts continue to build and we claimed success in 2021 with the passage of a CWD bill that could lead



RMEF prioritizes projects that conserve migration corridors



Montana Master Hunter Program



CWD Testing, Wyoming



ABOVE AND BEYOND—Colorado Highway 9 has long been dangerous for elk, mule deer and drivers, but wildlife overpasses and underpasses cut wildlife collisions by 90 percent.

to \$70 million for chronic wasting disease research. Plus, RMEF provided \$100,000 in funding for three research projects to help scientists and biologists learn more about CWD and \$180,000 to bolster efforts of continuing elk migration corridor mapping across the West. In all, RMEF allocated \$670,000 for scientific elk research to 14 states and two national projects that leveraged \$5.5 million in partner funding. That's an 8-to-1 match.

RMEF continues to push out funding and volunteer support for day camps, seminars, mentored hunts, recreational shooting and archery programs, and other hunting and

conservation educational efforts to ensure the future of our hunting heritage.

One example is the Montana Master Hunter Program. Strongly supported by RMEF, it improves working relationships between landowners and hunters, helps landowners and the State of Montana with its wildlife management goals, and creates hunting ambassadors and mentors. In 2021, 71 new master hunters graduated, creating a community of 237 master hunters that represent 41 cities and towns in Montana from both urban and rural communities. Thirteen different on-ranch service projects taught participants about the role of private

land stewardship in benefiting wildlife and other public resources. And more than 50 master hunters provided 482 hours of combined volunteer hours for projects ranging from removing invasive weeds and building wildlife-friendly fencing, to removing encroaching conifers to promote forest health.

So, were there challenges in 2021? Yes! Did RMEF overcome those challenges with success? Yes! Is there more to do? Absolutely! A new year brings with it new opportunity. We are already off and running. Thank you for your support and enjoy the race we're running together.



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The Exclusive Newsletter for RMEF Habitat Council Members

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TAYLOR RANCH—The Waterin' Hole

RMEF's accomplishments and for its future. This will coincide with RMEF's anniversary date of May 14th. Thirty-eight years and counting! Co-founder Charlie Decker and his wife, Yvonne, will be side-by-side with us to celebrate this milestone.

Thank you all for sharing the gifts of your time, talent, donations and leadership! We wish you a year of success and prosperity on this new journey. We look forward to seeing you and gathering as a family again!

needs to make a positive difference for the future of elk country.

You know there will be some fun and entertainment as well during our event. The Biltmore Estate is a must-see while in the area and goes hand-in-hand with the history of Asheville. As a part of the sprawling 8,000 acres on the estate, the farm-to-forest guided tour will offer insights into the Vanderbilt family's conservation efforts that led them to sell 87,000 acres to the U.S. Forest Service in 1914. Capping off this day, we'll enjoy an evening together including a "farm-to-table" private dinner on the property.

Habitat Council members are a family of like-minded conservationists. Therefore, we have planned a family reunion of sorts at Taylor Ranch with its rustic mountain elegance under a canopy of hardwood trees. At this family-owned and operated property, we'll gather around the dinner table, the firepit or lakeside with lawn games and a campfire ring with log benches.

For our last evening, we'll celebrate our impact in



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