



Erika Nunlist

CVA Program Updates

Welcome CVA’s Winter Technician, Niah!



Salmonfly larvae.
Niah Brass

The Centennial Valley Association is happy to welcome winter technician, Niah Brass, to the Team. Niah was born and raised in Northern Idaho, where her family has lived for four generations. She attended Montana State University (MSU) for her undergraduate degree in Land Resources and Environmental Science. During her time at MSU, Niah participated in undergraduate research on salmonflies on the Gallatin and Madison Rivers. This work helped further spark her interest in water and freshwater ecology. After graduating in December of 2022, Niah served as a Big Sky Watershed Corps member in the Yaak Valley through November 2023. She planned and implemented riverbank restoration along the South Fork Yaak River.

Niah is looking into graduate school in the upcoming future, but for now is helping CVA with a handful of activities through April to continue pursuing her interest in water conservation, building community, sparking discussion and working collaboratively in the field of science! Specifically, Niah will be with CVA through

April, supporting the Water & Drought Awareness Program, doing data entry and analysis, and assisting with grant writing.

In her free time, Niah can be found with her close friends and family, pursuing crafty and artistic pursuits, or spending time out on the trail with her pup, Otter.



Wildlife & Range Rider Program Update

Greetings from the Centennial Valley! Winter has been off to a slow start around here, but cold weather and recent snow have been a welcome change. Looking forward to the 2024 range riding season, Taylor is planning on coming back for half of the summer and we will be hiring one new season-long rider. There is the potential to hire a second rider to join the team in the later half of the season. If you know of any folks that would be the right fit for the program, have them check out CVA’s website for the job posting in February or refer them to Erika.



James Waxe

At the end of 2023, things shaped up pretty good overall. We had some of the lowest depredation rates seen in years, which was consistent with the rest of the state, according to the Livestock Loss Board. We also worked with one new producer and community member, which was great, and we continued working with many of local partners and community members who really keep this program running.

As always, thank you to everyone involved in the Range Riding program. This program wouldn’t be where it is today without your support. Thank you!!

-Erika Nunlist, Wildlife Program Coordinator,
wildlife@centennialvalleyassociation.org

Announcements

- ✧ Kickoff 2024 with a membership with the Centennial Valley Association! Member dues are a small, but consistent and impactful way to contribute to the projects and people that support the Centennial Valley’s working lands, wildlife and fisheries habitat, recreational opportunities, and community annually. We appreciate your support and consideration! To become a member, check out the [Get Involved](#) page on our website or contact Kara, Executive Coordinator, at communityorg@centennialvalleyassociation.org.
- ✧ **THANK YOU** to the many folks that contributed to the CVA during our Giving Tuesday fundraiser! Members and supporters raised over \$11,000 for CVA’s programs in 2024. We are so grateful and look forward to sharing 2024 with you!

CVA Program Updates (continued...)

Jenni Huntsman



Water & Drought Awareness Program Update

In comparison with last year, the Centennial Valley's winter had a late start! Last year, on January 17th, the snow water equivalent was at 112% of median for Red Rock Basin, while records show the current snow water equivalent at 69% of median on January 17th this year.

The surrounding basins in much of southwest Montana and areas of Idaho are experiencing similar levels of drought. According to the National Integrated Drought Information System, 97.62% of Beaverhead county is currently experiencing moderate drought. However, in the upcoming 10 days, southwest Montana has a 33%-40% of experiencing above normal precipitation. Let's hope for snow!

As of the end of the day on January 20th, the SNOTEL sites are reporting the following percents of median for snow water equivalent:

- * Beagle Springs: 92%
- * Divide: 61%
- * Short Creek: 44%
- * White Elephant: 72%
- * Clover Meadow: 69%
- * Lakeview Ridge: 30%
- * Tepee Creek: 74%

CVA will continue to send out water reports each month via email through April. We will also post each report on our website. If you'd like to get the water report directly in your inbox, reach out!

-Niah Brass, Winter Technician, drought@centennialvalleyassociation.org

Invasive Species Management Program Update

Shannon Wilkey



The CVA and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) field crews worked tirelessly into mid-October treating invasive weed species in the Centennial Valley! Crews spent nearly 1,200 man-hours actively managing invasive weed species in 2023, treating and monitoring over 200-acres. Way to go Team!

In addition, fall weather cooperated this year, allowing CVA and TNC crews to complete a fall reseeding project in the Long Creek area. The total reseeded area was -10-acres in bare spots and previously treated zones of Canada thistle and whitetop. The goal of reseeding

is to decrease bare soils available for invasive species to establish on, while increasing the biodiversity of the plants for both better habitat and forage. This project is part of the WHIP grant that the CVA received in late 2019. The native plant species included in the mix were: Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, and western yarrow.

