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Saving Bozeman's last best wildlife corridor

By William Webb and Tim Tousignant Guest columnists

Late last winter, a wolverine — one of the wildest denizens of the Yellowstone region — stood on the ridgeline of Mount Ellis and looked down into the valley of Limestone Creek south of Bozeman.

What it saw was the last undeveloped valley in the foothills of the Gallatin Range; a valley that is home to mountain lions, bobcats, bears and pine martens; a valley that provides a secure refuge for elk and moose increasingly hemmed in by Bozeman's suburban development; and a valley that offers a true backcountry experience for outdoor enthusiasts at Bozeman's back door.

Walkers and bikers on the popular Triple Tree Trail already know this place — it provides the backdrop of unbroken forest, the sense of entering the fringes of a wild area, that visitors experience from the Triple Tree summit.

What they and others may not know is that the valley of Limestone Creek constitutes the last finger of roadless land extending from the Gallatin Range into the foothills of the Gallatin Valley. From this drainage southward an unbroken tract of roadless country stretches all the way to Yellowstone National Park. All the other foothill valleys — Bear Canyon, Sourdough, Leverich, Hyalite and the rest — have been roaded and logged to varying extents. Limestone is Bozeman's last wild connection to Yellowstone.

All that will change if the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation has its way. Much of the land in the Limestone drainage is state owned, and DNRC has proposed to build approximately nine miles of logging roads into this drainage to log about 600 acres between Mount Ellis and the Triple Tree Trail. The roading and logging — much of it clearcutting — would leave scars visible from downtown Bozeman and destroy the wild character that makes Limestone special.

But we can still prevent that destruction. A group of Gallatin Valley residents has united to protect Limestone under the banner Save Our Gallatin Front. We know about the wolverine and the mountain lions, bobcats, pine martens, moose and other wildlife that use Limestone because we funded a professional wildlife survey in Limestone last winter to gather data for use in a forthcoming DNRC decisionmaking process about the logging proposal.

We are also questioning the need for this project. DNRC claims it has to road and log Limestone Creek to satisfy its trust obligation for state lands. But the Montana Supreme Court has ruled

that the DNRC's trust responsibility extends beyond financial returns to encompass all considerations impacting the best interests of the state, including wildlife and the environment.

As a result of our advocacy, DNRC has decided to study the proposed Limestone logging in an environmental impact statement. The EIS is due later this year or early next — along with an opportunity for public comment about Limestone's fate.

If you care about the backdrop of unbroken forest south of Bozeman; if you want to retain the last roadless corridor linking Bozeman with Yellowstone; if you want to preserve a place where hunters and hikers can wander trails traveled by moose, mountain lions, and wolverines at Bozeman's back door, then please tell the DNRC that roading and logging are not appropriate for Limestone. (Just google DNRC Limestone West Submit Comments)

If you want to learn more about Limestone's special nature and the results of our wildlife study, please attend the public meeting we will be hosting in the Bozeman Public Library Community Room on August 30, at 7 p.m.

And if you want to experience Limestone for yourself, please join us on a community hike into this last wild valley. Details about upcoming hikes are available at www.saveourgallatinfront.org.

William Webb and Time Tousignant are co-chairs of Save Our Gallatin Front, a coalition of Bozeman and Gallatin County citizens, formed in response to the Montana DNRC's proposed Limestone West logging project.