

Conserving it FENCELINE TO FENCELINE

by Heather Fraley

When he was young, John P. Greytak was convinced he'd gotten a raw deal. He spent his summers in sun-seared farm fields in the middle of Nowhere, Montana, surrounded by flies.

By contrast, his friends spent their summers reveling in the bustling cities of Great Falls and Billings.

It didn't take long for him to decide where he'd rather be, but it wasn't his choice. His dad shipped him off to labor on the land every year, starting in 1973, at age 11.

John's dad, John J. Greytak, was a product of the Greatest Generation. If he ever paused for breath while sprinting away from the tough times of the Depression and World War II, no one saw him do it. By the mid '80s, he'd built a logging, ranching and farming empire and amassed two million acres of working lands in South Dakota, Montana and Idaho.

John P. Greytak and his older brother were initiated into the family ethic of unrelenting hard work by way of summers on the 24 family-owned ranches and farms. Now 57, Greytak has made his own successful business career investing in real estate. In hindsight, Greytak says the summers of his youth that he once viewed as torture sparked his passion

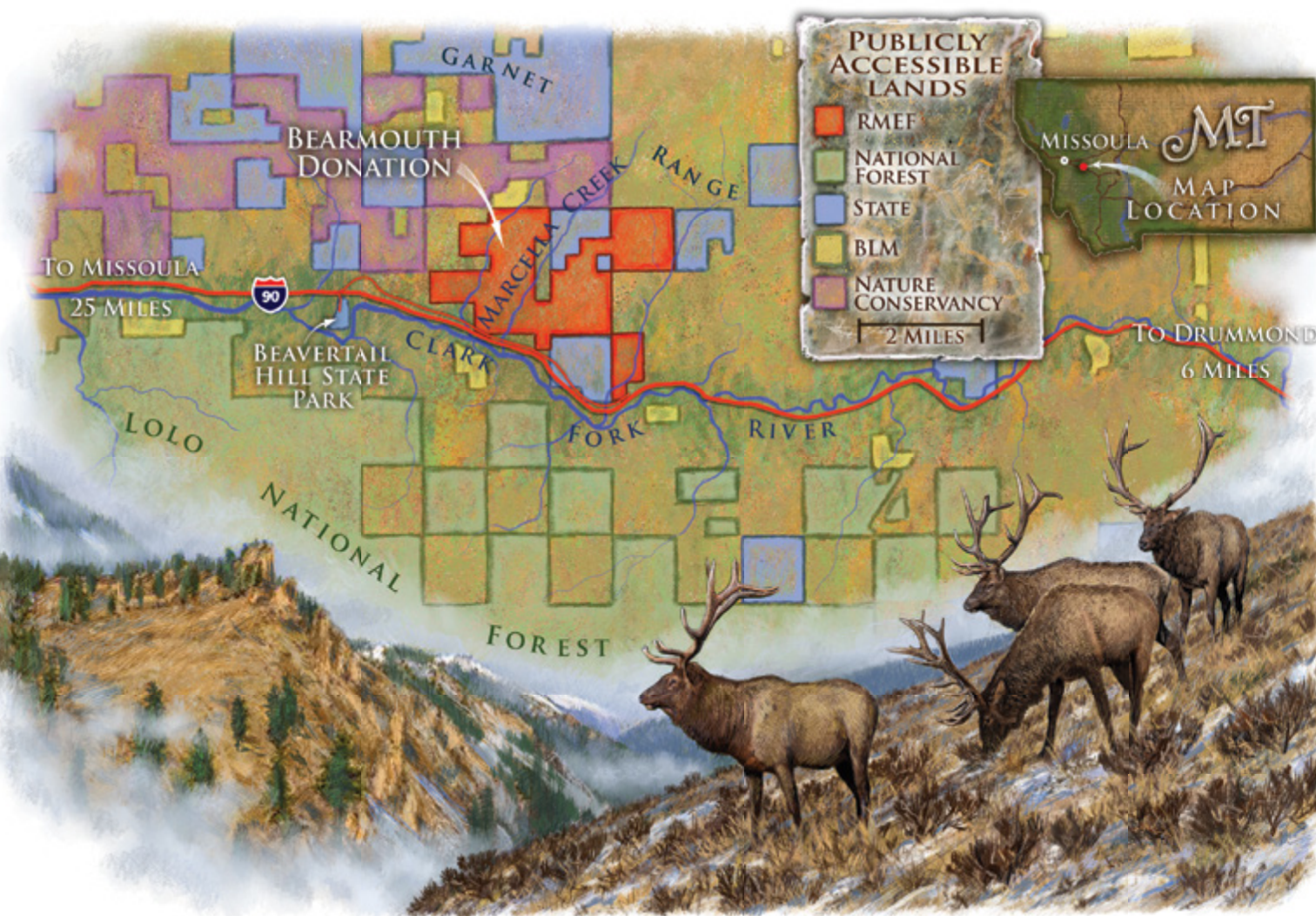


John Greytak grew up hearing his dad say, "Farm it fenceline to fenceline." But his own creed became *conserve it fenceline to fenceline*. That's how he came to give us all 3,450 acres of prime elk country.

PHOTOS: RMEF



A young John Greytak in 1975, learning the family ethic of unrelenting hard work—but also taking a break to clown around on his first ATV in 1979. The land he donated is full of cliffs and outcrops where, in his words, “You can feel the cats and the bighorn sheep, and the spirit of the Native Americans.”



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF JOHN GREYTAK / RMEF / COURTESY OF JOHN GREYTAK
ILLUSTRATION: WILLIAM GAMRADT

for land conservation.

“My brother and I watched my dad over-farm,” he says, cupping his hands around his mouth to imitate his dad yelling out over a field, ‘Farm it fenceline to fenceline.’

“And then all of a sudden, there’s no wildlife.”

When the Greytak brothers backed the farm equipment off the fencelines and planted to reduce erosion, they were amazed how quickly wildlife came back. Greytak always welcomed the sight of herds of elk, deer and antelope while he was working, and it made him think.

“We’re all part of this land,” he says. “It’s up to us to be good stewards of all the other creatures that need this land to survive. When you get that in your mind as a farmer or rancher, it changes your operations.”