The WHIP grant closes at the end of June 2024. CVA will hire crews to complete out those grant requirements in the six priority wildlife habitat areas, as well as continue work throughout the valley to prevent the spread of invasive weed species in partnership with TNC, Beaverhead County, Taft-Nicholson Center, Bureau of Land Management, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest—Madison Ranger District, Montana DNRC, and private landowners and community members alike!



High Divide Collaborative Opportunity!

This year, in lieu of their traditional gathering, the High Divide Collaborative is teaming up with Lara Tomov to host a Storytelling Workshop in Dillon, MT. This event is great for anyone looking to better articulate and share the story of their organization or community. Plus, it's a chance to connect with your friends in the High Divide. It is going to be fun, informative, and **free**. Save your spot today by registering [HERE](#).

3/20, 3:30pm - Film screening & discussion, Old Depot Theater

3/21, 9:00am - 3:30pm - Workshop, UM Western

-Emily Harkness, High Divide Program Manager



Partner Updates

Beaverhead Watershed Committee & Conservation District

The Beaverhead Watershed Committee and Conservation District have been up to more of the same. We're hoping for final design and permitting of our Grasshopper Creek mine tailing stabilization project to be completed this winter. Construction this summer. We're currently contracting with a consultant to assess the feasibility of a nutrient reduction wetland on Lower Stone Creek.

Any day now we'll start reaching out to people in the Red Rock watershed, as we finalize the Red Rock Watershed Restoration Plan. Projects identified in this plan will be eligible and prioritized for grant funding.

The Conservation District is working with partners to fast-track recommendations for Beaverhead County Wilderness Study Area and Proposed Wilderness designations. It sounds like there may be a public lands bill this year, so we'd like to have recommendations ready to be added to that bill. These areas have been in "study" or "proposed" status for decades, and it's time to finally resolve them. The CD will also continue operating the boat check station near Kidd.

-Zach Owen, Watershed Coordinator

The Nature Conservancy in Montana

Winter is just starting to show up in the Centennial, with anywhere from 0 – 12" of snow on the valley floor; we are still driving wheeled vehicles. The east side of the Valley has some of the strongest snowpack with approximately 10" at the Sandhill's Preserve HQ.

We are in the planning phase of the year; we are setting up projects, hiring employees, and securing funding for next season. We plan to host the same projects as last season, with CVA, MSU, and TNC staff basing out of the HQ. This season, we are working with local producers to deploy virtual fence collars on a couple cattle herds throughout the Valley. We are interested in assessing if virtual fence technology can be a benefit to rangeland health and producers' grazing and economic goals. In addition to virtual fences, we hope to provide additional resources to producers for reaching these same goals. This work is part of a greater collaborative effort throughout southwest Montana, as part of the Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership. Our field season will be kicking off around May 15th, and we look forward to seeing everyone then!

-James Waxe, Land Steward & Science Manager

Lima School District

As many of you have heard, and if you have not yet, the Lima School District is struggling with funding, which in return is putting our high school in jeopardy. With our low number of high school students and not enough funding, we are looking at a possible closure if we cannot pull together as a community and with help from the surrounding areas to keep this small vibrant community alive. If you look at any small community as a whole, the heart of most is the school, the kids that attend the school, and the families that live in the community that create togetherness.

We do not want to lose that here in our small town of Lima, MT. There are many reasons why we struggle funding wise. Some of those reasons are a small numbers of high school students, and with a sparse number we receive less state and government funding, many years of unpaid property taxes to Beaverhead County from the US Fish & Wildlife Service for the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, and the simple fact that Lima is a small town that needs your help.

Imagine if your family with your children faced this heart-breaking challenge to leave a community that generations of your family has lived, grown, raised families in, ranched and called home for decades. You are now faced with starting over, somewhere that is completely foreign to you. You will need to uproot your roots, your heritage, and find your way again, all because your community could not find funds to help keep the doors of your children's school open. I am sure you and everyone around you would do everything they could to help be good patrons of their own thriving community to help another. So, we as the community of Lima, on behalf of our children, ask for your help to keep our beloved Lima School and our "Bears" thriving for generations to come.

If you have questions on how to donate or make a gift to the Lima School District, please contact Emily Hansen at 406-698-2830 or by email at pokes1330@gmail.com.

With sincere gratitude and thanks,
The Community of Lima



To preserve traditional ranching as a way of life in the Centennial Valley, and to maintain quality open space, wildlife habitat, water quality, and wildlife migration corridors as they exist today for future generations.

