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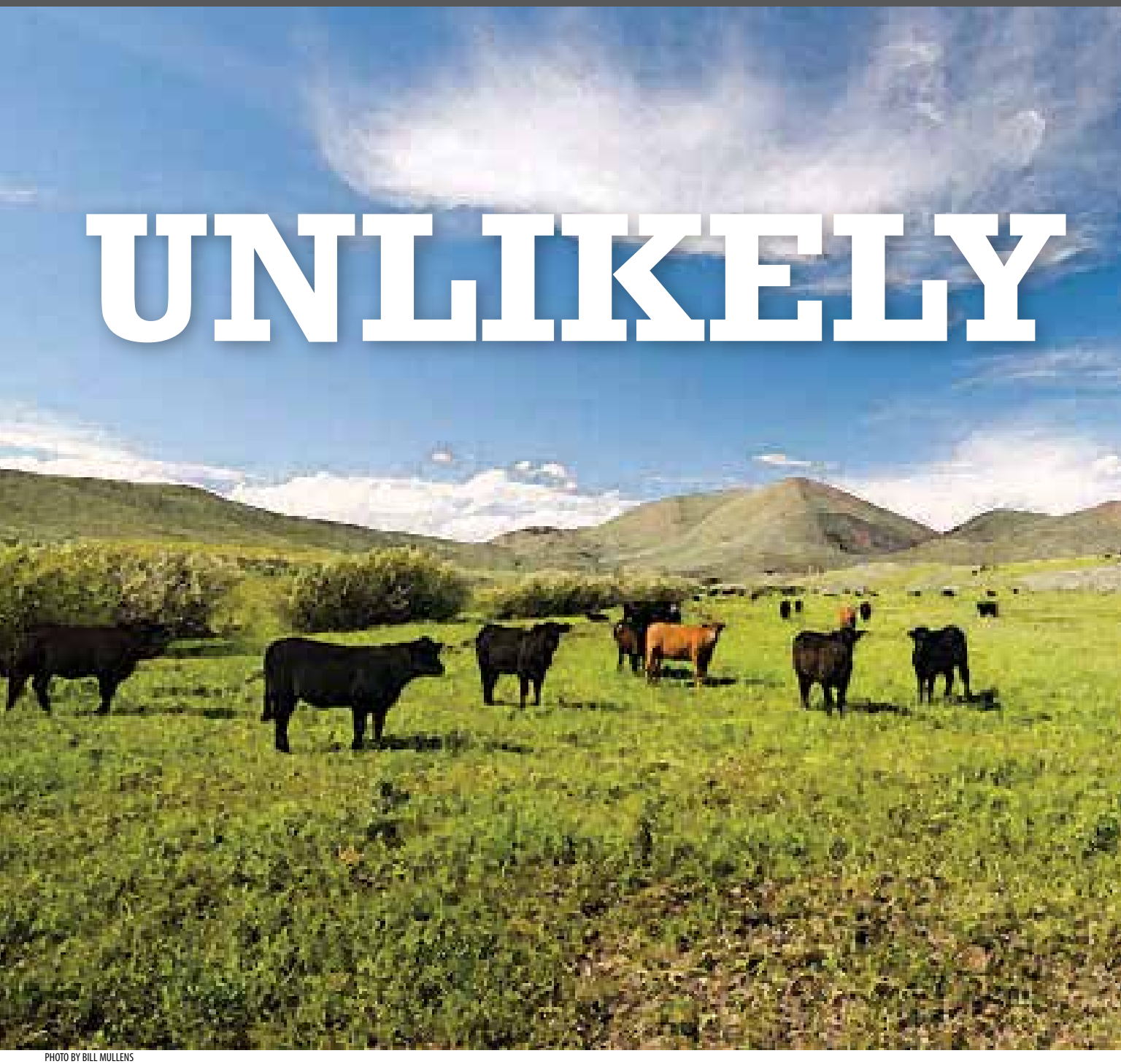
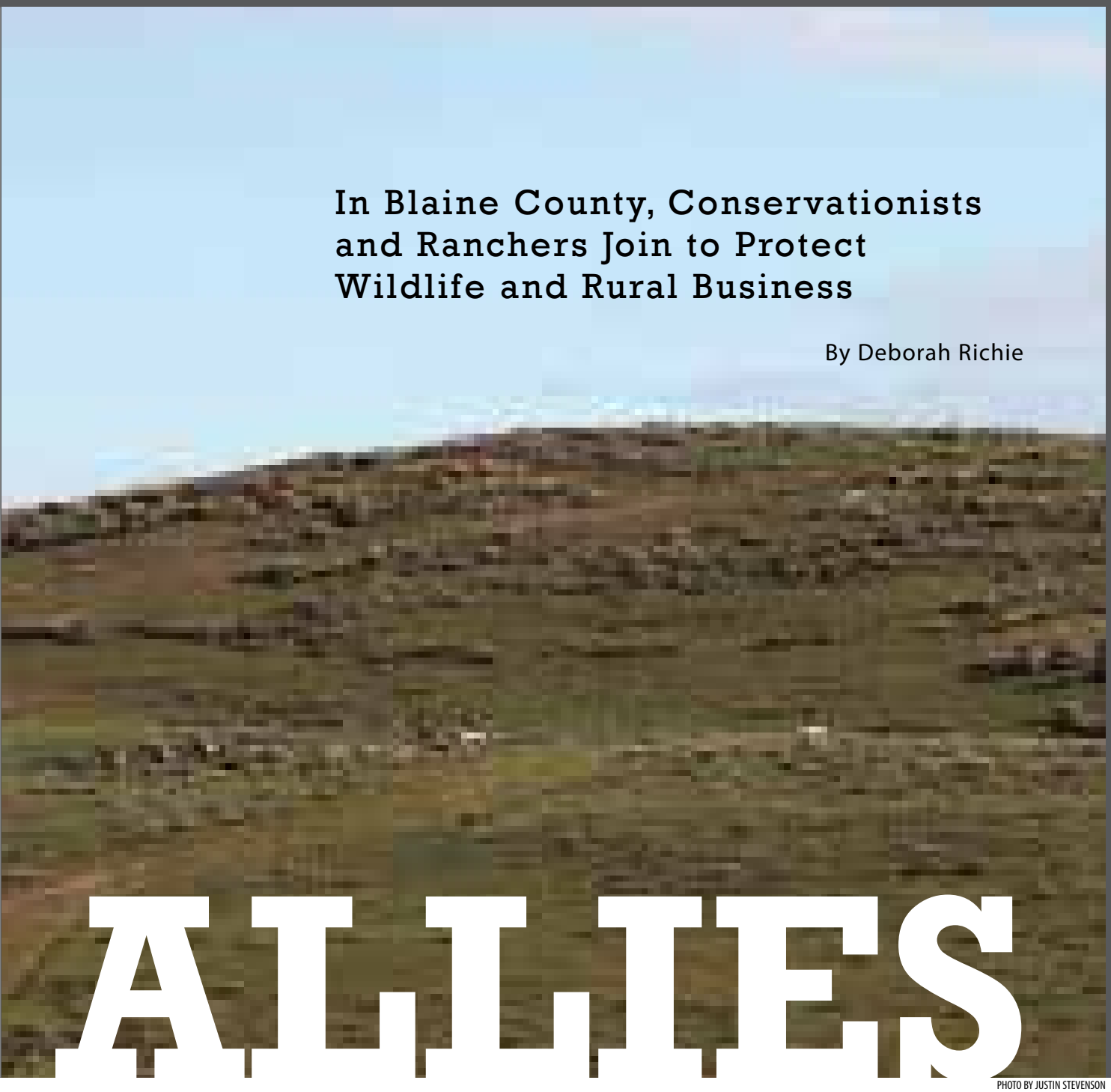