This experience of living and working with the land was the first step toward what he calls “one of the best things I’ve ever done,” a decision that gave him a tax break, but didn’t actually earn him a dime.

It was Friday the 13th last December, but far from the unlucky day of superstition. That day, Jennifer Doherty, RMEF’s director of lands had her first conference call with Greytak, his attorney and RMEF’s attorney, Grant Parker.

Greytak told them he wanted to donate 3,450 acres of land to the Elk Foundation, which would have made it the third-largest land gift the RMEF had ever received. He wanted it to be open for public hunting and other recreation forever.

The land lies a 30-minute drive east of Missoula,

near the ghost town of Bearmouth. The slopes rise steeply above the beautiful Clark Fork River. They provide prime winter range for about 400 elk that summer in the West Garnet Range and the foothills above the Blackfoot Valley near Potomac.

Along with the elk, the land is key winter range for mule deer, and supports thriving populations of whitetails, moose, black bears, wolves, mountain lions and a wide assortment of small mammals and birds. It was also historic lambing grounds for bighorn sheep.

“It was very exciting and also a little nerve-wracking,” says Doherty. “Because not only did he want to donate this property, he wanted to donate it that calendar year.”

There were only 18 days left in 2019.

When land changes hands, it takes time. Every step in the process holds legal tripwires. RMEF’s legal department had to make sure the land didn’t come with legal limitations that would make it a liability to own.

“We had to carefully walk through all of our due diligence that we normally do to make sure we weren’t cutting any corners,” says Doherty.

They had to walk briskly. RMEF’s lands and legal staff asked the board of directors for an emergency meeting to explain the opportunity, and admitted they didn’t have their usual, well-thought-out plan. RMEF isn’t set up to own land long-term. The organization acts as a bridge between private landowners and state or federal land management agencies, stepping in quickly when landowners are ready to sell or donate, and then



Historic bighorn lambing grounds, these steep, south-facing slopes offer prime winter range for mule deer and elk—and hunters will be free to seek them there this fall.

holding the land until government agencies secure funding, which can sometimes take several years.