Partner Updates (continued...)

Centennial Valley Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA)

During the 2023 season, in the Centennial Valley CCAA program, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) completed 17.4 miles of rapid riparian assessments on Long Creek, Middle Creek, and West Creek. Additionally, with the help of CVA, FWP completed flow and irrigation compliance monitoring for all Centennial Valley CCAA streams. Flow monitoring was completed on Corral Creek, Antelope Creek, Red Rock Creek, Tom Creek, Odell Creek, Metzel Creek, Long Creek, Red Rock River, West Creek, and Middle Creek. FWP checked headgates 19 times throughout the summer of 2023 across these streams to keep flows at or above target levels. Seasonal stream temperature data was also collected throughout the upper Red Rock Watershed on Corral Creek, Antelope Creek, Red Rock Creek, Tom Creek, Odell Creek, Metzel Creek, Long Creek, West Creek, Middle Creek, and Elk Springs.



This past year, the number of landowners enrolled in the Centennial Valley Arctic Grayling CCAA increased to six, adding approximately 109,929 acres to the program. In November, FWP and the US Fish and Wildlife Service completed a fish passage project on West Creek and Middle Creek to enhance riparian habitat and stream connectivity. This project installed infrastructure on four irrigation diversions identified as barriers to fish. The project included construction of 4 sets of step pools on irrigation structures, installation of 3 new measuring devices, and the reset of one measuring device to accurately measure diverted flows and maintain minimum flows for fish passage. In addition, one headgate was replaced and 2 pin and plank structures were reset and relocated to allow for fine tune adjustments during the irrigation season. A flow management plan has also been developed that specifies flow targets to ensure fish passage and access to spawning, rearing and summer habitats. The success of this project has opened over 4 miles of habitat on Middle Creek and West Creek for Arctic Grayling and other native fish.

Over the next year, FWP and CCAA partner agencies plan to continue implementing projects to benefit Arctic Grayling and Centennial Valley CCAA landowners. Projects that will be implemented this year include the installation of measuring devices to provide accurate measurements and increase irrigation efficiency, enhancement to inlet and outlet channels of an existing pond to improve spawning habitat, a ditch extension project to improve flows in Corral Creek, and a streambank restoration project on a small section of Hell Roaring Creek to treat incised banks and improve riparian health.

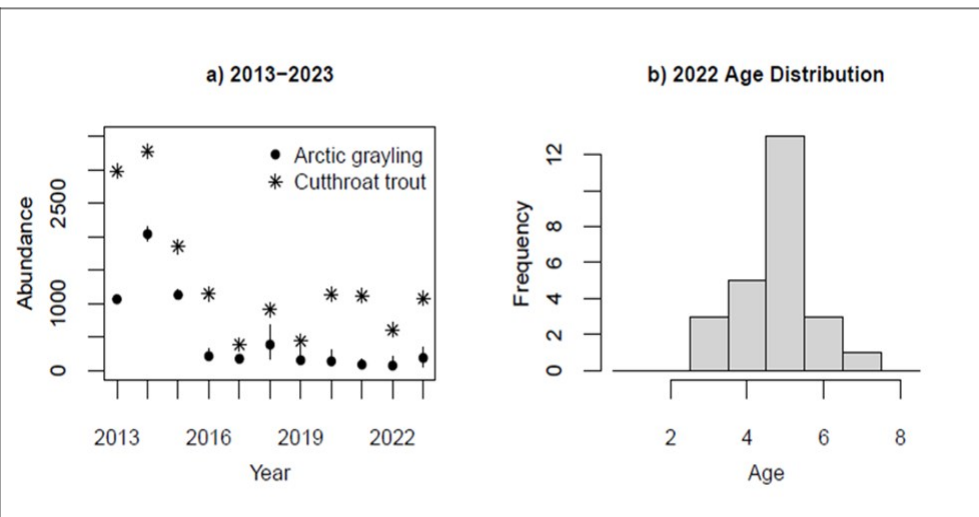


Figure 1. a) Arctic grayling and non-native hybrid Yellowstone cutthroat trout abundance estimates and 95% confidence intervals (grayling only) from Red Rock Creek, 2013–2023, and b) age distribution of the 2023 grayling spawning population.

