



WAYPOINT

SUCCESS STORIES FROM ABOVE

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LightHawk's monthly update, WayPoint, was created to share some of the good news we on staff learn about daily. These success stories illustrate the critical role we play in conservation efforts throughout North and Central America through the unique perspective of flight. We hope you enjoy WayPoint and will share with others our success stories from above.

Flights Help Protect Continental Divide Critical Wildlife Passage

As high alpine forests lead to arid sagebrush in the distance, volunteer pilot Reg Goodwin shares the view of the Continental Divide from his small airplane with a photographer and conservation staff from American Wildlands (AWL). They are gathering aerial reconnaissance photos for a final push to protect Montana's threatened MacDonald Pass, an important, but narrow, wildlife corridor that runs from Glacier Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness to Yellowstone National Park.

Nearly four years ago, the Montana Army National Guard (MANG) announced its intention to construct a 1,966-acre biathlon course along the eastern edge of the pass. Already compromised by the cumulative impacts of logging, mining, recreational activities and home building, this narrow corridor provides a critical link between core habitat for elk, wolverines, moose, and Canada lynx and grizzly bears, which are threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The course would be constructed on the area's largest wetland and would include a quarter-mile-long road (disturbing 32 acres of forest), newly cut and widened ski trails (impacting another 18 acres), a 50-car parking lot, a loudspeaker system, and significant outdoor lighting.

From the air, you can trace the path wildlife must pass to move from otherwise isolated habitats - through a 1.5 mile corridor of quiet woods lined by contaminated mining pits, burgeoning housing subdivisions, and



Above the MacDonald Pass wildlife corridor. The military is planning an outdoor training facility to be built on the slim 1.5 mile pinch-point. *April Johnston/AWL/LightHawk*

patches of clear cuts. The landscape as viewed under wings of the small aircraft brings into sharp focus the human influences that already inhibit movement along the narrow corridor.

LightHawk was first enlisted to work on this issue in 2005 when we provided a guided aerial tour to the Helena Independent Record to help illustrate human encroachment threatening animal migration routes in the area. The flight resulted in a thoughtful article, reaching more than 50,000 readers, in favor of preserving MacDonald Pass.

Despite strong public sentiment against the biathlon course development, the U.S. Forest Service must still decide whether to grant a 20-year special-use permit as the course would encompass 33 acres of the Helena National Forest. An environmental assessment conducted by the agency



A bald patch interrupts the forest surrounding the Luttrell Pit area which buzzes with activity during the summer months with construction vehicles moving contaminated soil into the repository pit. Less than two miles from the pit, a roadless area provides safe passage for wildlife. *Peter Ponca/LightHawk*

acknowledges forest clearing and construction will force animals onto the edges of the corridor where habitat is unsuitable. An alternative to the MacDonald Pass biathlon site does exist. There is private land - a ski area nearby that has adequate snowfall and the infrastructure of roads and parking lots.

AWL staff has worked with local citizens and other conservation groups to voice their concerns — organizing meetings with the Montana's governor's office and federal legislators, the Helena Forest Service, and MANG. The group has funded field research the last two winters that confirmed the presence of 17 sensitive wildlife species in the area, including lynx, wolverine and wolves. While the Forest Service decision is pending, AWL turned to LightHawk to gather aerial photographs to depict the narrowness of the corridor in a way that cannot be comprehended through maps or even the written word. The photographs will supplement GIS maps AWL developed illustrating animal tracking data within the proposed course site in an effort to demonstrate once and for all - to legislators, agencies, and other decisionmakers - why MacDonald Pass is vulnerable and deserves protection.

"I have been working on issues in this area for 15 months and this was the first time I got to see it by air. It made a huge difference- since our work focuses on ecological connectivity for wildlife; it really gave me a much more thorough understanding of the lay of the land that wildlife must navigate. Although my organization has a GIS lab, we have excellent mapping resources, and I have looked at the area via Google Earth, there is nothing that compares to seeing it from the air."

April Johnston, Conservation Director,
American Wildlands

The Forest Service has postponed its decision twice already while it tries to address the concerns of AWL, local concerned citizens, and other groups working to protect MacDonald Pass, but likely will issue its final decision this month. We are hopeful the public's voice is heard and visitors to MacDonald Pass continue to discover traveling animal tracks crisscrossing its woods, meadows and valleys.

"This will really help us meet our goals - we are trying to protect the Continental Divide in this area...Usually I think of photographs as supplementing our mapping, in this case, because we got high enough to show the true connectivity of high elevation forest between Bob Marshall Wilderness, the Rocky Mountain Front, and the Continental Divide west of Helena, I think our maps will be supplements to the photographs!"

- April Johnston, Conservation Director,
American Wildlands



LightHawk takes to the skies with AWL. *Tom Skeeel/American Wildlands*