PHOTO BY BILL MULLENS

I'm a runner with a propensity for stopping in my tracks for all things wild, whether soaring overhead, dashing by, or meandering into view. On my first morning in Hailey, I'd run along the shady Wood River and then headed up a back road into treeless, sagebrush country, the kind that I'd come here to write about. In a couple hours, I would join a field tour with the Pioneers Alliance to find out how ranchers, conservationists, county officials and others have teamed up to manage private working lands that are key to the future of one of Idaho's strongholds for sage grouse and pronghorn. The Pioneers Alliance is a remarkable group of unlikely allies who

In Blaine County, Conservationists and Ranchers Join to Protect Wildlife and Rural Business

By Deborah Richie



ALLIES

PHOTO BY JUSTIN STEVENSON

shrug off differences and focus on common goals of economic revival tied to safeguarding the Pioneer Mountain region bordering the famed Sawtooth Mountains.

Slowing to scan the foothills for pronghorn that must be somewhere, I couldn't help comparing my feeble efforts to the fleetest animal in North America. Picking up the pace, I stretched out my stride and envisioned cloven hooves skimming the sage steppe. Pronghorn can attain speeds of sixty miles per hour and sustain thirty miles per hour over long distances. With their aerobic capacity and elegant physique, they could cover the 26.2 miles of a marathon in forty-five minutes.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Cattle on Muldoon Summit in Blaine County, and pronghorn antelope.