The estimated number of Arctic Grayling in the 2023 Red Rock Creek spawning population was 188 (95% CI= 47-340), which is not significantly different from estimates between 2016 and 2022 (Figure 1 left). Peak predicted grayling spawning was May 24 and spawning fish ranged from age-3 to age-7. To ensure that spawning grayling had access to quality spawning habitat in Red Rock Creek, a beaver dam survey was conducted on May 11 and eight dams were notched. The number of intact dams was lower than usual in 2023, primarily due to higher snowpack and associated water levels. Spawning habitat surveys (i.e., pebble counts) were conducted in July. The amount of accessible suitable spawning habitat for grayling will be reported in the 2024 Adaptive Management

Plan Annual Report. Overwinter habitat in Upper Red Rock Lake is the primary driver of Arctic grayling abundance in the Centennial Valley. Alternatives that improve overwinter habitat and reduce risk of grayling extirpation have been identified but not implemented to date.

Announcement: Katelin Killoy has replaced Jarrett Payne as the new Riparian Ecologist for the Upper Big Hole River and Centennial Valley Arctic Grayling CCAA programs.

Contact information:

(406) 596-1999 | Katelin.Killoy@mt.gov | 730 ½ N. Montana St. Dillon, MT 59725

Partner Updates (continued...)

Update on Centennial Valley Birds and Grazing Project

Last summer, you might have occasionally scanned the fields or sagebrush hills in the Centennial Valley and spotted a dyad of people meandering around with binoculars, laser range finders, strange PVC-pipe squares draped around their necks, and likely dripping a cocktail of sweat and mosquito repellent from their faces. More tellingly, they may have just had the general appearance of a field biologist (you can probably picture the goofy hat now!). We were a crew of 6 bird nerds who spent 12 weeks walking just about every acre of land we could access from Metzel Creek to Widgeon Pond, and from Landon Ridge to Red Rock Creek. Every 300 meters we stopped, and as quickly as possible, we surveyed plants and birds at this location using standardized protocols. This was all to collect data for a project trying to better understand how cattle grazing can be managed to optimize wildlife habitat and species, while also leaving pastures in good health for subsequent grazing seasons.

