

Departments

CONSERVED FOREVER

Gentry Hale



A Confluence of Conservation: Seymour Creek, Montana

3,649 acres protected and opened to public access

BJ Bjornemo has hunted around the Big Hole River near Anaconda, Montana, for over 50 years. Decades of memories hang on this landscape, including witnessing his 12-year-old grandson shoot his first cow elk in the area last year. BJ is vice president of the Anaconda Sportsman's Club and played a key role in advocating for the acquisition of the Seymour Creek-Big Hole River parcel, a nearly 3,700-acre ranch nestled right next to where his grandson took his first elk.

Boasting lush meadows of grasses and sage framed by conifer and aspen, the parcel is not only an ideal home for elk, but also mule deer, whitetails, moose, bears, mountain lions and pronghorns. Given its exquisite habitat and prime location, the property was at high risk of subdivision. Instead, working with conservation-minded, multi-generation ranchers, RMEF recently helped forever protect these 3,649 acres south of Butte, Montana, and put it in public hands. It's now administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), open to walk-in access and will forever remain intact.

The Big Hole River and Seymour Creek snake across some two miles of the property, creating a critical aquatic oasis for the last wild population of fluvial Arctic grayling in the Lower 48, along with a variety of trout and other fish. Wedged between the Pioneer Mountains and the Anaconda Range, it also sits on a crucial corridor for Canada lynx and grizzlies, linking the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems.

The ranching family ran livestock on the property for more than three-quarters of a century. With land and water conservation at the forefront of their practices, the property remains pristine. When the family chose to list it for sale, RMEF moved quickly to build a partnership between the landowner, RMEF and the BLM. Proceeds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) paid for the bulk of the cost, with additional support from RMEF, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Conservation Alliance.

"We've had a lot of land acquisitions in the last couple of years and it always comes down to the property owner. They've got to want to sell it and put it in public hands. And that's where a lot of the credit goes—it starts with the landowner," says BJ. "That's the key, we've all got to work together for a common good."

The Seymour Creek-Big Hole River Project is the latest in a string of conservation victories for this area that started 23 years ago with the 32,000-acre Watershed Project, which lies less than 13 miles due north of Seymour Creek. That land now includes the Garrity Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which RMEF has since helped add another 1,252 acres to, along with 1,233 acres to the Mount Haggin WMA, which abuts the northern border of the Seymour Creek parcel.

“The beauty is that now it connects Forest Service land; Fish, Wildlife & Parks land; more BLM land; state trust land—and then you jump right into the Pintlers, so it’s a great acquisition,” says BJ.