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Years of Conservation in the Smith Valley

This September, Flathead Land Trust facilitated the addition of 257 acres of mostly wetlands to the Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area near Kila. This was Flathead Land Trust's fifth conservation project in the past 10 years to help protect the Smith Valley wetland complex, one of the largest and most productive wetland complexes in the Flathead.

The Smith Valley wetland complex is located west of Kalispell with Smith Lake in its center and Ashley Creek flowing through it. Each spring, the Smith Valley floor fills with water and provides an important refueling stop for tens of thousands of migratory waterfowl and other birds during their epic migrations.

Today, the block of conserved lands safeguarding the large wetland complex in the Smith Valley totals almost 3,000 acres in size. Flathead Land Trust has conserved 732 acres of this block in the past 10 years. We have helped add 588 acres to the approximate 2,000-acre Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) surrounding Smith Lake. The most recent 257-acre addition to the WPA

was purchased from Larry and Maureen Baer, private landowners who wanted to sell their land. In 2016, Flathead Land Trust facilitated the donation of 142 acres of land to the WPA; and in 2013, Flathead Land Trust received a grant from the North American Wetland Conservation Act to purchase a 189-acre property that had gone into foreclosure and owned by a local bank. This property was then added to the WPA. Flathead Land Trust has also worked with private landowners who wanted to keep their land in private ownership but protect its conservation values to conserve an additional 144 acres of private land adjacent to the WPA with conservation easements. Other conserved lands safeguarding the wetland complex include almost 300 acres of private lands with conservation easements held by Montana Land Reliance and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The new addition to the Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area is thanks to a partnership between private landowners, Flathead Land Trust, The Conservation Fund, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). For the past six years,

Flathead Land Trust has been working with Larry and Maureen Baer to achieve conservation for their 257 acres of primarily wetland habitat adjacent to the Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area. The Conservation Fund bridged a funding gap by purchasing the property in July to hold it until the USFWS could obtain the funds to add the land to the Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area, a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In September, the USFWS obtained funding to purchase the property from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund which is congressionally-authorized to provide grants to protect migratory bird habitat throughout the USFWS National Wildlife Refuge System.

We are thrilled that such key bird habitat is now permanently protected and another special place in the Flathead Valley will be available for future generations to enjoy in perpetuity. Flathead Land Trust will celebrate the conservation of bird habitat in the Smith Valley with a bike and bird tour of the area next spring – stay tuned for details early next year.