With the rapid pace of this transaction, no agency could commit to take over—and pay for—the property. It was a bit of a leap of faith, but with 3,450 acres of elk country on the line, the board agreed to jump.

Doherty and Parker began mobilizing all the contractors they would need to get the transaction finished. From the title officer’s expertise to an efficient hazmat evaluation, the pieces clicked quickly into place.

“When you have an offer like this of a gift of land—such a beautiful, humbling thing—you work your tail off to get it done,” says Doherty.

“We have a really good team here,” adds Parker. “And John obviously had his act together. He’s kind of a dream landowner to work with.”

The title office sent the finalized documents at 3 p.m. on December 31.

“The stars aligned, as corny as that sounds,” Doherty says.

A month after the donation closed, I stood in the sun and snow on RMEF’s new property. I was ground-truthing it and trying to wrap my mind around what it would feel like to be Greytak—to own this land and give it away to the public.

Beyond the land itself, the donation also secured legal access to land owned by the state, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Nature Conservancy.

“I knew if I gave that 3,450 acres, it’s going to block up about 10,000 acres immediately for people

to recreate and hunt on,” says Greytak. “Ten thousand acres that will always be what it is today—prime elk habitat.”

That late January day, the land was showing off its finest features.

Hills swept down into coulees. Ponderosa pines and Douglas firs towered on the hillsides. A nearby fault had thrust quartzite cliffs into view. The rusty-pink rock formations climbed out of the snow toward a cloudless winter sky. A golden eagle circled, dark against the blue.

They nest in these cliffs, along with prairie and peregrine falcons. Marmots and golden-mantled ground squirrels love the talus slopes below.

“It’s not just a monotypic stand of forest and it’s not just a grassland,” says Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) biologist Torrey Ritter. “It’s a grassland and it’s rock outcroppings and it’s little riparian areas and it’s all these different classes of conifer forest—just a diversity of niches that species can fill.”

I walked up a snow-covered logging road, my boots punching through the crust next to the purposeful tracks of at least three wolves. I could see the Marcella Creek drainage that could serve as a route of connectivity for grizzly bears and other species coming and going from north to south.

“This property creates a corridor along that I-90 area of protected lands,” says Ritter. “Any time we can fill in those gaps and connect open space, that’s a really big benefit for those wide-ranging species.” coming and going from north to south.

Watching the winter sun hit the slopes, I understood why Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

designated the area “crucial” winter range for elk, mule deer, moose and white-tailed deer.

“It gets a lot of southern exposure,” says FWP’s Blackfoot area biologist, Scott Eggeman. “Because of that, it stays relatively snow free and it has good grass, so we get a lot of elk in there.”

Eggeman calls the Interstate 90 corridor from the western edge of the donated land east to Drummond and Garrison “some of the best winter range in Region 2.” FWP’s Region 2 spans about 6.7 million acres.

I hiked across the logging road and started climbing a steep ridge, passing massive trees next to stumps of their contemporaries where loggers had long ago picked their way along the slopes. Multiple black scars along the trunks of the still-standing ponderosas showed where fires had passed.

Two months after the donation closed, Greytak, a fit-looking man with a self-assured energy, graciously welcomed me into the office of Studio Greytak in Missoula.

We sank into comfortable chairs on opposite sides of a work of art masquerading as a coffee table. Rich wood and a giant piece of amethyst cradled a thick glass top. Resting on the table was a clear, Columbian crystal roughly the size and shape of a hedgehog, set artfully in metal.

I asked Greytak why it was important to finalize the donation in 2019.

He told me he had been working with FWP on a conservation easement on this property over the previous two years, and was set to finalize it in 2019.

Instead, the project “blew apart at the goal line,” as he puts it, when the state’s funding fell through. He and FWP biologist Scott Eggeman had both put a lot of effort into designing the easement. He didn’t want that momentum to be lost.

“I said, ‘There’s gotta be another way.’”

Greytak’s accountant had told him it would be good to have a tax write-off in 2019. The easement would have helped with that. But when Greytak suggested he just outright donate the land—valued at well beyond \$1 million—to a land trust, his accountant’s jaw dropped. From a tax perspective, it was a great move, but it’s not often that clients simply give away prime assets.