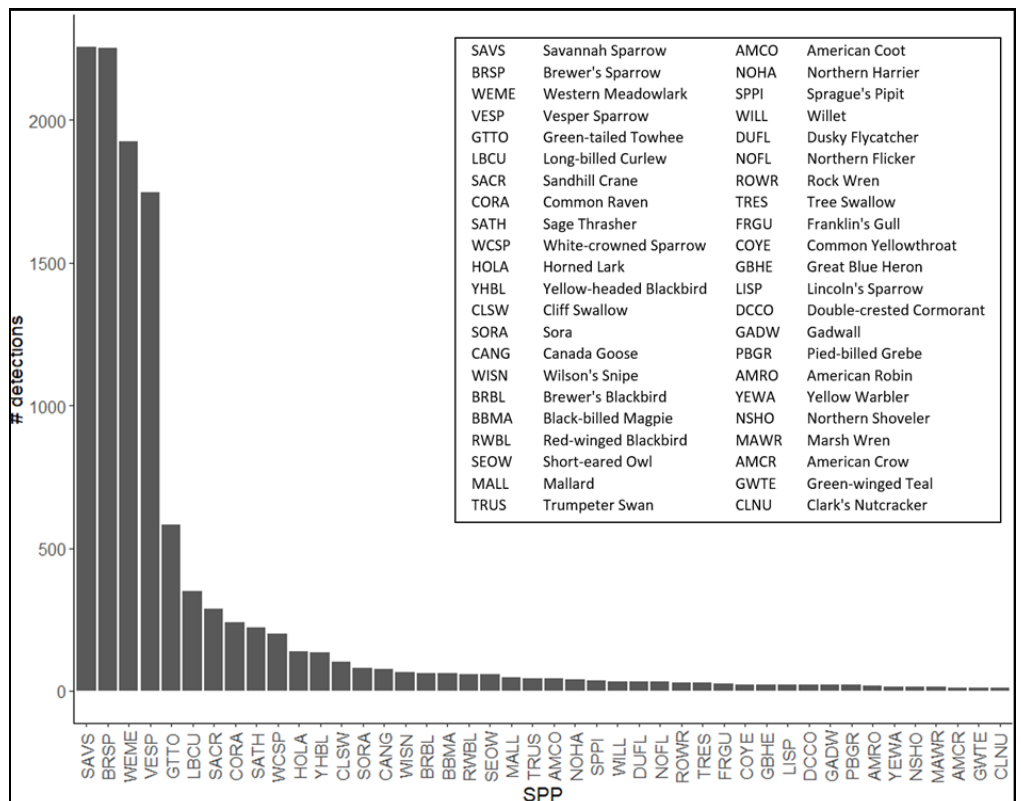


Last year, our 6-person crew recorded a total of 89 different bird species(!) during our surveys, some of which were not previously known to occur in the Centennial Valley, such as Sprague's Pipit and Clay-colored Sparrow. We plan on following up on these species next year to see if they return to the same locations. Many bird species do return to the same location, a phenomenon known as *site fidelity*. Finding a rare bird is always exciting, but discovering a population that has probably been around for a long time, but simply gone unnoticed, is even more special. Of course, as is typical with many bird surveys, most birds we detected were very common. Savannah Sparrows, Brewer's Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks, and Vesper Sparrows comprised the lion's share of all our detections. However, we also recorded many other species in between the two extremes—species that were moderately common. Results from this study will rely on all species detected, from the rare to the common, and will help us determine *species diversity and abundance*, two ecological buzzwords that basically tell us how many species there are and how many of each species are present. These together will give us a good idea of ecological health and resiliency of these

pastures.

This joint effort, with partners including Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, US Geological Survey, Montana State University, Bureau of Land Management, MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and private landowners around the region, will continue into the spring and summer of 2024 as well. We are just now beginning to plan for this upcoming field season and are excited to get back out and meander amongst the birds again! Feel free to reach out to Adam Mitchell if you would like to know more about the project or anything else about Centennial Valley birds.

Adam.mitchell2@montana.edu



This figure shows all the species detected 10 times or more. The most common species are listed, and the figure also shows the decreasing abundance of all the other species.

To preserve traditional ranching as a way of life in the Centennial Valley, and to maintain quality open space, wildlife habitat, water quality, and wildlife migration corridors as they exist today for future generations.

Friends of the CVA

CVA strives to build and utilize working relationships with numerous agencies and organizations, such as:

- Federal, State, and County Agencies
 - The Nature Conservancy
 - Taft-Nicholson Center
- Madison Valley Ranchlands Group
- Big Hole Watershed Committee
 - Heart of the Rockies Initiative
 - USFWS Partners Program
- Montana Watershed Coordination Council
 - Cross Charitable Foundation
 - Greater Yellowstone Coalition
 - Defenders of Wildlife
 - Livestock Loss Board
 - Missouri Headwaters Partnership
 - Friends of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the Centennial Valley
- Fish, Wildlife and Parks WHIP Program
 - Montana Native Plant Society
 - Western Landowners Alliance
 - Vital Ground
 - Patagonia
 - And Many Others!

CVA Board Members

Yvonne Martinell, Chairwoman

Scott Huntsman

Peggy Dulany & Andrew Anderson (Proxy)

Kevin Crowe & Tassi Duffner (Proxy)

Mel Montgomery

Jerry Scheid (Advisory)

Mark Bergstrom (Advisory)

Jim Berkey (Advisory)

Bill West (Advisory)

CVA Committees

Weeds: Scott Huntsman

Wildlife: Yvonne Martinell, Bill West

Hunting: Jerry Scheid, Scott Huntsman

Fundraising: Jim Berkey, Bill West, Andrew Anderson

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—Dillon Field Office

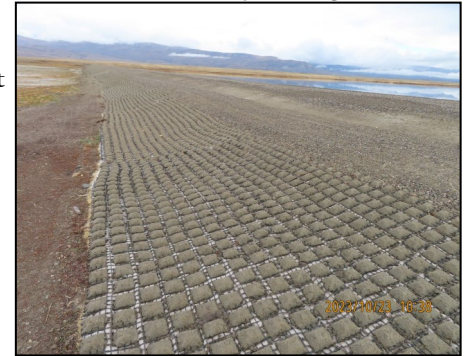
The Monida Creek Ducks Unlimited dam maintenance project is complete on BLM. The contractor completed the work last fall and looks great.

The dams were rip-rapped and seeded and, with some spring moisture, will hopefully be vegetated next spring, as well as continue to provide nesting and brooding habitat for waterfowl well into the future.

-Kelly Bockting, Wildlife Biologist



Photos: Kelly Bockting



Beaverhead County Weed District

This winter, Beaverhead County Weed District submitted a project proposal to continue the Upper Red Rock Cooperative project in 2024. The next step in the process will be the Noxious Weed Trust Fund hearings in March. We are looking for anyone participating in the project, that is willing to travel to Helena, to speak to the council on the importance funding to the Upper Red Rock landscape for noxious weed management. If you are interested in attending, please contact Amber at the weed office. This spring we will be holding applicator trainings where continuing education credits will be offered for license renewals. Remember, by the end of 2024, a total of 6 credits are needed to renew. Dates for trainings are yet to be determined. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions. Hope everyone stays warm and safe!

-Amber Burch, Weed Coordinator



Tom France