Here in the backdoor of Sun Valley, pronghorn are breaking more than a speed record, and part of my assignment is to find out about local efforts to protect one of the longest migration routes for this species. In fall, herds head from the Pioneer Mountains northeast across rumpled, dry mountains, lush valleys, through Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve, and finally arrive at their winter range in the Little Lost River and Birch Creek areas of the Upper Snake River Plain.

Like ultra-marathoners, pronghorn must conquer thirst, barriers, and exhaustion. Survival requires both physical prowess and a continuous pathway that's safe for a round trip. Roads, highways, subdivisions, pipelines, and poorly designed fences can be deadly. Facts about pronghorn swirled in my head as I ran and then refocused on my immediate surroundings, where a pair of red-tailed hawks circled above me. I stopped to revel in the sheen of fanned tails like glowing embers against a cerulean sky. From their superior vantage, the hawks might glimpse the elusive pronghorn and perhaps that iconic bird of western arid lands exuding the scent of sagebrush. The sage grouse, a bird in trouble, appears to be the antithesis of a pronghorn. The chicken-like bird is known for lumbering flights and awkward forays along the ground. A race between a

PHOTO BY JEREMY R. ROBERTS, CONSERVATION MEDIA

SAGE GROUSE—ONE CHOOSY BIRD

In the Pioneer Mountains, biologist Regan Berkley of Idaho Fish and Game tracks forty collared sage grouse, all of which were captured among about five hundred birds as they wintered in the shelter of tall sagebrush. Each spring, the sage grouse scatter to the north, east, and south, as far as thirty-five miles away.

Science is handing over critical information for planning and conserving a declining population. The wintering site was being considered for the relocation of the Friedman Memorial Airport in Hailey. The airport is looking for an alternative now, but if biologists hadn't figured out the critical winter use and if the airport had been built, sage grouse would have taken a hit in far-flung spring and summer ranges.

The reason sage grouse move so much is simple. They're picky about habitat and food. In winter, they hunker down in dense sagebrush, poking above the snow and living on an exclusive diet of sagebrush leaves. In spring, generations of birds return to the same leks. Nesting habitats can't be too far from leks and must have a mix of sagebrush, bunchgrass, wildflowers and wet meadows for the chicks to thrive.

sage grouse and a pronghorn would be the equivalent of the tortoise and the hare.

To give sage grouse credit, courting males can dance the socks off just about any other animal on the planet. They make up for lack of speed and grace with their two-step strut, flaring tail feathers and inflating twin throat sacs that create a popping sound like the uncorking of champagne bottles. Males gather by the tens, twenties, and even hundreds—depending on the size and health of the population—on outdoor dance floors called leks, a word derived from the Swedish word for play. They dance to the rising sun as sage hens scrutinize the males from the sidelines. They dance morning upon morning throughout March and April. At last, the females select their star, mate with him, and head off to nest.

Pronghorn can't dance. Sage grouse can't fly fast. Yet, the two species rely on the same landscape. Sage grouse that once numbered in the millions have drastically declined to some two hundred thousand. They've fallen prey to the plow, to houses, highways, energy development, fires, and invasive weeds. Fragmentation of the sagebrush-steppe they require is the biggest threat.

The plight of the sage grouse has put this bird squarely on the political hot seat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2010 determined that the sage grouse warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. However, a backlog of other wildlife being considered for listing prevented the bird's inclusion immediately. That gave everyone involved with the bird's future a window of time, until 2015, to reverse the declines. The race is on to conserve and restore sage grouse habitat, while assuring the future of ranching. The two go hand-in-hand. A listing that curtails range activities could be devastating for ranchers already experiencing financial difficulties. Ranchers, like sage grouse and pronghorn, depend on grazing livestock across big landscapes that often are a mix of private lands and public leased lands. The healthier the range, the better it is for a rancher's bottom line, too.

That's where the Sage Grouse Initiative and Idaho's Pioneers Alliance intersect. I spend much of my time writing for this initiative, which aims to conserve the sage grouse and sustainable ranching in eleven western states. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the initiative in 2010, funneling millions of dollars of Farm Bill money into protecting and restoring sage grouse habitat and leveraging the money to go as far as possible via partnerships. The initiative also funds twenty-four cost-share field jobs (including three in Idaho with the nonprofit group Pheasants Forever) to carry out restoration and conservation projects. Dollars support science to make sure the best practices are applied in the right places, where the birds are concentrated and recovery efforts will make the most difference.