Greytak decided to reach out to RMEF. He joined in 1999 and later upgraded to a life membership, and he’d seen RMEF land projects and been impressed.

“Watching some of the land that the foundation’s been involved in over the years has been really epic,” he says.

The most important reason Greytak wanted to complete the deal in 2019 had nothing to do with taxes, though. It was his father’s recent death at 89.

“I really wanted to get it done in the year he passed,” he says. “That became a driving force for me.”

He explained that he’d watched his dad squeeze every dollar out of every acre, and as part of the next generation, he wanted to help correct the blind spots of the previous generation. Protecting this ground for its value to wildlife, hunters and other recreationists, rather than using it strictly for monetary value,

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: NPS-JACOB W. FRANK / ROD SINCLAIR / GOOD BULL OUTDOORS

seemed fitting.

“None of this would have been possible without my dad, so for me, I saw it as a tribute, a way to give back to the world through his efforts,” he says, while acknowledging with a wry grin that his dad might be looking down on him and disagreeing.

Greytak wanted the land to be open to hunting because that’s one of his passions. He fell in love with bird hunting in college. While he pursued a degree in business marketing at Montana State University and worked part-time, he also got plenty of field time chasing pheasants. Those fall days only deepened his respect for wildlife and its relationship with the land.

Hunting stuck, college didn’t. A few credits short of a degree, he decided to drop out and work for his uncle. In 1989, he went into business with his dad to build retirement communities in Florida.

He remembers needing to build a retaining pond for a retirement village. To do it legally, he had to hire a company that would mimic natural wetland habitat. He was amazed by the results. Again, he saw the good that flows from taking deliberate conservation actions.

While he was working in Florida, he and his sister purchased the 10,000-acre Sitting Bull Ranch in the eastern foothills of the Bull Mountains near Custer, Montana. In his free time, Greytak pursued his newest love—private land conservation.

He wrote down all the animals he could attract with habitat improvement projects. Turkeys, white-tailed deer and upland birds joined the antelope and mule deer already present. He learned one of Aldo Leopold’s tenets that “to keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.” He was bringing all the pieces back.

It was pure magic for Greytak to watch resident elk come back onto the land after being absent for more than half a century. Pretty soon, the ranch boasted 400-class bull elk.

When he took up elk hunting at age 37, he was immediately hooked on the challenge.

“I got a passion for elk that I’d never experienced before in my life, and it changed me forever,” he says. “I just understood the value of conservation.”

His goal quickly became to complete as many stewardship projects as he could to create more food, water and cover for wildlife.

A bull fell to his bullet this year, but more often than not, all he has to show for his elk hunts are lessons in humility. He marvels at how elk know topography so well that a herd of 200 can disappear in seconds.

One year, a friend came out to hunt with him, and suggested selling Sitting Bull Ranch and buying a ranch in western Montana. Greytak had poured his soul into conservation work at Sitting Bull, so the suggestion hit a brick wall. But his friend kept



Greytak didn’t hunt elk until he was 37. But after killing his first bull (above) that fall, it took him over. “I got a passion for elk that I’d never experienced before in my life, and it changed me forever. I just understood the value of conservation.”

pushing. It couldn’t hurt to look.

As soon as his feet hit the Bearmouth land, it grabbed him.

“Some of the rock formations on that property up Ryan and Marcella creeks—you can feel the cats and you can feel the bighorn sheep and the spirit of the Native Americans,” he says.

He purchased the now-donated parcel in 2009, along with several other pieces of land to the east and north. Collectively, he calls those holdings Bearmouth Ranch.

Soon after the purchase, Greytak discovered a thesis written about the area. While earning her master’s in archaeology at the University of Montana, Patricia Robins Flint studied a 20-square-mile area just east of the donated land. In 1977, she documented eight prehistoric archaeological sites, adding to the four already known.

Native Americans had crossed and camped on this land through time immemorial, subsisting on the unique resources available in the surrounding area. The Salishan peoples, including the Semte’use, the

Flathead and Pend d’Oreille, were the most recent indigenous groups to use the general area. They hunted, dug bitterroots and picked serviceberries, which were plentiful on the south side of the river.

