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# OPINION

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BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

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## Work needed to maintain safe passages for wildlife

“Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side, of course!”

This well-known one-liner is also appropriate for deer, elk, moose, bears, cougars and other wildlife as they move about the landscape from habitat to habitat. Just as people must be able to safely travel from one town to another to meet our needs, wide ranging animals must be able to safely travel between important habitats to meet their needs — whether it be across public lands, private lands or busy highways.

This idea of maintaining the ecological connections, or wildlife movement corridors, between important habitats is gaining increased focus within state and federal agencies and non-government organizations interested in conserving the impressive natural heritage for which Montana is so well known. This habitat connectivity work complements our country's long standing commitment to conserving large habitat areas such as our national parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness, and roadless areas.

Maintaining these connections is critical to keeping our pearls of habitat linked together, for without these connections we have little more than a series of habitat “islands” — which

likely will lead to the loss of resident wildlife.

As the well-known naturalist and conservationist Aldo Leopold once wrote, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” For American Wildlands and many others in the business of land and wildlife conservation, the “thing” that will keep Montana's natural heritage “right” is keeping our quality habitats connected to each other — as part of a

greater whole and intact natural system. In fact, many people would argue that maintaining these connections is one of the most pressing conservation challenges facing Montanans today.

One place where this work has gained increased focus and attention is on Bozeman Pass. As far back as 1996, American Wildlands identified Bozeman Pass as a critical wildlife corridor connecting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem with the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem, which includes Glacier National Park and the



TOM SKEELE  
Guest columnist

Bob Marshall Wilderness. Since 2002, a diverse group of state and federal agencies and non-government organizations have been working together to protect wildlife and their movements on Bozeman Pass — whether it be on public lands, private lands or across I-90.

This Bozeman Pass working group has an impressive list of partners: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Transportation, U.S. Forest Service, the Western Transportation Institute at MSU, American Wildlands, Craighead Environmental Research Institute, Gallatin Valley Land Trust, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Trust for Public Lands, Wild Things Unlimited, and numerous private citizens.

This diverse set of interests has come together in various configurations to secure some important conservation successes. The most well known of these achievements includes:

- Passage of a citizen-based county zoning plan for parts of Bozeman Pass;
- Securing conservation easements (with support from the Gallatin County Open Space Program) and purchasing lands across I-90 from Frog Rock;
- Construction of a mile of fencing along both sides of the highway west of the Bear Canyon exit.

The first two projects are helping protect the rural character and wildlife habitat of the pass, and the third project is helping keep wildlife off I-90 by funneling animals to a safer railroad underpass crossing.

At a time when Americans spend lots of time staying connected to each by cell phones, e-mail and the Internet, it is reassuring to realize so many people also want to make sure our wildlife populations are able to stay connected to each other. This is very positive work with concrete opportunities to make a difference. American Wildlands is pleased to see the depth and breadth of interest that exists at the federal, state, county, NGO, and citizen level for keeping our wildlands and wildlife connected.

Thanks to all those who have already played a role in helping provide wildlife with safer passage across Bozeman Pass. I encourage others to help conserve our state's natural heritage by getting connected to these efforts.

Tom Skeele is executive director of American Wildlands. For more information on wildlife safe passages efforts on Bozeman Pass, go to [www.wildlands.org/bozemanpass](http://www.wildlands.org/bozemanpass).

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