Courting sage grouse males can dance the socks off just about any other animal on the planet. They make up for lack of speed with a two-step strut.

One of those places is the Pioneer Mountain's collage of sagebrush steppe, lava flows, grasslands, steep slopes, aspen-edged streams, and peaks. Within these 2.3 million acres, pronghorn and sage grouse still find plenty of elbowroom, although in fewer numbers than twenty-five years ago. About 160,000 acres of private farm and ranchlands form vital connectors between the north and south. Keeping lands intact is important for an entire ecosystem that extends from mule deer to grassland birds.

I'd come in the heat of August, not the best time to hear Brewer's sparrows and sage thrashers, but as I ran back toward Hailey, I glimpsed songbirds flitting among sagebrush that's home to butterflies, bees, and flies pollinating the wildflowers, and shiny beetles soldiering along the ground. I was tempted to hike up for a closer look until I checked the time and hustled back to my hotel.

Invigorated from the run, I soon joined the Pioneers Alliance

PHOTO BY BILL MULLENS

group assembled on the front porch of the Nature Conservancy office across the street from one of the espresso shops in Hailey where chic meets cowboy. I hopped into the lead car of a caravan that would take us a few miles south to Bellevue, then east on a gravel road heading up and over Muldoon Summit and down the other side into the Little Wood River Valley. I shared the backseat of John and Diane Peavey's car with their affectionate border collie. The Peaveys are the biggest landowners of the Pioneer Mountains and the first to put lands into conser-

PRONGHORN ON THE MOVE

The Pioneer pronhorn herd migrates up to ninety miles one-way, according to findings from a 2008-2010 partnership study of collared animals. One segment between the Pioneer foothills and the unforgiving lava of Craters of the Moon National Monument is only two hundred meters wide. As soon as the narrow corridor was clearly identified, managers removed and altered fences to ensure the animals could squeeze beneath them. (The lowest strand must be smooth, not barbed, and at least eighteen inches off the ground). Pronghorn are speedy, but they are not jumpers.

The fairly small herd, which fluctuates between a hundred and two hundred animals, shows one hundred percent fidelity to this one migration route, a highly unusual finding, according to Scott Bergen, who led the research for the Wildlife Conservation Society, and now works for Idaho Fish and Game. Once on their winter range, the Pioneer animals mingle with hundreds of other pronghorn in windswept lands that are mostly free of snow, allowing high-speed escapes from predators. Bergen and his team captured and collared some of the pronghorn on the winter range, too, and discovered yet another impressive migration route of up to ninety miles east over the Continental Divide to summer in southwest Montana. There, the pronghorn fan out into three separate areas—Horse Prairie, Medicine Lodge, and the Centennial Valley—not far from Yellowstone National Park. Knowing and preserving migration corridors for pronghorn is critical to their future.

Part of the thrill for Bergen of studying pronghorn goes beyond the data and maps. He gets to revel firsthand in the prowess of an animal native only to North America. "You watch them going fifty miles per hour right toward a fence, and then they stop on a dime, duck under the fence, and bolt back to full speed again," Bergen said.

vation easements that would protect them in perpetuity for pronghorn and sage grouse, and to assure a future for ranching that also relies on intact lands, not subdivided fragments.

John is a third-generation rancher, former state senator, and a ranch owner. His wife, Diane Josephy Peavey, has written about life on the ranch for decades, illuminating the beauty of the stark landscape and its people in her book, *Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land*, and in commentaries on Idaho Public Radio.

As we drove up the mountainside, we followed a stream lined with the white trunks and green shimmering leaves of aspen. Diane said when she first arrived at the ranch in 1980, she drove up this same road toward her future home and told John, "I just love trees." He gave a slight grimace and informed her that she'd come to the wrong place. Trees are few and far between on the ranch, but sage grouse and pronghorn excel in the great openness, which is where Diane found a wealth of stories.

The couple told me about John Laidlaw, the earliest settler in these parts after the era of gold mining ended, who emigrated from Scotland in 1892 to start grazing sheep. The Studebaker buggy that Mrs. Laidlaw drove to town on this same road is parked in the Peaveys' barn. Today, it takes about an hour to get to town from their ranch. Back then, it took all day. I heard, too, about the Laidlaws' pigs getting away and the infamous pig roundup. On the Muldoon Summit dividing the Big Wood and Little Wood drainages, I learned that John's grandfather used to own both sides with a business partner. They decided to divvy up the ranch simply—by each choosing which side of the summit they wanted to keep. The Peaveys took the east side. If they'd chosen the west, they might have ended up with high-end real estate close to Sun Valley. But they're content with what they have instead—excellent grazing country with outstanding wildlife values.