Five miles east of the donated land as the crow flies juts Mount Baldy, and close by, a chert quarry. Native Americans prized chert for making knives, scrapers, arrowheads, spear points and other tools essential for survival. During her study, Flint noted that the quarry had seen so much use, even Columbian ground squirrel burrowing brought worked chips of chert to the surface.

Farther east of the donated land, pictographs splash red across a series of sheer jutting limestone cliffs. These cliffs are said to have served for centuries as a vision quest site where young men sought spiritual communion and guidance. They fasted and kept vigil in this then-lonely place. Based on the claws and necklaces found below them, the cliffs were likely also a place of hunting magic, where they would leave offerings to obtain a successful hunt.

The pigment for the pictographs likely came from an iron-oxide deposit known as “red hill” thrust to the surface by movement along the nearby fault a quarter-mile east of Little Bear Gulch. This crustal weakness also created Nimrod and Bearmouth hot springs. These pools were important to indigenous peoples for both medicinal and religious reasons.

“The combination of thermal hot springs and pictograph panels made the Bearmouth area a unique religious place,” according to Flint’s thesis.

The horse arrived here around 1730, and iron began replacing chert. The south side of the river was an ideal place for a horse trail, and the Bearmouth area became a stopover on the way to hunt buffalo on the other side of the Continental Divide. Later, Lewis and Clark passed within about 30 miles of the property before branching off to the Blackfoot River.

Today, Interstate 90 roughly follows the path of the long-ago trail trodden by countless feet and hooves.

“After I read this [Flint’s] report, it was mind boggling,” says Greytak. “This is sacred, hallowed ground, and it needs to be treated as such.”

Greytak loves things that are steeped in history.

When he bought Bearmouth Ranch and hired an interior designer to help him decorate the ranch lodge he designed and friends built, she took him to the world’s largest mineral show, held in Tucson, Arizona (think 65,000 people attending over a three-week period in 2019). Seeing the minerals with their geologic time-scale history, he quickly caught “gem fever.”

In Greytak family modus operandi, he turned an obsession into a business. He started Studio Greytak, a collection of artisans creating practical works of art

from minerals. The coffee table in front of us was a perfect example.

He sees himself as a temporary steward of both minerals and land, things he views as beautiful gifts from nature. He gestures toward the Columbian crystal on the coffee table to illustrate.

“It’s in my control right now, but one day I’ll hand it off. It will be in someone else’s control and it will be part of their journey.”

He feels the same way about the donated land.

“I preserved it and I gave it a chance to be that forever,” Greytak says. “Now it’s in the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation’s control. I’ve entrusted that they will do what’s right with it.”

He has been fortunate enough to be able to conserve land on a scale that not every individual can. Underlying that act, though, is the same passion that drives us all.

“If we want to preserve this way of life and this beautiful legacy that Montana offers, it’s up to us to do it,” he says. “I think the common fiber that brings us all into the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation fold is the love of the land and the elk, but also the desire to leave that lasting legacy for generations to come.”

Greytak calls his donation “phase one” in his land protection efforts. He’s not sure what “phase two” will be, but he’s looking into protecting some of his remaining land with conservation easements.

“It wouldn’t be subdivided into those 20 to 30 acre parcels where the elk are constantly having to jump fences and be harangued,” he says. “They need the space, and I would love to ensure that.”

For now, phase one is more than enough. The donated land will be open to hiking, bird watching and of course, hunting. It lies within hunting District 292 and will be enrolled in FWP’s block management program in the fall of 2020. The rugged terrain makes for a great physical challenge.

“It’s not a drive-by hunting opportunity. It’s a genuine, get-out-and-hike hunting opportunity,” says biologist Scott Eggeman.

This spring the land was open to turkey and bear hunting. This fall, the land will see elk and deer hunting starting with the archery opener in early September.

Greytak says he was constantly asked for hunting access on his land. Now he has some big news to tell the people who call him.

RMEF hopes that within three years, the land will pass into the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management, and through them, to all of us.

However, even if a private landowner ends up owning the parcel, it will include a public access easement, per Greytak’s goal.

“Did it make me any money?” he asks. “No. Was it a profitable business venture? No. Is it important? Is it going to last forever? Yes. And that was the point.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF: JOHN GREYTA