We drove past the turnoff to the Peavey ranch and on to a gathering spot under the trees of the Little Wood River. There, about thirty people clambered out of pickups and vans to stand in a circle and share their personal stories. I'd expected to hear about wildlife conservation on private lands. What I was not prepared for were the connections to the economic revival of Carey, the postage stamp of a ranching town to the south that contrasts sharply with well-heeled Hailey, Ketchum, and Sun Valley. But as I listened, I discovered a common thread of linkages.

First, the landowners stepped forward to make supportive comments about conservation easements, voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and land trust that protect natural values and are tailored to meet the owner's needs and vision. The people there had worked closely with the Pioneers Alliance, the Nature Conservancy and the NRCS, among other partners. The Sage Grouse Initiative recently provided a major boost in funds to help pay ranchers for the more than thirty thousand acres of easements that are helping them invest in improvements, pay off debts, and hand over their ranches intact to the next generation.

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Ray Baird's creased and weathered features bear witness to a life outdoors ranching in the Pioneers. He told the group, "We feel like this is a dream come true for us." Terry and Anita Clark complimented the process of putting the lands in conservation easement that had gone smoothly for them and shared their enthusiasm for the outcome.

"Our ranch has been in the family for more than a hundred years," said Terry. "We'd like to keep it together and not see it developed." Lee Cook, a farmer and schoolteacher in Carey, said his family ties to his farm go

PHOTO BY BILL MULLENS

ABOVE: Rancher Ray Baird on his Blaine County property.

back to 1903. "The conservation easements will help us stay on the land."

Listening to one testimonial after another, I felt tingles of empathy for the inhabitants, both human and wild. Wildlife doesn't know the difference between public and private lands. It's up to us to keep their habitats and corridors open. Here, I thought, people are stepping up from all walks of life and leading the way. Blaine County even passed a two-year voter levy in 2008 raising $3.4 million for preserving working farms and ranches and wildlife habitat, the first of its kind in the state.

They've opted to follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents even when the going gets tough, rather than subdividing and moving on.

The two Blaine County Commissioners who came to the event, Angenie McCleary and Larry Schoen, made the connection between conservation and the economic future of Carey. As I heard about building a recreation economy in a community with deep roots and grassroots pride, I had an epiphany. Until that moment, I hadn't connected the dots from conservation easements to a new pavilion to be dedicated at the fairgrounds later that day. Protected working lands keep the Carey area ranchers in business. At the same time, the intact, wildlife-rich landscape is central to the town serving as a gateway community for tourism.

Later, as I drove back to Missoula through the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, I felt a little smug as I passed jam-packed campgrounds and trailed RVs headed to Redfish Lake. All these people are missing out on a secret, at least for now, I thought. They could easily escape the crowds by heading into the uncrowded Pioneer Mountains. They're missing out, too, on the human story that adds a much deeper meaning to the spectacular views. Without my own work, I'd similarly be in the dark. I owe more than a paycheck to the chunky birds that have won me over with feats that go beyond the dancing courtship of males.

Earlier in the spring, I accompanied a biologist tracking a radio-collared nesting sage hen. We stood twenty feet from the bird and it took ten minutes before I could make out her shape under sagebrush. Every feather blended with the drifted wood and merged with the leaves, grass and soil, as if she wore an invisibility cloak. I remember a video of another collared sage hen, taken by a camera placed at the nest under a sagebrush, as she defended her nest against an attacking bull snake, absorbing strike after strike and pecking right back. She never backed down, even when the snake wrapped its coils around her. She shook him off in a flurry of wings. Eventually, the hen emerged the victor and calmly settled back on her eggs.

Thanks to sage grouse, I'm opening my eyes to the intricacy of the sage-steppe and the grandeur of wildlife migration. Sage grouse and pronghorn are guided by ancestral knowledge, by seasons, storms and drought. When houses and other development block their way, there may be no alternative route for them. On the other hand, the people who live in sage grouse country are teaching me about the opposite of migration, which is the power of staying put. They've opted to follow in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents even when the going gets tough, rather than subdividing and moving on. They're joining together to act unselfishly for the future, and for the great community of life to which we all belong, no matter where we migrate, and no matter where our feet land on this precious earth. ■